The Virtual Colombo Plan – one year on

“Australia has the right kind of expertise to make a significant international contribution through the Virtual Colombo Plan. We have a wide range of institutions that provide world-class services across the entire education sector, and we are already experts in the field of distance education. Our involvement in the Plan will enable that expertise to be employed on a bigger scale than ever before. By playing an important niche role in this area, we can make a real difference.”

The Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, at the launch of the Virtual Colombo Plan, 2 August 2001

1. ORIGIN

In August 2001, the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and the President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, announced the launch of a new joint initiative, the Virtual Colombo Plan (VCP). The VCP aims to help close the global knowledge and digital divides, which are inhibiting many in developing countries from accessing, using, and sharing knowledge that can help in their fight against poverty. For its part, the Australian Government allocated $A200 million over 5 years to the VCP.

The Australian Government recognises there are many ways in which information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used to improve the effectiveness of a whole range of development activities – both indigenous, and donor-supported – across a large number of sectors.

2. JOINING AUSTRALIA’S STRENGTHS …

To ensure the effectiveness of the Australian Government’s assistance in addressing the digital divide is optimised, we have deliberately focused our assistance in areas where Australia is regarded to be strong – namely in the provision of distance education, and in relevant development knowledge.

By virtue of our large distances, distance education has long been a crucial component of Australia’s education system, particularly for people living in remote rural areas without ready access to traditional schooling means. Australia shares many features in common with our developing country neighbours, such as similar climatic and geographic features, transport and communication problems caused by our remoteness from other countries, and within Australia.

Australia, through our official development assistance program, the work of Australian non-government organisations, and close people-to-people links, has developed a good understanding of the development issues facing our main development partners, principally in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Australian Government’s contribution to the VCP draws upon these strengths, and our partnership with the World Bank.

In summary, the VCP supports:
- basic and higher education; and
- communications infrastructure and knowledge content.
3. ... WITH OUR PARTNER COUNTRIES’ NEEDS

In addition to drawing upon Australia’s strengths, it is essential that Australia’s assistance addresses development priorities in our partner countries, and is provided in ways that address clearly – whether directly, or indirectly – the sustainable reduction of poverty.

Access to relevant development information, training opportunities for teachers and education managers, and skills development for public policy remain limited for developing country practitioners. In particular, people in developing countries are often excluded from the range of relevant resources that are available to people in developed countries through the internet and other electronic technologies.

3.1 (a) in basic and higher education

(a) Basic education

While much progress has been made in developing countries in terms of educational access and achievements, pressures on education systems in developing countries remain great, especially at the basic education level.

As a whole, the Asia-Pacific region is close to meeting the goal of universal primary education (with an overall net enrolment ratio of 97% \(^1\)). However, the good regional statistics hide disparities between and inside countries, and between the genders. In South and West Asia, for example, there were still 47 million children who did not attend school in 1998.\(^2\) Some countries have actually seen a decline in the number of enrolments\(^3\). In some communities in this region, the lack of female teachers is restricting basic education opportunities for girls, where cultural and social preferences are for them to be taught by female teachers\(^4\). Keeping children at school is also an issue. Three countries of this region had more than 40% of pupils leaving school before reaching Grade 5\(^5\).

Quality of education is also important. Inadequately trained teachers face an uphill struggle in ensuring their students develop the skills they will require later in life\(^6\). Large student-teacher ratios restrict the ability of teachers to respond to an individual student’s learning needs.

Universal access to quality basic education is not an end in itself, but an important precursor to achieve a wide range of poverty reduction outcomes. For example, literacy and basic mathematics skills are fundamentals in almost every facets of life – whether it be for farmers in deciding what crops to grow and how to maximise their income, understanding and acting upon basic health information, including combating the spread of HIV/AIDS and minimising the health impact of water-borne diseases, not to mention providing the opportunity for further study.

While it is true that in many developing countries classrooms lack basic equipment, such as blackboards, tables and chairs, in the future, ICTs will become increasingly relevant to classroom teaching. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, ICTs can make a positive difference to the learning outcomes of students – even given the lack of classroom materials – by working through intermediaries (for example, by upgrading the number of appropriately trained teachers, or by promoting the cost-effective distribution of teaching materials).

Australia’s contribution to the VCP recognises both these points. The use of ICTs in distance education for basic education teachers offers the potential to:

- through increased cost-effectiveness, help increase the number of suitably qualified teachers;

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1 Source: Education for All – 2000 Assessment, from the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000, page 28
2 Source: Education for All, page 9
3 Source: Education for All, page 26
4 Source: Creed, C., 2001: The Use of Distance Education for Teachers, page 9
5 Source: Education for All, page 36
6 Students still doing poorly - Failings blamed on quality of teachers: Bangkok Post, 12 July 2002
• through providing more amenable training opportunities, increase the number of female teachers, and thereby increase education opportunities for girls, where teacher gender is a major constraint;

• through cost-effective updating of training materials, and through the more centralised use of professional teacher training staff, the potential to raise the level of teacher skills – so they can deliver better learning outcomes with the resources they have to hand; and

• if cost savings can be realised in teacher training, financial resources can be freed to devote to the upgrading of infrastructure and teaching materials to further improve the quality of basic education.

(b) Higher education

Quality higher education, too, is critical to a country’s development, especially in today’s world. As the proportion of economic activity moves from the agricultural and industrial sectors to the information-based sector, there is an increasing demand for people with university qualifications, and this trend is continuing. The research and practical skills required to address the root causes of poverty – for example, in creating the right policy environment and domestic resource allocation – are often acquired at tertiary education institutions. Higher education also provides the teachers and educators for the next generation.

And yet, opportunities for higher education remain limited to people in most of the countries of our region. This is, in part recognised by the number of open universities. For example, five of the six largest open universities in the world are located in this region. As may be expected from this fact, the Asia-Pacific region has more enrolments in open and distance education than any other region.

From the statistics above, combined with the increasing demand in the region for higher education, and financial constraints face by all our governments, it is clear that distance delivery for higher education in the region is going to take on increasing importance in the future – both for teaching of students as well as for upgrading the skills of lecture and administrative staff.

(c) The VCP response

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• through increased cost-effectiveness, help increase the number of suitably qualified teachers;

• through providing more amenable training opportunities, increase the number of female teachers, and thereby increase education opportunities for girls, where teacher gender is a major constraint;

• through cost-effective updating of training materials, and through the more centralised use of professional teacher training staff, the potential to raise the level of teacher skills – so they can deliver better learning outcomes with the resources they have to hand; and

• if cost savings can be realised in teacher training, financial resources can be freed to devote to the upgrading of infrastructure and teaching materials to further improve the quality of education.

(d) Where Australia is helping

The VCP aims to develop the capacity of partner government institutions delivering teacher education to efficiently use ICTs as an alternative delivery mechanism, and to help governments establish the appropriate policy settings for ICT-based delivery to function effectively. This will be supported through the provision of scholarships for teachers and teacher educators to study, online, at Australian

education institutions without the need to be separated from their families and work. The latter is particularly important for middle to senior level officials, who might otherwise be denied the opportunity to gain overseas qualifications.

Through the VCP, Australia is supporting partner countries’ capacity to train basic education teachers using ICTs. Activities underway focus on using ICTs directly to upgrade teachers’ skills through online distance education from Australian education institutions, and through developing the capacity of partner country teacher training institutions to use ICTs to deliver this training themselves. As may be expected, given Papua New Guinea’s predominance in Australia’s development cooperation program, these activities have commenced first in PNG.

The Australian Government plans to commence large-scale assistance to the higher education sector from 2003/04 on. We have, however, started a few activities, where the right circumstances permit:

- through our in-Australia scholarships scheme, we are providing skills to key individuals in distance education;
- we are developing our plans for scholarships for key people from developing countries to upgrade their skills through online learning at Australian institutions;
- supporting the University of the South Pacific to improve its ICT-based distance education delivery; and
- developing a project to support the African Virtual University through assisting with the development of the University, and in developing courses to meet the needs of African students.

(e) Issues

The biggest issues AusAID faces in progressing our plans in this component are:

- insufficient infrastructure for the full use of ICTs to be realised in many of our partner countries;
- the relatively recent attention given to the potential that ICTs offer in this area – meaning that, if ICT-based delivery is to be fully effective, we need to ensure the correct policy setting is in place;
- the use of computer-based learning in basic teacher education has yet to become widespread, including in this region9;
- that distance education for teacher training requires sufficient numbers of students to be cost-effective compared to traditional face-to-face teaching10 - ie that it realises economies of scale;
- the need to identify teacher training institutions using, or planning to use ICTs in distance education delivery, and to agree with partner governments that this form of assistance should be prioritised; and
- the need for any degrees awarded for online study from Australian institutions to be recognised for academic and employment purposes by the awardees’ government institutions.

4. IMPROVING ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

The transfer of knowledge – technology transfer – is at the heart of much of Australia’s overseas aid. We endeavour to bring – through training and mentoring – Australian experience, skills and knowledge to help our development partners address the policy and practical barriers to addressing poverty in their countries. The ultimate aim is to help our partners meet skills and knowledge gaps that they have identified, and to apply them in a sustained way long after the Australian assistance has concluded.

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9 Source: Creed, C., page 37
10 Perraton, H. 1996: The Cost Effectiveness of Distance Education for Primary Teacher Training, page 3
Reliance on physical knowledge stores – whether it be print, video, audio, or person-based – places limitations on a person’s ability to locate this information themselves, in a way that is convenient and timely – particularly in developing countries where funding is often a major constraint. ICTs can considerably ease this information access issue.

Through the VCP, the Australian Government is building on, and strengthening systems established by the World Bank to expand partner country access to information and learning opportunities from around the world, and help them use the internet to disseminate their own knowledge for the benefit of the world community, as well as to help improve the design and delivery of development assistance they receive.

To date, Australia has assisted the establishment of Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) centres in China and Vietnam. Other Asia-Pacific countries with GDLN centres are Australia, Korea, East Timor, Singapore, Mongolia, Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. Further sites are possible in India, Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and the University of the South Pacific, Fiji.

These GDLN Centres are proving a useful way of:

- accessing training programs – a number of which have been funded by Australia – on topics that assist developing countries to develop policies and approaches in their fight against poverty; and
- sharing experience and knowledge amongst themselves on such issues

- We plan to deliver more such content, where this meets the needs of our partner countries.

In addition to supporting the establishment of the physical infrastructure and management of GDLN centres, Australia is also supporting the provision of appropriate content for delivery through the GDLN system. While very much in its early days, we have run a number of successful pilots, including on HIV/AIDS, and financial governance. We plan to deliver more such content, where this meets the needs of our partner countries.

In association with the “hardware” of the GDLNs, the World Bank has helped set up internet portals to assist people working on development issues to access needed information in a timely manner. This work is being coordinated through a new international body – the Development Gateway Foundation – of which Australia is a founding member, contributing $10 million over three years in support of it.

4.1 Australian Development Gateway

To support this global system, Australia has recently (on 20 September 2002) set up its own gateway which, with further development, will become the premier site to locate Australian knowledge on development on almost every conceivable theme. The first phase covers (a) education and distance learning; (b) agriculture; (c) health; and (d) information and communication technology. The Australian Development Gateway is one of the many ‘country’ gateways being established around the world within the framework of the Development Gateway Foundation.

By logging onto http://www.developmentgateway.com.au users will be able to take advantage of a wealth of Australian expertise offered by a range of selected leading organisations and institutions. These include the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Education Network Australia (EdNA) and the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE). Over time, new knowledge partners and topics, including access to material on governance, will be added to the Gateway. On line data and training will also be offered.

4.2 Issues

The issues faced by the GDLN system, from Australia’s perspective, are:

- financial sustainability;
ensuring that training delivered through the GDLN system is highly relevant and effective in addressing – directly, or indirectly – the poverty issues faced by participating countries. The World Bank – with Australian assistance – has recently undertaken a study to ascertain where there is greatest demand.

ensuring that an Australian content and knowledge is relevant, accessible, and easily useable, by people working on development issues in our partner countries.

5. THE USE OF ICTS OUTSIDE OF THE VIRTUAL COLOMBO PLAN

The VCP is not the only mechanism through which we are using ICTs to support development. Australia is supporting the use of ICTs in other projects, where we and our development partners agree this is the most effective way of delivering sustainable poverty reduction. As an example of the latter:

Australia’s support for East Timor’s development includes many ICT-based activities, such as information systems for mental health and oral health;

we are supporting a sea level and climate monitoring project in the south Pacific; and

we are making a substantial contribution to the Asia Recovery Information Centre.


“the end goal of our endeavours has always to be the relief of human suffering, the bridging of the divides between the rich and the poor. There are many ways in which that can be done, development assistance, importantly more open trading systems, indeed the rich nations of the world can do more to help the undeveloped nations of the world by demolishing trade barriers than they can by virtually anything else. And the contribution that the spread in an affordable way of information technology and all that it brings to the developing world is an important part of our endeavours”

The Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, at the opening of the World Congress on IT, 27 February 2002