BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

HAYATO YAMANAKA

A. BACKGROUND

With Asia and the Pacific countries in the process of social and economic development, many universities and higher education institutions are actively making efforts to apply different levels of telecommunication technology to their delivery of education. Distance education appears to be one of the most effective and promising areas for the utilization of such educational technology.

The 1970s and 1980s have seen the expansion of distance higher education in the Asian and Pacific regions. As for Asian countries, following the establishment of the Allama Iqbal Open University in 1974 in Pakistan and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand in 1978, other Asian countries have rapidly built distance higher education institutions. Examples are the Open University of Sri Lanka in 1980, Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia in 1984, the University of the Air in Japan and Indira Gandhi Open University in India in 1985. With regard to the Pacific, the University of the South Pacific began its Extension Service within the School of Education in 1974. These institutions were established to provide higher education for people who would not have opportunities of higher learning under conventional systems. Universities with distance education modes are expected to promote economic growth, social development, and cultural enrichment.

Since 1989 the National Institute of Multimedia Education (NIME) has been conducting research into distance higher education institutions in Asian and Pacific countries. The research was financially supported by the Ministry of Education, Japan. For the year of 1989 Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand and the Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia were selected as the research objects. For 1990, Indira Gandhi Open University in India and the Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan were studied by the research team. Each research project attempted to clarify the "real" state of distance higher education institutions.

For the year 1991 the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Suva, Fiji was selected as the research target and a total of 300 workdays were occupied in the field research in over a dozen sites in order to investigate the role and function of distance education in the South Pacific in collaboration with USP University Extension.

In addition to this, the research project will be continued until 1994 to complete the analysis. When all research is completed, we should be able to present a comprehensive image of distance higher education in Asia and the Pacific countries.

The University of the South Pacific is the only regional university in the South Pacific, shared between 13 member island countries. This regional institution was established in 1970 by 11 island countries: the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, the Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa. In 1991 the Marshall Islands joined USP as the 13th member. Figure 1 indicates the countries which participate as members of USP and also indicates
the places which our team visited for the research.

USP provides not only conventional university education but also distance higher education programmes. University Extension are in charge of the provision of distance education at USP. University Extension were established in 1970 as part of the Department of Education at USP. In the beginning, their tasks was to assist working school teachers in elementary and junior high level in obtaining their Diploma of Education by means of conventional correspondence education. In 1974 this division was reorganized as an independent department. Since then, they have expanded the number of courses and enrolment. In 1974 USP organized USPNET, a satellite communication network using ATS-I in order to provide tutorials with students in outer islands. After the unfortunate termination of ATS-I in 1985, USP began pursuing their initial distance education objectives by using INTELSAT, a commercial satellite network. This service was initiated under INTELSAT's project SHARE.

Today, more than 3000 students are studying on the main campus at Suva. This shows a satisfactory development of USP as a higher education institution. In addition, approximately 6000 enrolments are counted for University Extension. This indicates that the role University Extension can be expected to play in Island society is becoming more important than ever before.

B. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

This research project has pursued the following three objectives:

1. Interview Research with Students/Graduates of USP, USP University Extension, and other universities in metropolitan areas of the Pacific Rim.

One of the most important objectives of the research was to measure how the distance education programme affects human resource development in Pacific island countries. Focusing on the social and regional mobility of students/graduates in USP Extension, the project attempted to clarify the positive and negative roles and functions of distance education in island societies. As for the negative function, the project placed particular focus on the historical trend of "brain drain" from the Pacific islands to metropolitan areas on the Pacific Rim.

The project asserted that, in order to meet this objective, students and graduates would be the most worthy informants. To clarify the function and role of USP's Extension Programme, we adopted a method of comprehensive interviews with students at various levels as well as graduates. We selected approximately 150 samples of students/graduates from the main campus and each regional centre. In addition to these, we selected about 50 samples of students or graduates from universities in metropolitan cities out of the South Pacific Region, such as Honolulu, San Francisco and Berkeley in the United States; Auckland, Palmerston North and Wellington in New Zealand, and Brisbane in Australia. The research teams met with them and conducted the hour-long interviews directly. Our questions covered a wide range of subjects relating to the following:
- Demographic factors
- Social status background
- Cultural and ethnic background
- Lifestyle patterns
- Educational history
- Patterns of academic life
- Motivation for higher education
- Evaluation of the distance education programme or their higher education institution
- Attitude toward their educational career
- Present job satisfaction
- Future expectation (if student, includes future employment)
- Attitudes on their contribution to the development of their home country

The responses were compared among the three different student/graduate categories from the above perspectives. The three categories were as follows: students/graduates of the Extension Programme, students at/graduates from Suva Campus, and islanders who are studying or have studied in metropolitan universities on the Pacific Rim.

2. Field Research on Regional Study Centres

The second main focus of this research project was directed to Regional Centres of the University Extension of USP. One of the limits of distance education is that students tend to lack face-to-face interaction with instructors. To compensate for this shortcoming, most of the universities using distance modes set up study centres in a central locale where students can contact instructors and/or tutors, and use such educational resources as text and reference books, audio-visual tapes, satellite communication terminals, and experimental equipment. Regarding the University Extension of USP, Regional Centres are allocated to each member country of USP, and most of them are linked into a regional satellite network.

To explore the operations and functions of the Regional Centres of USP, we asked the following questions:

- How does USP organize the Regional Centre system?
- How do Regional Centres assist or direct student study?
- How does USP utilize educational and cultural resources in the island society where the Regional Centre is located?
- What kinds of benefits do Regional Centres provide not only to their students, but also to non-student residents in the society as well?
- How do Regional Centres affect each island society in educational, cultural, and socio-economic terms?
Each of the Regional Centres of USP has a close relationship with the government of the member country. Regional Centres have relative autonomy in their activities and decision-making based on the conditions of each country. This is one of the unique characteristics of USP Regional Centres compared with other distance higher education institutions in Asian and other Pacific countries.

Despite the importance of the study centres in distance education, we know little about their actual functions and operations. Nor do we know much about differences in study centre systems in different countries. Many research programmes on distance education have had a tendency to depend on data collected through the central administration of the distance education institution and not to visit and observe the "realities" of such study centres. This tendency might be the result of difficulties and inconveniences of visiting such remotely-located study centres.

However, if one of the central aims of this research is to clarify the real-life value of such regional institutions in distance education, we must inevitably visit them, observe directly their activities and conduct interviews with students, staff, and the governmental officials responsible for education. This is the reasoning behind the design of this programme of field research.

As one of the expected outcomes of the long range research project, in the course of comparing different study centre systems in different countries, we should obtain data about the functions and operations of regional study centres and their influence on the local societies where they are located.


Finally in this study we focused on the impact of distance higher education on socioeconomic development in the South Pacific countries and also on the trends of social mobility. Generally in developing countries, higher education institutions with distance oriented institutional methods have been established to encourage socioeconomic development of their societies by creating educational opportunities and developing human resources. Among the South Pacific island countries, problems of limited opportunities for higher education and small job markets have been blamed for population outflow.

The University Extension of USP have the potential to change the current situation. Through interviews with government staff responsible for socioeconomic development, executives of local businesses, and USP graduates working in local businesses or foreign countries, we explored how the Extension Programme socioeconomically affects island societies. These are the questions we asked:

-How do government administrations establish and maintain their relationship with USP?
-What educational backgrounds do government staff and local business executives have?
-What types of jobs do university graduates obtain?
-How do government/business executives evaluate USP Extension students in terms of human resources?
What type of support does the government provide for Extension students?
What policy does the government adopt concerning USP University Extension?

C. TARGET AREAS
As well as Suva the capital of Fiji, where the UPS main campus is located, the research project also targeted other island countries for research purposes. The countries visited were the Cook Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa, all of which have Regional Centres. In addition to these countries, the Marshall Islands has recently gained membership of USP. Also Tokelau has been a member country of USP for quite some time. However, these countries have not yet established their own Regional Centres. Therefore these countries were excluded from the target countries for the research.

D. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE RESEARCH
In this research project, five factors affecting conditions of distance education were set out for investigation in each island society: cultural characteristics, information environment, educational system, social structure and characteristics, and socio-economic structure.

These aspects were first examined by conducting literary reviews of collected materials and then comprehensively analyzed in juxtaposition to the earlier mentioned research factors, particularly as they relate to distance education in the South Pacific. In respect of internal factors affecting distance education, the research was based around two complimentary systems of analysis, which focused on both the institutional level and the experiences of individual students.

By combining these two different types of analysis on the quantitative data provided via a questionnaire filled in by the students/graduates as well as the qualitative data obtained from interviews with them, it was hoped that the real status of the distance education programme of USP could be grasped, and its effectiveness examined.

Figure 1 in the following page indicates the flow chart of these affecting factors.
Figure 1 The Conceptual Framework of Relevant Factors on Distance Education in the South Pacific

- Characteristics of culture
  - Religious traditions
  - Cultural transformation in the modern age

- Information environment
  - Type of communication
  - Language and policy for the language
  - Infrastructure of media communication

- Educational system
  - Traditional system for education
  - Continuity from primary and secondary education

- Social structure and system
  - Ethnic condition
  - Construction of social class and stratification
  - Social status system
  - Social mobility

- Economic and Political structure
  - National economy (production and consumption)
  - Labour market
  - National integration or local decentralization
  - Relationship with former suzerain country (Overseas aid and bloc economy)
  - Regional cooperation among island countries

Effects of distance education

- On institutional level
  - System, institution, technology
  - Administration, staff development
  - Curriculum, contents of education

- On individual level of receivers
  - Demographic changes of students
  - Degree, skill, certificate
  - Status formation, course after finishing programme

Effects on island societies
- Quality and quantity of human resources
- Promotion and restraint on social development and social mobility
- Cultural change