

PRESS RELEASE

IEC has been providing advice and support in distance education and open and flexible learning to the developing world since 1971. It has a long and important history in the establishment of ODL as a legitimate means of giving the marginalised access to quality education.

It is therefore with great pride and much sadness that I write to inform you that the IEC Trustees have decided that the organisation will cease to be active from 31 March 2006. The Trustees have reached this conclusion in view of a number of changes in the external environment that now make it impossible for IEC to continue generating the income it requires to survive.

Having no core funding, IEC has always had to struggle to beat the uncertainty of activity-by-activity funding. Despite this, having a wide remit – consultancy, learning programmes, research and projects – has enabled IEC, in the past, to rely on one or other income stream being successful to cross-subsidise the others. Today, however, we are faced with very significant changes, in our working and funding environment, beyond our control, which no longer make this viable. We thus plan to wind down the organisation in an orderly manner that enables us to fulfil our current commitments.

The policy change that means donors fund directly to developing world ministries reduces significantly IEC's access to and opportunity to undertake consultancy, and a shift towards more inward looking University policies (due in part to quality assurance issues, and also to the need for Universities to look to their own financial pressures) has reduced our chances for establishing new learning programmes. Meanwhile, both projects and research activities require subsidy by the organisation as funding rarely includes core costs.

As we all know open, flexible and distance learning has become much more mainstream in the wake of the technological developments of the past few years. During this time IEC has had to compete with an ever growing, diverse group of specialists, and on an increasingly globalised basis. Indeed it has always been IEC's mission to work itself out of a job, and perhaps that is in part what we are seeing, as capacity has developed around the world and as ODFL has become increasingly accepted as a key part of mainstream education approaches and systems so the need for a small group of activists has declined.

Over the past 35 years IEC has been instrumental in raising funds to establish, and has provided institutional development support to a large number of organisations, particularly in Africa but also elsewhere. Among these are South African Institute of Distance Education, Sudan Open Learning Organisation, South African Extension Unit, Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre, Botswana Extension College, Malawi College of Distance Education, Mauritius College of the Air, the Namibian Extension Unit and the Women in Fisheries Industries Project.

IEC has also worked with the pioneer open universities in Asia, including the Functional Education Project of Allama Iqbal Open University and Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Bangladesh Open University and the Indonesian Open School and in the Caribbean helping institutions to develop national teacher training programmes in Belize and Guyana.

IEC also worked long and tirelessly for the establishment of the Commonwealth of Learning.

Central to our philosophy has been a desire to work for improved equity of access to education, and through this social and economic participation and self-determination. We have thus worked in the service of mass populations particularly of out-of-school youth, illiterate adult learners, refugees and internally displaced people, nomads and those disenfranchised under Apartheid. We have also supported the development of programmes and institutions which serve end beneficiaries both directly through courses and also indirectly through training of unqualified teachers and other education and development personnel.

IEC thus leaves a legacy of organisations and alumni that will continue to widen access to education for the masses in the developing world.

We thank all those who have been our partners and advisers in this endeavour and wish you all well in your future projects.

Felicity Binns, Executive Director, IEC

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