

# **Unconventional Educational Practices in Majority World Theological Education**

A Qualitative Research Study Commissioned by  
Overseas Council International  
A Comprehensive Report

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## Forward

Along with my colleagues on the international partnerships team at Overseas Council, I have been blessed to visit and fellowship with theological schools in nations across the world. In 2010, our team found ourselves reflecting on a number of schools that appeared to be engaging theological education in unusual, innovative, and at times provocative ways. Conversations with several of these institutions and an OCI donor suggested that these “unconventional educational practices” needed to be better understood.

I am deeply thankful for the work of Dr. Meri MacLeod in designing and carrying out this significant labor from 2011-2013. Meri’s insistence on a collaborative research design *shaped by* these innovative institutions as well as her careful application of the research methodology across a wide variety of contexts allowed this to become the provocative report that it is. I am also thankful to the regional directors and other staff at Overseas Council who contributed significantly to this project.

I find two themes particularly interesting:

First, the study shows that, despite a wide-ranging dialogue over nearly 30 years about “renewal in theological education,” *the impetus for the unconventional practices in the programs studied is much more local than global*. The “uncommon practices” appear to be rooted in what MacLeod calls an “uncommon ethos” that embodies *at once an openness to new ideas as well as a proactive approach to the local church*. More often than not, this involves theological educators who were willing to take significant risk and sail into largely uncharted waters in order to respond better to pressing needs. As the study shows, these attempts were not uniformly successful, yet they represent an ethos of experimentation and a constant awareness of the broader context of the theological school.

Second, the study points to *the largely unsupported nature and the resultant vulnerability of innovation*. The decidedly locally based nature of innovation means that leaders often lack access to broader conversations and tools critical to the support of academic administrators in other contexts. The combination of this lack of tools, opposition, a frequent sense of being alone in innovative work, and the ever-present pressure of financial pressures places untold stress on innovators, raising significant question regarding the *human sustainability* of innovation.

This study looks at a handful of schools. It is my hope, however, that the narratives presented here will ring familiar to others, and promote a deeper conversation on meaningful innovation in theological education around the world.

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## Introduction

This report draws together highlights, patterns, and prominent themes from across nine diverse schools for a research project commissioned by Overseas Council International (OCI) – that of seeking out and describing “unconventional” or emerging uncommon educational practices in majority world theological schools. The practices elicited after careful analysis of the data are generally reflected in a substantial number of the schools. Those schools where a practice is most clearly reflected are identified; as well as any school that appears as a clear exception. Comments from interviews that reveal the clearest definition or explanation of a practice are included in this report as illustrative material. As a result not all schools are referenced equally in this report. Illustrations are written both within the body of the report and in appendixes.

By 2010, OCI staff had become aware of the changes taking place in theological education, whether among schools in the majority world or in western countries. In addition, the data collected from their partner schools had documented a decline in traditional full-time student enrollment. At the same time there was an increase in a variety of new models such as distance education, instruction at specific “centers” located closer to where non-traditional students lived, and “in-service” training that offered modular courses less disruptive to students’ ministries and families. Further, it became apparent that the emerging models were not confined to one region of the majority world but were evident in every major region. An early draft of a possible research study stated that, “while we are aware of many emerging models and creative endeavors, we lack understanding of many elements of the projects.” As a result, OCI along with significant supporters, realized that their service to these schools would be enhanced by a deeper understanding of what was taking place. The result was a decision to conduct a large qualitative research study to investigate in a focused and in-depth way the new work of the schools.

## I. Research Methodology

### Purpose

The purpose of the study was two fold: (1) to gain a greater understanding of “unconventional” educational practices reported at the selected schools and (2) to provide each participating school with their own report along with the comprehensive report for reflection and ongoing development. An additional benefit of the study was that the interaction during the research visit was a catalyst for “reflection-in-action” among the educational leaders. Educators at several schools specifically noted that the research visit stimulated new discussion in ways meaningful to their work. A number said that they looked forward to the help they would receive from the individual school reports.

### Participants

OCI leaders, after extensive discussion, narrowed the original list of possible participating schools to a final list identified as (1) a recognized partner school, (2) represented various types of diversity, (3) schools whose new programs were seen as positive by their constituencies, and (4) with experienced leadership in place. By spring 2010 nine schools from four regions of the “majority world” agreed to participate in the study. The Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo found it impossible to participate because of the political developments in Egypt at the time. The nine participating schools included the following:

<b>School Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Research Visit</b>	<b>Campus Type</b>
<b>Africa Theological Seminary (ATS)</b>	Kitale, Kenya	December 2011	Commuter/Multi-week Residency
<b>Evangelical School of Theology (EST)</b>	Wroclaw, Poland	May 2012	Commuter/ Short Intensives
<b>International Faculty of Theological Education (FIET),</b>	Buenos Aires, Argentina	October 2011	No standard school campus
<b>Bible Institute of Bénin (IBB)</b>	Cotonou, Bénin	January 2012	Commuter/ Short Intensives
<b>Lanka Bible College &amp; Seminary (LBCS),</b>	Colombo & Kandy, Sri Lanka	November 2012	Commuter & Residential Campuses
<b>Lviv Theological Seminary (LTS)</b>	Lviv, Ukraine	November 2011	Residential & Extension Centers
<b>PROMETA</b>	San Jose, Costa Rica	April 2012	No standard school campus
<b>South African Theological Seminary (SATS)</b>	Johannesburg, South Africa	July 2012	No standard school campus
<b>Singapore Bible College (SBC)</b>	Singapore	September 2012	Residential

**Table 1:** Participating Schools

These schools provide considerable variety including location and languages, institutional types and programs, history and funding patterns, as well as faculty and student composition. One limitation within the variations is the limited representation of denominational schools largely due to the emphasis on interdenominational schools of OCI’s constituency. A further limitation to generalizability of the study findings was the

loss of representation from the Middle East due to the political unrest at the time of the research visits.

### Design

A systematic inquiry was designed based on the principals of qualitative research and grounded theory utilized in the field of education.<sup>1</sup> Central to the research study was the qualitative interview conducted with faculty, administrators, and students. Qualitative research interviews, unlike written surveys, provide the opportunity to hear directly from participants in their own words as they describe their points of view, motivations, experiences, and the meaning they give to their experiences. The face-to-face accounts from students are an important part of the insight gained from this study and they accounted for forty-six of the one hundred and thirty total interviews conducted.

Approximately 1,800 pages of verbatim transcripts were generated from the interviews.<sup>2</sup> Some studies on theological education may include an interest in students but rarely does the research include interviews directly with students. It is more common to see informally designed surveys that elicit selected quantitative information about or from students; or interviews that elicit secondary data about students from faculty and administrators. Given that the vast majority of the students interviewed are older, working adults their experience and perspective provided an important contribution and can guide educators in their continued work of developing unconventional theological education.<sup>3</sup>

Qualitative research of schools is most often designed as a case study of one school. It is rare to find up to three schools included in one study, referred to as a multiple case study or collective case study where the focus is on the study of a cross-case phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> This study was commissioned to inquire into emerging educational practices in nine different schools. The strength of this study, therefore, is the cross-school perspective and the breadth of practices discovered; a potential limitation is the lack of depth that is possible in the multi-case study approach.

Each interview transcript has been coded with a randomly generated three-digit number in order to maintain confidentiality. Each code is unique and unrelated to the name of the school or the role and gender of the persons interviewed. Further, the pronoun 'he' is used when referencing the comments of all interviewees in order to protect the anonymity of the small number of women interviewed for the study.<sup>5</sup> This is done in contrast to the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method* by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, eds., (London: Sage Publications, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Originally seventy-two interviews were expected with twenty-seven being with students. The increase in total number of interviews was related to factors in the real situation once onsite.

<sup>3</sup> The majority of older adult students was identified by OCI as an unexpected surprise. Original hesitation regarding interviewing students was due to the assumption that schools were serving young students.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Stake, "Qualitative Case Studies" in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* ed Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005) 3<sup>rd</sup>. edition: 446-466.

<sup>5</sup> While women were interviewed in each school the numbers were small since they generally comprise a small minority of students, faculty, and administrators.

academic standard for publishing research that involves human subjects where it is expected that the gender of the interviewee is identified.<sup>6</sup> On occasion interview quotes have been modestly edited to enhance readability while retaining the authentic voice of the speaker. All recorded interviews are in the possession of OCI and the original quotes can be checked if needed.

Two collaborative elements were developed in order to contextualize the research design—and ultimately to increase the benefit of the findings for each school as they continue the creation of unconventional practices. Beginning with an orientation meeting in Addis Abba in May 2011 school leaders met together with the researcher and OCI leaders to gain an understanding of the purpose for the study and to collaborate in shaping the first draft of the research questions. Central to the time together was clarifying the distinctives of each school and establishing foundational relationships critical to a successful research visit. Appendix A provides the general schedule for the meeting that was conducted in a collaborative process. Each representative was asked to envision how their school could benefit from the study so their efforts in arranging the research visit would be a contribution to their own purposes as well as to those of OCI. Representatives from each school were able to contribute in both the design phase and during the actual research as they identified key individuals to interview. Each school's individual report is based on their school's set of interviews and modeled on the format of this summary report.

Guidelines were given to each school to expedite their selection of those who would be interviewed. They were to include a minimum of three faculty, administrators and students, both male and female. Schools were asked to identify any off-site experiences that would help the researcher gain a better understanding of their work. This resulted in some schools (ATS, IBB, FIET, LBCS) arranging in-country travel<sup>7</sup> expanding the total number of interviews. The nine site visits, approximately five to eight days in length, included formal interviews, many informal conversations, and formal participant observations, including several class sessions. Two sets of interview questions were used, one set for teachers and administrators, and another for students provided in Appendix B.

Interview questions for the teachers and administrators focused on the nature of the unconventional educational design, factors that seemed to contribute to its effectiveness (or not), and the primary concerns regarding sustainability. Student questions focused on experiences such as a high point of their time, how they would describe the program to a friend, and what they might keep and add to their educational program by imagining themselves as the principal of the school. Both sets of questions were tested at two schools in Quito, Ecuador in September 2011 which helped to refine the student questions and the logistics in preparing schools for the online interviews at ProMETA and SATS.

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<sup>6</sup> *Writing the Empirical Journal Article* by Daryl J. Bem of Cornell University. Accessed at [dbem.ws/WritingArticle.pdf](http://dbem.ws/WritingArticle.pdf) on July 17, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> ATS included a visit to the Mt Elgon campus, FIET included churches in Mar del Plata, Argentina, IBB included a visit to the Songhai Center in Porto Novo, Bénin, LBCS included both the Colombo and Kandy campuses.

The diverse approaches, languages, and locations of the schools presented an immediate challenge to conducting the research. The first goal upon arrival was to discern the broad strokes of the unconventional or uncommon educational approach(es) in order to focus as many interviews as possible on understanding it from the perspectives of those involved. Some educators, while working intensely in their own setting looked at their educational programs as a natural routine response to the needs around them and not necessarily as something “unconventional.” It took time to listen and discern what was assumed to be ordinary but in fact turned out to be quite uncommon. For example, co-curricular student groups from different ethnic communities learn and grow together as a Christian community at ATS and LBCS—a remarkable undertaking given the recent experiences of violence between the various ethnic communities in those countries. These sorts of “unconventional” collaborative learning practices could become the object of another inquiry—one that inquires into the ways in which collaborative education contributes to the development of peaceful relationships in ethnically divided societies.

Only two of the nine schools chosen for this study employ a comprehensive form of distance learning. However, given the general agreement globally that distance learning is a vital area of educational development an extended description of the two distinct models represented in this study, one embraced by SATS and the other by ProMETA, is included in this report as Appendix C. Each school’s model is described against the historical background of the field of distance learning as it has developed over the last fifty to sixty years. A summary of that historical development of distance learning is provided as a supplement to this report in Appendix D.

## **II. Student Interviews**

The overwhelming majority of students interviewed for the study were older adults with life experience and responsibilities that enriched their coursework. The two exceptions included students in the residential programs at LTS and LBCS-Kandy. While SBC is primarily a residential campus many of the students interviewed were adults with some years of ministry experience including several Singaporeans who hold employment responsibilities in addition to their studies. It was reported that the average age of students at SBC has increased over the last fifteen to twenty years with today’s average between thirty-nine and forty-one.

Generally the students quickly became comfortable and conversed freely during the interviews and they seemed pleased to talk about their experiences and ideas. Many were pleased their school was chosen to be part of an international project (inclusion in an international project adds to their prestige). Several expressed appreciation for the work being done to assist their school. Opening questions about non-threatening topics (e.g., their family, where they worked, where they were born, and so on) helped to set the students at ease. The interview process used a mixed approach including role playing two imaginary scenarios and recalling significant memories. When a topic of special interest to the study was mentioned by a student follow up questions solicited further clarity.



When a translator was used it took a little time for the students to adjust to speaking through a translator, especially when using Skype for the ProMETA interviews. All students were interviewed individually with the exception of the students at SBC who met as two focus groups. At SBC only English speaking students were interviewed. The group approach did prove somewhat less informative as dominant speakers made it difficult for quiet students to speak, and most students responded selectively to the interview questions providing an incomplete transcript compared to students interviewed individually.

However, one group near the end of the interview broke into a spontaneous discussion of a concern they discovered they cared about collectively. Students had been asked to imagine a future where they were now the principal of SBC. In this role they could keep what they considered the most important aspects of their education and add new elements. One student said:

“I would be bold to also introduce oral examinations instead of only written examinations. Some people find it so difficult to write but they can communicate a truth in their way.”

Then another added,

“Especially if English is like their fifth language or something. It’s incredibly difficult for them to write.”

“Yes,” said the next,

“But if you sit them down and ask them what their thoughts are on this, they are able to communicate with you. In a way it makes them practiced to become oral communicators, which also is an important aspect in ministry.”

Then,

“I think this also helps prepare us to be ministers in a world where lots of people are illiterate or nearly illiterate. Because our learning system is so paper-based and computer-based, then we go back to our ministries and we’re working with people who have a very low literacy, it’s going to be a paradigm shift in some cases to really apply what we’ve learned.

Another added,

“Four years we’ve been expressing our thoughts on computer and paper and suddenly we have to start communicating with someone.”

Building on that,

“More than that, just helping them to understand the Bible in a way that is not based on literacy is something that’s not really considered as part of our training at this stage.”

Through this serendipitous group process students seemed to gain an awareness of something that was important to them about how their education could both serve their classmates and become more relevant for them in ministry. Here the group process

generated insight that was expanded by the participants and may not have occurred to the same degree in an interview of one individual. These adult students at SBC were younger than most adult students interviewed at the other schools, but they echoed the common concern consistent throughout the interviews: the practical relevance of their studies for ministry. They needed to understand how their academic studies were meaningful to their work in ministry.

Valuable insights for the schools were gained through student interviews, especially since the schools are doing unconventional programs and most of them are serving primarily adult learners. Student interviews made it possible to identify consistency between what faculty described as occurring in their courses and what students actually experienced. Talking directly to these adult students, rather than collecting information about them through the perceptions of educators, proved to be one of the most important aspects of the research design. For example, the descriptions of the ProMETA faculty and online students from five different countries were remarkably consistent concerning the teaching and learning design of the courses and the deep community relationships the students experienced. At ATS faculty described how a class of adult students took an active role in redesigning the schedule of courses resulting in accomplishing the same academic work load while reducing the number of days the students spent away from home and their jobs. When interviewing ATS students they identified the importance of their work with the administration that brought about the schedule change. It was a significant highlight for them. Additional insight from the student interviews is described as one of the four dominant themes, “Adult Learners as the Primary Student Population” beginning on page 16.

### **III. An Uncommon Ethos**

Stakeholders across all schools expressed a passionate vision for serving the church by providing accessible theological education for the working adult student. They are deeply burdened for the church and many actively assist churches whenever and wherever possible. Board members, administrators, and faculty alike expressed concern for unmet educational needs essential for a healthy church. It seemed central to their sense of call to provide accessible and relevant theological education. This burden for the church, coupled with an awareness of the changing context seemed an important catalyst that pushed them toward new and unproven approaches--even to the point of offering the counter-cultural option of online learning.<sup>8</sup> An interesting discovery in the interviews was that no school could identify a model they drew ideas or inspiration from as they worked to create their unconventional designs. One exception was found at a school where two deans drew on their experience in their earlier PhD studies from the West to inform how they approach assisting faculty in adopting new pedagogical practices. Educational leaders expressed their support for the church in a variety of ways. One leader noted, “we are careful about always to keep that connection to the church. Is it going to be useful? Is it needed? Is it needed for this time and place in the history of the church in

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<sup>8</sup> Experience with community rich online learning is generally limited and often not perceived as a high quality educational option for church leaders.

Argentina? It's always that." Another leader shared, "Our goal again and again, over and over, is to serve the church, the local church, not to serve us from the church. . . . The starting point of everything we do is the church, not our institution."

One school board member (and pastor) expressed their concern for the church when he said, "Today churches are many and the numbers of members of churches are many. Pastors are not enough. Some of the leaders are not even trained. It's important to guide, to orient the training in such a way that we respond to the need of the church that is in formation." One principal described how his school is reaching a "constituency neglected by the traditional theological institutions, most of which are denominational. If you are going to attend their school you must be a member of their denomination. We have opened the net to reach out to many church pastors or workers who without this school do not know where to go to have access to any theological education."

Most of the schools exhibited two orientations that are uncommon in the culture of many schools: an openness to new ideas and a proactive approach to the local church. Western theological schools, reflecting higher education in general, have been criticized for maintaining closed systems focused on familiar internal functions and established patterns. Research indicates that "historically embedded patterns of organization and governance resist fundamental change and often marginally adapt themselves to evolving conditions of the larger environment and international trends and norms."<sup>9</sup> Numerous leaders in this study expressed a strong desire for new insight and suggestions related to organizational and curricular change. Some leaders initiated discussions with the researcher to test new ideas or invited recommendations before the conclusion of the site visit. Others expressed eagerness to receive the report of interviews and observations hoping to gain helpful information.

When we think in terms of designing a new program we don't start looking at ourselves and saying what else can we do to add a new program for an institution to look better. We listen to the church and we see what they need to be more effective in their ministry. What an average worker in a church would need to be effective to God's particular calling to his life and to his church. [transcript 696]

The service to the churches often involves long and costly travel up a mountainside in Kenya, across rugged country roads in Sri Lanka, along winding systems of travel in Poland and Argentina, or much further away to another region. In this way the schools have built trust with the churches and it appears that both church leaders and students know that they can call on the schools to assist them. It seems that these theological educators are more than course teachers or program administrators; some seem to function as influential church leaders in their region. Principals and faculty at numerous schools described how they are ready to go to serve the church when they are called upon. In Bénin, IBB is often called upon to assist with challenging issues in the church. At ATS the principal and faculty

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<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Edelstein and John Aubrey Douglas. *Comprehending the International Initiatives of Universities: A Taxonomy of Modes of Engagement and Institutional Logics*. Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, December 2012, page 4. Research & Occasional paper Series: CSHE.19.12. Accessed on April 12, 2013 at <http://cshe.berkeley.edu>.

remind the students that they can contact them whenever a faculty member can assist with their ministry — and students do that. In Sri Lanka, LBCS has extension sites around the country and one senior administrator, who is also a faculty member travels regularly to visit the pastors at the extensions sites. On other occasions senior administrators traveled for many hours over mountain roads or through remote jungles in response to the requests of pastors.

It also became clear that creating “unconventional” educational practices sometimes created a difficult environment in which to work. Dynamics such as stress, risk-taking, suspicion, uncertainty, isolation, and misunderstanding were reported as these educators challenged acceptable patterns. Both faculty and administrators told stories of how students have changed through their educational experience and many times when they return to their churches it can cause tension and conflict. The students are eager to bring their new ideas gained from their studies which can become a threat to the established practices. One pastor-student explained that,

When I came here I was in one of the churches. I learned here and when I went back I told my church members, ‘I have seen some things are not going very well and I think we need to change some things.’ Some leaders will say, “no that’s not what we want to do. We don’t want your ideas.” They would not listen. I tried it for about three years but they all didn’t budge. [transcript 525]

Research on the diffusion of innovation suggests that innovators are generally more open to new ideas than most others, have an unusual capacity for risk-taking and coping with uncertainty, and are generally more adventuresome.<sup>10</sup> This research defines an innovation as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or another unit of adoption” such as near peers, family, community or organization.<sup>11</sup> The work of implementing an innovation is described as a social change process where various groups of people over time come to accept the new innovation. While the educational leaders at the nine schools in this study typically did not see their work as innovative, their work is compatible with the definition of innovation. Gaining an understanding of how innovation permeates a social system to the point of broad acceptance as described in the research literature can be useful when considering the issues of sustainability for the schools.

#### **IV. Dominant Themes**

Four themes emerged across nearly all schools in the study: (1) priority of the context, (2) adult learners as the primary student population, (3) contextually grounded teaching and learning, and (4) sustaining educational innovation.

##### Theme: Priority of the Context

The cultural context held an important place in the educational approach for the majority of educators in the study. When inquiring into how these educators went about creating

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<sup>10</sup> Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press, fourth edition, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, xvii.

their unconventional education often they began by describing their situation be it geographic, economic, political and what they had discovered regarding the unmet needs of the church. Their growing understanding seemed to develop over a period of time as they sought to identify the existing gaps in the training needs of pastors. Often one facet of the identified “gap” in theological education was the lack of programs that were available to working adults in formats that they could access. These educators seemed to listen regularly to the experiences of pastors and church members. Beginning with this experiential knowledge from within their communities they defined the curriculum and structure (weekend intensives, monthly classes, etc.) that became their unconventional approach. This was quickly evident at ATS, EST, and ProMETA. A lengthy investigation across Latin America was conducted by ProMETA exploring the educational needs of the church. The findings of which directly shaped the curriculum.

One school described that their beginning was not “coming with the ideas one day of deciding to start a school here.” Rather,

It was after interaction with the church and leaders from around. They called for a workshop. They called the bishops and senior church leaders from around, and in their Christian way they were asking one question, ‘how can we best help you?’ Over 300 church leaders from around confirmed saying, ‘help us in the area of training.’ . . . It’s like we go to the church, identify a need and include that training in our program. Now we see that people are saying that they need counseling in the church. Counseling is becoming an issue in the world. Many church leaders have said that almost on a daily basis they are faced with a counseling situation. Now we are starting a counseling program. Our model is pastors say, ‘we would like a school that can help us to not dislocate ourselves from our work stations,’ We have taken that seriously and it’s really working for them and they like it. [transcript 034]

A number of schools seemed to adopt a different starting place when creating their curriculum. Rather than beginning with the classic theological curriculum these schools focused on the keenly felt issues debilitating the church within their local or regional context. For example, at IBB the dominant frame of reference for the curriculum was West Africa within the broader African context; and then more specifically local issues such as the widespread impact of Voodoo in Bénin. The priority in the curriculum most often identified was the critical need for Bible knowledge. So courses focused on biblical studies and hermeneutics, biblical theology, and practical ministry skills. Less attention seemed to be given to the classical approach of systematic or historical theology. As one ProMETA educator stated, “we respect the [western] seminary curriculum but we do not feel bound by it. We don’t offer classroom theology but theology that is relevant for real life.”

Many educators seem to be regularly engaged in a socially rooted experiential learning process that informs curriculum revision. There was a clear sense of a dynamic curricular process in place at many of the schools, often informal and more spontaneous than established schools experience. Courses are not set for long periods of time but are revised based on the latest information coming from the context. This approach of “learning-as-

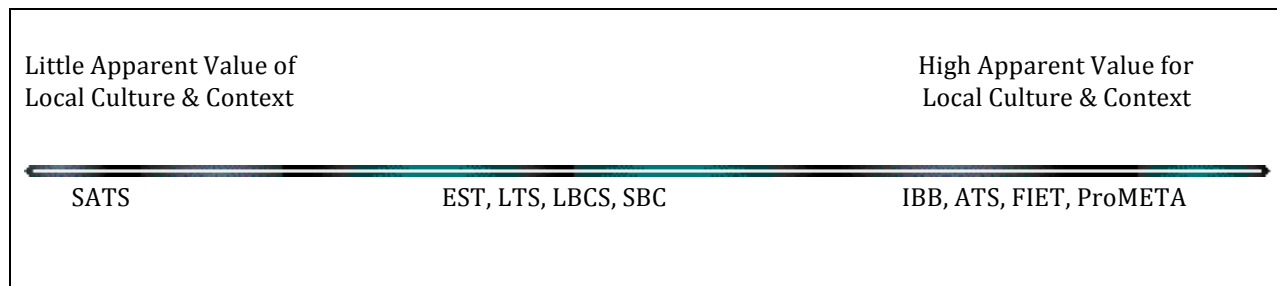
you go” trial and error experience reflects the experiential learning process found to be central in adult learning.<sup>12</sup>

One exception to this pattern is the School of Theology (SOT) at SBC. The SOT-English school, and to a lesser degree the SOT-Chinese school, described a lengthy history of faculty with PhDs from the US and UK. In addition, numerous faculty in the SOT-English are westerners with an interest in retaining what they perceive to be the theological curriculum and faculty load of esteemed western seminaries. In contrast to a number of schools in this study SBC’s Schools of Theology have a strong focus on systematic theology in their curriculum. At the same time there is a growing concern among many faculty that graduates are less able to “reengage back into their context and to minister effectively and relevantly.” As one leader described,

Students are not able to communicate as relevantly as they should and they have a lack of awareness of some of the contextual issues facing Singapore. They are not able to engage those issues so there’s a big disconnect now between what they’re saying and their ability to be relevant and to apply the truth of God in their own preaching. These, and other issues, have been reported to us with much greater frequency so it has prompted us to say that we need to do something about this.

The unconventional focus of SBC for this study is their growing investment in the work of integration, both across disciplines and with local contexts and practical ministry.

The degree of influence of a school’s cultural context when shaping their educational practices may be identified on a continuum with cultural context identified as having little influence at one end and cultural context perceived as having a high value and strong influence on the opposite end of the continuum as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Degree of Importance of Cultural Context in Shaping Unconventional Educational Design

Cultural context appeared to have the least value, and thus influence, on the educational design of SATS programs. Numerical growth and global expansion was identified as a high priority for SATS. Interestingly, SATS also appears to be less unconventional or innovative in their educational programs compared to other schools included in this study. They seemed to have adopted a long standing model (see Appendix D) of distributing pre-

<sup>12</sup> David A. Kolb *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984)

packaged course materials and, unlike FIET, they appear to have made few, if any, culturally sensitive adaptations.<sup>13</sup> The reason given by SATS is that they serve students from different countries. ProMETA, the other distance education school, serves students from many countries and their high priority for contextual education has influenced faculty pedagogy.

Currently SATS students, many of whom are older adults, are required to work fully in English to take courses, including writing at an acceptable academic level and with all instruction text-based in English. Admittedly, determining how to approach the various languages across Africa when offering higher education is recognized as a complex issue across higher education.<sup>14</sup> One new adjustment to their standardized English language approach is the recent work of a local SATS student to translate courses into French so SATS can grow by moving more fully into West Africa, beginning in Ghana. In addition, they anticipate including in their program offerings a new curriculum written by non-South Africans of the group More Than A Mile Deep (MMD).

IBB, ATS, FIET and ProMETA are schools that seem to represent the end of the spectrum that highly values the local context and they have identified ways their cultural context influences their educational programs. The local context has influenced the curriculum in how they understand the way their people best learn, and how they structure their educational offerings. One FIET administrator remarked, "Context is king for us!" One principal, reflecting on a key to his programs identified the importance of "staying close to the church." When critiquing one student's class sermon one instructor chided, "We are not interested in preaching like the West. We are concerned with learning how to preach for Africans. Preaching is not about gaining applause."

For one school context shapes curriculum in that,

They make students to have a wide-range of other things in the general courses, like conflict management. This conflict management, we have conflicts, so a student trained here can mediate some issues outside. Community development, something like that. If there are issues in the community which the community wants help, you can help, as well as pastoring to these people, enriching them in some way. These general courses are also very important. Also when we come to the bible part of it again, they have so many things that are rich that can help one to be trained enough to lead the church and to lead the community. [transcript 525]

FIET has made a number of intentional changes in order to adapt their educational offerings to their context. Appendix E describes one such adaptation that appears to reflect what some scholars refer to as culturally compatible education.

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<sup>13</sup> FIET began with TEE pre-packaged curriculum but modified significantly how it was implemented in order to fit more compatibly with the cultural needs in Argentina. IBB eliminated TEE pre-packaged materials entirely concerned with the lack of spiritual transformation in the students.

<sup>14</sup> Damtew Teferra and Philip G. Altbach, "Trends and Perspectives in African Higher Education" in *African Higher Education: An International Reference Handbook* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3-14.

Schools who seem to fit more in the middle of the scale are aware and concerned with the issues of their local context but the cultural context appears to have less of an influence on their educational designs. These schools appear to be working to innovate from within a traditional school and the mindset of what is appropriate and best within that paradigm. Unlike schools such as IBB, FIET or ProMETA, they seem to be attempting to modify or add on to the established school with innovations such as extension centers necessary to reach dispersed working adults. For example, educational leaders at EST hold up the former seminary residential model with full time faculty as the desired ideal. Their approach to unconventional practices is in large measure motivated to generate a level of necessary income to sustain the school rather than to offer unconventional educational designs. EST has surprisingly developed little real online learning even though their students are dispersed around the country.

For LTS, it appears that the innovations are added on to the primary work of the residential school. They seem to be extras largely in response to requests for training by dispersed pastors. When the new principal reflected on the situation he indicated that it was now time to consolidate the many new things that had occurred under the prior principal. For these schools it appears that unconventional education is not their core identity as it is at IBB, FIET, or ProMETA; and this difference may well be important in understanding the nature of sustainability for the different schools.

#### Theme: Adult Learners as the Primary Student Population

The older adult learner, individuals with life experience and a variety of responsibilities, make up the largest student population participating in the unconventional programs. Most often these students are working bi-vocationally such as teachers in Kenya who also function as pastors. These older adult learners comprise the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in seven of the nine schools in the study. Schools such as LTS and LBCS that have focused previously on residential students are expanding in a number of ways to reach the adult student. LTS has developed a new Masters program and began extension centers to provide courses for pastors across a broad geographic region. LBCS created the graduate school in Colombo and at their residential campus in Kandy they offer an evening program for teachers.

The innovative educational designs are reaching adults with the biblical training they seek and students at ProMETA and FIET expressed the desire that their school would do more to promote their programs because they see such a great need for the education they have received. Student interviews indicate that the schools whose only student population is the nonresidential working adult are providing what these students, from various backgrounds, identified they most desire: practical and relevant education, access and flexibility that fits their life responsibilities, relationships of mutual support and respect.

Adults managing the responsibilities of jobs, families, and ministries seek learning opportunities that can be directly applied to their work and ministry. This priority was consistently identified across the student interviews, regardless of whether the student was male or female, urban or rural, professional or non-professional workers. Relevance and practical application were one of the most common themes across student interviews.



In Poland, one adult who travels from the northern part of the country to take classes at EST said, “If the courses are not applicable to what I need then I won’t stay [in the program].” In Mexico a former civil engineer turned pastor said that he reviewed ProMETA’s website carefully to be sure that the courses would be relevant to his context and he reflected,

[T]he most beautiful discovery I have made here, is that there is a real possibility of applying all these [courses] to my context. I think that’s what makes me really happy about being here, the fact that I easily find how to apply what I’m learning to my different context. [transcript 358]

A Venezuelan pastor who has worked on his ProMETA program for over seven years was asked what kept him staying with the program and his reply was immediate.

The fact that I noticed more and more that what I was studying was relevant to the reality I was living. It’s pretty common to find out that you study a program, but then you go out and you see people, they are speaking of something totally different than what you heard in the class. I think they really were talking in each course about contemporary issues. What I was learning in the class was something relevant to the situations I was living. That also convinced me of staying. [transcript 664]

Relationships were identified as another important component for these learners -- they valued the sense of community they experienced with peers and faculty and some continued these relationships after courses ended. At ATS, a strong sense of community was described with the oft-repeated metaphor of the umbilical cord. Several interviews and conversations repeated the commitment that, “The umbilical cord is never cut. We are a family.” And this sense of family connectedness permeates the distance between the students even when they are not in their face-to-face classes together.

Even after we close the college we are still connected. We are here sometimes for three, four weeks. When you go back we are still connected with our instructors because we have mentorship group. When we are away we still talk and pray for one another. [We] stay connected and we can invite one another to our churches, seminars, come and teach. We continue the fellowship. [transcript 760]

Students often identified their appreciation for the diversity of people in their courses and small mentoring groups. The diversity included different denominations (or “dogma”), various churches each bringing different beliefs, and different nationalities or ethnic communities included in their study program.

There are several things that make this place a good place to study and one of them is we are so many students. Most students here come from different denominations. When we come here we share a wide range of experiences together and it forms something like we are united in Christ. As much as we think they’re different from us, but you see here it’s like we have some kind of unity and diversity and therefore we learn so many things from each other. Sometimes when we are in our mentoring sessions when we share together these experiences it makes us so rich in what we are doing. [transcript 525]

For those online the value of community was linked to the richness of learning with people from many different countries who are seeking to apply course material to their own contexts. One student reported on a helpful activity:

An activity that I consider very important is the forum. There we can interact with the mentor and with the other students. What's different is that during this forum you can share from your activities but in more practical ways what you are doing in your own community, and you receive this feedback on what can be fine, what maybe needs to be fixed, and things like that. This is very powerful because you have classmates from many countries with many backgrounds working on different things, and so the experiences are so rich that you learn *a lot*. . . . There is something *extremely powerful* about working from different countries, having classmates from different countries. [transcript 055] emphasis of interviewee

This pastor described how the diverse online community has changed him.

I grew up in the Baptist church and in Mexico the denominational aspect is pretty strong and strict, you just keep yourself in the lines of your denomination. So the chance of having classmates with other points of view, with other cultures and also theological, denominational backgrounds made me see that I don't know everything and that there is something really powerful about this diverse context of people. Then that changed me as a person even in the way I relate as a pastor with people because I think that has made me more humble. And for me, it is interesting to see how people have started telling me, "You have changed and there's something different in the way you teach and preach." I think that's a major change in my life. [transcript 358]

Many students identified the importance of access and flexibility as critical to them. Most seemed aware that there were few options available to them for theological education. For those who attended "semi-residential" programs such as ATS, IBB or EST many would travel long distances and could be away from home for several weeks at a time. For those spread across many Latin American countries the online option of ProMETA was an important and valued option — and as the only option.

The first thing [that attracted me] was the fact that I did not have to attend to a class because I was dealing with responsibilities in the church [as a pastor], time with family and everything. I really wanted to study, but the options I was looking for required for me to attend to a class each week and that was not an option for me. [transcript 664]

For ATS, they provided a program that fits professionals, especially the teachers. . . . We come here for learning and it doesn't interfere with my employer. That is the uniqueness of this college. [transcript 760]

Appendix C describes more fully how students view their experience in the distance learning programs like ProMETA.

For some accessibility meant that, “It’s affordable. . . . If you have a job you can pay for the program. I know that’s something important in our context.” For others it meant that the educational level of the course materials allowed “anyone” to be able to study. At several schools some adults mentioned how important it was to be treated as a person. One student reflected, “The people here, how they work. It’s like they have a lot of hospitality. . . . When you are here there’s a lot of hospitality. . . . You’re treated with respect.” ATS educators and students reported the very influential role some adult students played in making a key change to a program. One student said,

We requested the administration to adjust [the schedule] a bit so that when pastors end their lessons by 1 p.m. the following day, then for teachers we stretched a bit until the afternoon and it reduced our total time for a three credit [course] from ten days to eight days. That became so friendly to us because we realized they were listening to us. They were not rigid. They came down to accommodate us.  
[transcript 775]

One educational leader pointed to a common struggle described by many respondents in the various schools as he reflected, “The good news is that the students are in their context. The bad news is that the students are in their context.” Educators, and students alike, see the challenges of balancing many responsibilities with the demands of their courses. Situated learning is recognized as contributing to ones’ learning but it can also involve the challenges of regular interruptions to a student’s academic schedule. Persisting over time are challenges for adults and pressing concerns for educators, particularly the distance programs of SATS and ProMETA.

A final pattern identified in most schools was the request by students for a greater use of technology in their courses, even for those in rural villages of South Sudan or from church leaders in churches with very modest means. Expectations are changing, whether a younger student or a middle age pastor. They want to be connected by mobile phone or other technology with their professor and they look for greater inclusion of media in their courses, such as websites with relevant resources. The principal at ATS anticipates the increase of technology use by his school now that fiber optics has come to his city. When examining the various efforts of schools to increase their revenue it was striking to realize that no school, including schools in major world-class cities or an online school like ProMETA, seemed to be aware of current technology that may well offer financial benefits (e.g., cloud computing or digital printing).

#### Theme: Contextually Grounded Teaching and Learning

This research demonstrated that unconventional approaches to teaching and learning have emerged in nearly all the schools. Representative teachers<sup>15</sup> at these schools incorporate teaching strategies they believe will best develop the kind of learning most needed by their students. Three factors appear to inform the contextually rooted teaching strategies these faculty have developed: a commitment to the local context, a belief that distinctive cultural

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<sup>15</sup> The study was not designed to interview all teachers at a school so it is not known how many practice contextually rooted teaching practices.

patterns impact the way a course needs to be taught, and students as adults need to take an active part in their learning.

The first influencing factor reported by faculty is the need for subject matter and teaching approaches to directly address the needs and real issues facing the church in its specific context. Most teachers are leaders in local churches and it is not uncommon to find them serving as pastors. As one professor/pastor stated:

It's important that theology responds to the reality of the people. You are required to go into the scripture to search the scripture and to bring something that is going to help the church. What is this reality you are facing? Based on every situation that is happening locally I try to think and research deep. For me to transfer just the courses I received to my students I found it not helpful. I feel like I'm just doing certified copy. Sometimes I see that happening with some of my colleagues. It's like they're repeating whatever they see. It's like courses are just copied from who told them at the faculty of the seminary and back here. It is that predisposition that I personally have which led me to start making this difference. . . . These problems [within our local church] that come to me I try to ask myself, "How do I find theological answers to these questions?" This is what is helping me to make these courses much more practical and much more contextual to respond to the need. [transcript 672]

A ProMETA professor noted that,

Courses are designed to be very practical and to be relevant to real life -- even to the course titles. One course is a missional interpretation of contemporary culture. The focus is how to interpret events, ideas, trends, etc. as if they were a cultural text. In order to do that we analyze movies, soap operas, consumerism, and we analyze the issue of dignity, poverty, and political discourse. The idea for me is how can our students actually understand their culture, not modernity or post-modernity? . . . This classroom theology is great theology but that doesn't apply out there. You know the situation here in Venezuela with Chavez and this and that. You know the situation in Guatemala with violence and crime and all that. This thing will not fly in Guatemala.

The idea is how can we integrate theology, social sciences, humanities, in a more disciplinary approach so that we train the student in theology, this is the main thing for us but how do you do theology outside in the marketplace, in a hospital, in a factory, at home, in an office, if you are an architect or an engineer, or if you are a pastor? How can you do theology if you don't understand the world in which people in the congregation live? . . . For us, it's how can we teach our students to at least know where to look for the information, how to research the world in which they live so that they can lead congregations and people in the congregations to know how to think biblically, theologically. [transcript 450]

Staying relevant is also critical for the courses. As one teacher said, "we want to be sensitive to how the world is going, what kind of training these students need." At IBB one professor described how he regularly revises his courses each time just before he teaches

so pastors in the class have the biblical insight needed to assist with the latest issues emerging in the church. Another approach to keeping courses contextually relevant is what a ProMETA professor described as incorporating “flexibility” into courses in order to allow their adult learners to adjust assignments to make them relevant to their contexts. This is especially important since students from over twenty different countries are enrolled in their courses. As one professor stated:

I know my context but I cannot know all of their contexts. They are capable adults and they know their context, their congregation, much better than I. For example I have this student in Spain. He sent me an email. Professor, I want to thank you for the course; it’s making such a big transformation in my life, but all the assignments are basically related to Latin America; but I don’t live in Latin America; I live in Spain, you know that. Can you change the assignments for me? I said, “oops, please forgive me for that. I forgot that thing. I was thinking so much in Latin America.” I said “Okay.” Then instead of telling him, “Okay, why don’t you do this or that,” I said (student), “What would you suggest as an assignment for you that would be relevant in your culture, relevant in your situation? I would be willing to work with you. Instead of me telling you and since I don’t know that much about your culture, your situation. I know Latin America, but I don’t know Spain. Tell me what you think would be significant for you?” He said, “Would you let me do this?” I said, “For sure; go ahead.” The student can tell you, “Listen, that thing is not working for me; it’s too hard, too difficult; it doesn’t apply; I’m interested in this.” “Okay great.” “If it doesn’t help you why should we do it? Tell me what would be relevant to you?”  
[transcript 450]

A student commenting on methodology said that,

Another aspect in the methodology that I really appreciate is the fact that we the students are the one’s building the knowledge. It’s not that we are accepting what a professor says, but we together are building what we learn and I think that is extremely important in the education of adults because yes, we have the power of creating knowledge and it’s not something like imposed from the outside.  
[transcript 358]

A second influence on teaching and learning strategies identified by faculty was the cultural and social patterns distinct to their area. For faculty in schools such as FIET, IBB, ATS, and ProMETA a number of cultural factors made them unlike the West and actually necessitated different approaches to teaching and learning. One professor at IBB commented that when their professors return after graduating from western schools “their experience and their teaching is not meeting the need and the reality of the people on the ground. It passes over their head.” One ProMETA professor observed that,

It’s been a quite journey to reflect on what theological education should be in Latin America, not around the world, because for me it has to be integration. The approach that we were taking in ProMETA is a multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to theological education. We want to see what of the traditional curriculum of theological studies is relevant and what is not. What is not relevant we are not going to go there. “Why?” We don’t want to be bound by traditional curriculums. That doesn’t make any sense. We want to be sensitive to

the heritage we have in terms of what other schools have done in the past. We want to honor that, but we don't want to be bound by that. [transcript 450]

Examples of the cultural and social patterns faculty identified included national history (the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America or the Communist restrictions on the church in Ukraine), the impact of indigenous religions (Voodoo in Bénin), the way their people comprehend new ideas or process information (narrative and personal rather than decontextualized and abstract), and the lack of study habits expected in academic programs (absence of the social practice of public libraries). The importance of these cultural influences seems to relate to the goal identified by one professor. "It's not just to put faith at the conceptual and intellectual level, but we want to render this faith practical." In a real way this concern for the practical is reflected in many of the unconventional approaches adopted by these schools that seek to reach the untrained leaders in churches scattered across vast regions of the world. Some of the more thoughtful illustrations came from personnel at two schools--IBB and ProMETA.

From an IBB board member:

The African way of learning is different and the African functions using imageries. We discovered that even intellectuals still use the same approach for learning. It is an approach that touches the wisdom through the daily living. Because of that when we asked [ourselves at IBB], "How do we train in Africa, in our context?" We decided to make use of the African approach. It is that approach which says that it's not the theoretical teaching or learning that will transform the person but it is the model of a master who goes along with his disciple. . . . Then we said, "How do we train people who will be able to influence the church as a whole?" We found those who go into Bible schools and the content of biblical training is western. When a pastor returns back he wants to apply his learning in an environment where the context is different. . . . So, we learned to change the approach of training.

For us if we don't change the approach we cannot transform people. For instance, when people come to teach others how do you do the fundraising, people come [from the West] with explanations and big programs. For us, if it is six students we put them together. The teacher will say, "I give you twenty-five thousand each; now go and multiply." He does not teach them how do you do it, but he gives them two weeks. After two weeks each one of them come and start sharing what they did to multiply the funds. We were surprised to see that each person brought a new approach which was different from the other. Because when the teacher gives his approach it's only one approach but now we have six different approaches which not only they have applied but they have written and they have given a report. Then students see together. They start looking at every approach, critique it, and then some others can say, "okay, let me go and try that approach." [transcript 130]

From an IBB teacher:

In a course on the prophets I started this course by presenting the prophetic and messianic movement in Africa. I do that to show them that we also have our own background. We have an album, historical and prophetic album. That's where I

start my course. When I start from there now I ask them the question, “What is the Bible saying?” “Who is the true prophet and how does the true prophet function?”

In my course on traditional religions, I ask students to bring me a witch doctor in the class or I take them to visit a witch doctor. When we ask questions to this witch doctor to try to demonstrate to the students how, to show them how we are essentially religious here in Africa. Sometimes also when they are doing their assignments, we send them to do some research to meet with some witch doctors and those who are elders in their families. What is the implication for the pastoral ministry? At the end of their research they have to show the implication for their pastoral work. [transcript 672]

From a ProMETA teacher:

It has always been my conviction that most schools train people in theology but it’s a classroom theology that they teach, with no connection, with no reference, with no interaction with what is happening in the world, because we teach people how to interpret the biblical text in a proper way. We don’t teach people how to interpret the context in which we are going to be applying the Bible. It seemed to me that to train students we would need to be able to understand human beings in some way and the context in which they live and in which they are ministering. How can we understand the world in which we are doing ministries? How can we train students to think globally, to think systemically, to think missionally, to think beyond doing theology in a classroom? And primarily with an idea of not conveying to students information about the world, but creating in them the strategies, the skills, to interpret the world in which they live. For that we needed to help out students or to train the students on issues, for example, of how to conduct qualitative studies, rather than me telling them the culture of Costa Rica as a professor. No. Tell them how they can discover first the culture of Costa Rica or Guatemala or Peru or Mexico. [transcript 450]

A third factor that appears to influence many courses is the awareness that students are adult leaders, not younger students. Two schools have even replaced the word “student” with the word “compadre” or “learner.” Teachers recognize that these adults have life experiences that have shaped the ideas and beliefs each brings to class. Many also value the contribution the learners make to each other as colleagues in ministry. As a result substantive and free flowing discussions are a core element in the unconventional pedagogy at several schools, most notably IBB, ATS, EST, FIET, and ProMETA. As one principal stated, “I believe in dialogue. I believe that truth is built among many people, not just one.” He goes on,

We are the church. The church is one body. I need you, you need me. I have to learn from you and you have to learn from me. The Lord speaks to you and the Lord speaks to me also. It is very important that there is a process of discussion and dialogue between people. [transcript 298]

Central to the pedagogical practices of several schools was engaging students in the process of developing their own convictions based on their study of Scripture. One student

described how “the teacher does not focus on his doctrines of his church but rather he draws us back to the Bible and says, ‘What does the Bible say about this?’ When we center on the Bible some of us get challenged over how we have been doing things.” Students at ProMETA, ETS, LBCS, FIET, and ATS identified substantive discussion that fostered deeper thinking as a valuable part of their educational experience. One LBCS professor noticed that he found a variety of different ways of teaching when he came to Lanka.

They’re using different methods. It helps the students to affect their life, they’re changing. I observe the students are changing. Discussion method is very useful. We are giving one topic to the students to discuss. We are discussing and they are coming with different ideas. We put them all together and they present their ideas and what they discussed in the class. After that we summarize their discussion and the ideas from their different groups. It is very useful. Rather than lecturing, just lecturing — discussion is very interesting and very useful. [transcript 123]

Another professor described how interaction with the adult student is a priority and of personal value to him.

Through interaction we learn a lot which we give as a priority here. We like interaction with our students very much, in a class and also outside. We take a cup of tea together. We engage them. We go to missions together. We find forums and ways that we can interact with them. That’s why we wash our dishes with the. We are still learning. [transcript 034]

Students at SATS noted that they want to be engaged in discussion as part of their courses, specifically linking it with their oral culture patterns. For more on the student’s responses to online learning see Appendix C.

Additionally, several schools viewed their students as key agents of change in their communities and churches — work they believe involves both social and theological understanding and skills. In many locations a seminary-educated leader may be the only person in the community that could bring vital skills to bear on difficult and urgent community issues. Courses and co-curricular activities are designed with this goal in mind. At LTS residential students spend time personally engaged in ministry in orphanages and other social organizations to help them lead local churches in new outreach ministries, countering the Communist-era internal focus of church service. At IBB the effectiveness of graduates in leading change in their communities is the primary standard of the school’s effectiveness. “The student goes back to his base and is the transformation that is operating in his environment, it’s that which is much more important for us. . . . we see the ministries that are developed by these students. . . what a person has become on the field,” reflected the principal.

ATS and IBB identify their educational goal as “nation building” and each school works to nurture maturing Christians who move into every area of society to bring Gospel changes. ATS makes their intent clear in one of their educational aims: “It is the goal of the Seminary to empower Christian leaders to become agents of positive change and development in their churches, ministries, and communities.” In order to accomplish this aim the curriculum is designed to be “relevant, practical, and contextual in order to enhance the



learners ability to apply it to their churches, ministries, and communities. Each course requires a graded project in which the learner applies the knowledge learned during lectures to their respective ministry contexts, and faculty are recruited based on their academic qualifications and proven ability to apply the knowledge to various areas of their expertise.”<sup>16</sup> One student explained that,

The motto of this college: instructing the mind, training the heart and empowering the hands. That is the whole setup of a person who is ready to transform Africa or transform his community. The mind is instructed. The heart is trained to do the right things. The hands are empowered to do what the mind knows is correct. . . . that people are empowered with knowledge to go out and transform their communities. [transcript 760]

Repeatedly adult students indicated they find their program to be relevant, practical, and having a lasting impact in their life and ministry — echoing Fink’s conviction that, “For learning to occur there has to be some kind of change in the learner. . . . And significant learning requires that there be some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner’s life.”<sup>17</sup> Interviews suggest that a number of schools seem to be including intuitively most of the elements that contribute to significant learning. (See Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning, Appendix F.) As one student stated, “I’m a changed man!” Another described how the spiritual formation courses of ProMETA stimulated real change.

[W]hat I noticed was that those courses were not just mere theory, but they were something very, very practical. When I think about them I see it was just not knowledge but it was again something very practical, and when I think of my life I think before ProMETA and after ProMETA because of it. As I said, more than knowledge, that knowledge is important, but more than that I learned how important it is to apply that to your life. [transcript 055]

It was not apparent at SATS in what ways they may be engaged in unconventional pedagogy and there was no indication that assessors (course graders) or program supervisors engaged in a pedagogical process such as those described by teachers at the other schools.

#### Theme: Sustaining Unconventional Education

To a greater or lesser degree, schools are working under difficult conditions as they strive to understand and manage complex challenges related to long-term stability. Their endeavors occur within environments that are at times unpredictable and affected by external changes fraught with uncertainty, peer suspicion, resistance and conflict, and a sense of inadequate preparation. As one principal said: “Nothing you study in seminary prepares you to run an institution. You just come in blind.” Some educators described their approach to creating the “unconventional” as a “trial and error” process trying to discover what will work. One principal reflected, “In the beginning we didn’t know

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<sup>16</sup> Africa Theological Seminary catalogue 2009-2011, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> L. Dee Fink (2003). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. (San Francisco, CA: Willey & Sons Publishing), p. 30.

anything, just intuition, and the grace of the Lord.” Another said, “I’m hunting for the right business model.” Later in casual conversation he confessed the following:

You know there is nothing in my seminary background that prepared me for the decisions and the challenges I’m facing now and what is happening here. Where can I go to get some help? Are there seminars I could take? I don’t know of anyone who is involved in the same kind of challenges.

As IBB takes on the next phase of their educational design they anticipate “many” changes and realize that,

It is really a big change in itself that is going to take place in what we intend to do. It’s obvious that there will be many other challenges that we do not have a hand on. We cannot master [it now] but it will be known to us when we’re on the field that we start learning and see how to overcome or resolve every challenge that comes. I think there will be a lot of change. . . . It’s going to be like trial and error. We’ll be testing but I’m sure because we know where we want to get I believe we will end up by getting there. [transcript 369]

Hampering the effectiveness of most schools was an apparent lack of current information that could potentially contribute to their effectiveness. For example, proven cost saving measures with currently accessible technology, such as mobile connectivity vs. high speed lines, cloud based server support vs. school owned servers, or solar powered tablets with mobile connectivity rather than a laptop/desktop PC, and expertise about the nature of learning and how a focus on learning influences educational design. It was not uncommon to hear educators describe their efforts as they struggled to figure out what to do while functioning without an awareness of what information could be helpful, where to find it and how best to consider incorporating it.

A vivid example was at EST where they have access to contemporary technology but fail to fully benefit from its capabilities. EST’s students today are primarily older working adults who bring life experience and the regular responsibilities of ministry to their studies. They are motivated to apply their education to improve their ministry and they value interaction with peers and instructors as an important component of their learning. On the other hand, faculty and administrators carry hints of guilt and an explicit longing for the former days of residential education so there would be more time together as a community for spontaneous and extended dialogue. All the while they have an online learning platform in place but seem to have no idea how to utilize it for the interactive learning and community building they all desire. It appears that the online platform is simply a static holding place for course documents.

Sustainability endeavors of the schools clustered around (1) creating alternative revenue sources, (2) transition to new leadership, (3) expanding the programs offered, (4) designing education for adult learners, and (5) seeking accreditation. An intriguing insight from the study was realizing that no one identified an example or other model that offered guidance for the challenges they faced. When this question was asked in the interviews respondents often inquired of the researcher if there were others who were attempting similar kinds of changes.

ATS, EST, and IBB described most clearly their effort and future plans for creating alternative revenue sources. Each school was attempting to assess the local context and various environmental conditions. One EST example was their service to the elderly. They saw potential opportunity in the serious conditions and widespread social neglect among the elderly in Poland. The school was able to acquire grants and charge modest fees to hire a program specialist who has created new social programs for the churches and community. After creating successful ministries to the elderly and modeling new ministry possibilities, individual churches have begun their own ministries to the elderly. Though they were pleased that the churches responded, they realized that this program could no longer be a sufficient revenue stream and new programs had to be developed.

ATS has for some time operated with added revenue streams through renting out office space on their grounds to local NGOs and maintaining a woodworking shop for making church pews and school desks. The board, in 2012, approved an ambitious building plan that includes several new buildings including office space to improve the working conditions for the staff, new housing for students, new office space to rent out, and a facility where local residents and churches can hold special events. As the new plans were described it was unclear to what degree a strategic risk analysis of environmental factors had been undertaken. Such an analysis might reveal the potential environmental changes that could negatively impact the continuation of large numbers of NGOs in Kitale, Kenya. Or, if western donors were to construct facilities beyond what local communities could sustain how might that impact the school long term?<sup>18</sup> When the ambitious new plans were explored the potential increased costs to students for their upgraded housing seemed not to have been fully considered, including the potential impact if current students were priced out of continuing their studies.

IBB's strategy represents a broad approach to empowering their students, churches, and the greater population. Financial sustainability is a critical need for the Bible institute, their pastor-students, and the people of their churches. The institute's plans include the development of a no-waste ecologically based agricultural center modeled after the highly respected Songhai Green Rural City Model located in Bénin.<sup>19</sup> They have secured the farmland, completed training at the Songhai Center for their agricultural director and have just begun creating a working farm. In time, the farm will provide essential revenue for the school and it will be a training center for their students in agricultural skills to support their families. In turn, these pastor students will teach the members of their church the same skills so they too can support their families and all contribute to the support of the church. Additionally, IBB envisions individuals from the surrounding communities receiving the same agricultural training along with being exposed to the Gospel and a Christian community.

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<sup>18</sup> These are specialized environmental analysis that look at various elements, attempt to assess the pace of various changes and closely review the underlying assumptions in a strategic plan.

<sup>19</sup> <http://guweb2.gonzaga.edu/faculty/alfino/SonghaiMercury2011.pdf>

[http://www.songhai.org/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=117&Itemid=106](http://www.songhai.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=117&Itemid=106)

SATS presents itself as the exception to the other schools when it comes to creating additional revenue sources. They believe they have a financially stable model in place and operational systems established to maintain their educational model. The educational design, adopted from universities who honed the system over the last several decades (see Appendix C), allows SATS to meet their operational budget through their own enrollment and their accreditation service fees to students at “partner” organizations or schools, such as FIET. Leaders of the executive team indicated they have a number of plans in place to expand their program offerings globally and to secure the hoped for recognition from American schools, particularly Fuller Theological Seminary and Dallas Seminary. Grants are occasionally sought for special projects such as the translation of their BTh courses into French and for multiple trips to China. SATS leadership indicated that all the “pieces” are in place for the next five to ten years to keep the current system rolling smoothly.

A second cluster of endeavors seen as vital for sustainability is the work of leadership transition. LTS had just replaced their previous principal at the start of the study. FIET identified leadership transition as imminent and ProMETA identified it as a top priority over the next several years with an informal search process already underway. An important question for FIET and ProMETA seemed to be the degree to which new leadership can be prepared to continue the work of the unconventional education. This appeared to be less of a concern for LTS. The new LTS principal stated that his most important concern regarding the new “unconventional” initiatives was to “consolidate” the many new things that had been done by the previous president.

FIET’s transition to a new principal has been a concern for some time. It had been assumed that the best kind of person to be the next principal was an individual with longevity in FIET and extensive academic credentials. There seemed to be a growing realization that the most essential quality was that of having been a pastor. FIET’s core distinctive is the way it focuses on the needs of pastors. The future principal needs to have, kind of involvement, that kind of passion for the local church, that kind of passion for pastors — the main issue, the identity of FIET, is the relation with the church, the patience with the church and with the pastors, to understand the needs of the church. If this is true, you need people with the same mission and passion. [transcript 298]

ProMETA’s challenge in transitioning to the next generation of leaders appears quite complex, perhaps more so than for other schools in the study. Future Latin American leaders will need to share the “unconventional” learning values, a commitment to servant leadership that permeates the curriculum, and be willing to embrace online learning in a transformative model. Finding such individuals so far has proven elusive. Since ProMETA serves Spanish speaking people globally through fully online programs there is a growing awareness that perhaps remaining in Costa Rica is not a requirement for the future. In addition, the next generation of leaders may need to combine other employment with teaching and leading the school since enrollment is not at the place where it can financially sustain the next team of leaders. Creating this alternative financial model seems daunting to the executive team and they have no apparent success stories to learn from. They also realize that a part of the solution involves finding new ways to substantially expand

enrollment while not increasing costs by adding faculty. In addition, an important requirement is to achieve the enrollment growth without losing the quality of their courses, what educators working with innovation refer to as “scaling-up” innovation.<sup>20</sup> The work of expanding innovation while retaining its integrity carries with it numerous challenges. ProMETA leaders are searching for a way forward that effectively retains the qualities of their unconventional educational practices.

A third cluster of endeavor for schools is the area of program expansion, identified by nearly all schools, and seen as an important way of responding to the changing context and the need for greater enrollment. For ATS, new programs are being developed in response to the request from churches and they view them as necessary to keep up with cultural changes impacting churches (e.g., changes in music). At SBC, new programs are being considered that would (1) serve an under-prepared group of new applicants, (2) reach a new student community with access to potential students in Manila through the School of Music, and (3) possibly create a new PhD through the School of Theology. SATS plans to create a new base in Ghana from which it will expand its programs into West Africa. ProMETA is considering offering shorter programs for their students not ready for the longer masters degree.

FIET struggles to keep up with the requests they receive for new programs as pastors try to keep up with the impact of the changing culture on the churches. In addition, there are growing requests to revise long outdated courses. FIET was the one school that indicated that the demand for their programs is much greater than their staff can manage. The principal indicated that it was very difficult to find leaders who can work well in their model; that is, those who can take a servant approach coming alongside pastors and building trust over time. As a result they have more cities requesting FIET than they have available regional directors.

A fourth endeavor related to sustainability involves those schools with adult learners and the challenges of designing education that fits their different expectations. As one dean pondered, “How do you schedule courses and semesters when you have no idea how many students will enroll, especially when you know they can only manage one course at a time with everything else they are responsible for?” Educators accustomed to planning course loads for full time residential students now struggle to understand how to offer courses and academic programs for students who work at a much slower pace and who can enroll intermittently. The slower pace of adult learners seem to have the greatest impact on the distance learning schools but even the short intensive programs at ATS and EST are impacted by the unfamiliar adult enrollment patterns.

The fifth endeavor for several schools is accreditation. ATS and EST are well on their way to government approval with ATS in the process of the additional accreditation with ACTEA. These schools see the expensive and challenging process as necessary given their changing environment and student expectations. It is perceived to be an essential step

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<sup>20</sup> Chris Dede, James P. Honan and Laurence C. Peters, eds. *Scaling Up Success: Lessons Learned from Technology-Based Educational Improvement* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

toward greater recognition and expected increase in student enrollment. FIET has created accessible university accredited programs by arranging for a national university to hold classes within large churches across Argentina. In addition, they provide SATS accreditation for those students who may wish to access that opportunity.

ProMETA has been exploring several possibilities for accreditation including a potential partnership with a recently accredited Latin American university. They are also exploring implications of offering accreditation to students who may wish to go through the process with SATS. Neither option seems especially inviting to ProMETA. At one time, ProMETA did investigate the possibility with AETAL but accreditation for online programs was not possible.

In anticipation of possible accreditation ProMETA has created all courses based on the Costa Rican standards, which has a difficult process of accreditation, and mindful of the U.S. seminary standards experienced at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. All necessary records are kept that document their practices and academic standards. This has resulted in recognition by Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for those who wish to advance their education by applying for doctoral studies. Student interviews at FIET and ProMETA indicated that students are quite interested in “accredited” programs but it was unclear what students perceived as the meaning of the accreditation for their local context. This is especially true for ProMETA since they draw Spanish speaking students from many different countries, including Spain.

## **V. Contributions to Future Sustainability**

This investigation of educators engaged in unconventional theological education provides a number of insights into their work and experiences. First, nearly all schools are striving to find the strategies that will sustain their institutions. Second, they hold the conviction that their context and culture is distinct in ways from western culture and those distinctions influence their approach and curriculum. Third, they are engaged in providing meaningful learning for working adults, most of whom have few educational alternatives. Fourth, no school has a well grounded understanding of the effectiveness of their education beyond generalized anecdotal data. Fifth, nearly all educators have an uncommon openness to new ideas, and whether willingly or out of necessity, are generally risk takers. And sixth, schools are largely unaware of several fields of expertise, such as accessible technology, that may offer insight and assistance for their work. Without established practices that seem to promise sustainability most schools are to varying degrees fragile. Their innovation has had positive results but sustainability remains to be achieved. These schools could well be collaborative partners for those interested in investing in relevant and sustainable models of theological education. To this end four types of responses are recommended.

### Special Consultations

The work of creating innovative new approaches for contextual theological education can be enhanced with working consultations of like-minded educators who come together within a supportive environment that assumes an unconventional conversation. Such

consultations are best when they are organic in nature, encourage uncommon topics and experiences, approach learning in the pattern of working professionals, draw on a variety of resources (online, specialists, readings), and recognize that direct experiences with emerging models are a critical component in deepening understanding, fostering insight, and stimulating creative ideas that are adopted by the stakeholders of a school.

Such consultations may take the form of a single meeting over several days or it may be designed to accomplish an extended goal that would involve two or three meetings over the course of several years. This might be the case for those interested in more deeply understanding different approaches for contextual education where meetings are held at strategic locations so participants can gain first hand experience with a school or other organization's innovation. It may be especially valuable to broaden awareness by including schools showing promise that are not considered one of OCI's partner schools, such as New Hope Christian College – Hawaii (<http://hawaii.newhope.edu/wordpress/about/letter-from-dr-randy/>) where faculty have worked to integrate values of their native Polynesian culture into numerous aspects, including how faculty work together. Another location could be the conference center at the Songhai Green Rural City Model located in Bénin for a consultation focused on creating alternative approaches for generating revenue, such as forms of social entrepreneurial services. Additional topics for consultations that can benefit the schools represented in this study include emerging new models of interactive and information technologies, new structures and designs for sustainable online learning, educational designs for reaching dispersed working adults, new models that support national scholar publications, and contextual student learning assessment models.

At a different level, OCI could play a critical role as convener of a series of consultations focused on the urgent global need to fundamentally redesign the university model of theological education so that it serves the majority world through forms that are sustainable and contextual. This broader focused consultation would include innovative-minded leaders of influence and expertise both within theological education and outside, such as economists, technologists, and social entrepreneurs.

#### Online Resources and Community Dialogue

Access to information and expertise available through an interactive and multifaceted website could stimulate and support continued innovation through “on-demand” tools for educators to try out in their context, information on what is working and being implemented at various schools globally, and a community of colleagues for discussions, collaborations, or private conversations. Theological educators could benefit from an easily searchable repository of how-to templates, check lists to guide planning, links and summaries of new information on technologies, case studies of new models, blogs with a rotating regional focus on topics such as emerging technologies, and local experts answering questions submitted by theological educators. Of particular benefit would be online learning resources including: sample online course models, a how-to guide to design and teach online and blended<sup>21</sup> courses, and an administrators guide to planning distance programs best suited for theological education. Collectively this site, supervised by

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<sup>21</sup> Course that combine teaching online with teaching in a face-to-face classroom within the same course.

experienced theological educators, can become the “go-to” place for ideas, information, and examples of what is changing in theological and higher education globally. It could be an invaluable resource for ICETE members as they seek to be informed and locally relevant for their work of strengthening sustainable education.

### Stimulating Innovation through Pilots

Diffusion scholars indicate that the rate of innovation adoption is linked to the increase of reliable information and the reduction of uncertainty within a social network over a period of time. Through the support of pilot projects educators can gain valuable experience, opportunities to refine the new design in real life situations, and tested information to share with others more cautious about innovative change. In spite of the valuable contributions pilots offer they may not be widely considered in majority world theological education and initiative may rest with OCI to stimulate and guide productive pilot designs, perhaps beginning with schools in this study who seem open to new possibilities.

Pilots that contribute to a broad discussion on sustainable and contextual theological education will be essential. As will the support for those schools in this study who are innovating in strategic ways but are at a fragile place. Such pilots would include: a case-style project description, a series of reflective observations and insights gained during planning and implementation, and lessons learned with concluding recommendations – all of which would be available to other schools on an OCI searchable website. Innovative pilots could include testing changes such as,

- (1) Moving the third or fourth year of a residential program to a blended design of learning at a distance and on campus.
- (2) Testing new technology suitable for the majority world, such as solar powered mobile devices with locally produced course readings in place of western textbooks.
- (3) Redesigning academic courses for mobile devices where minutes are bought in small quantities at a time.

When considering educational pilots it is essential to provide extended support for both the planning phase (often at least one academic year) and an implementation period over a minimum of two academic cycles or academic years. This provides an opportunity for the innovation to be experienced with more than one group of students and after initial adjustments during the first experience. When the innovation is run a second time educators are better able to assess the potential impact and value of the innovation. The inclusion of a collaborative educational researcher can enhance the data gathered from pilots by assisting with the overall design and assessment strategies, as well as conducting focused investigation at key educational periods during the implementation with insight beyond what local educators would bring. This research work can strengthen the information gathered from a pilot and potentially reduce apprehension and resistance to an innovation some theological educators may have.

Large scale pilots can also make a strategic contribution as schools have the opportunity to “grow into” new structural models through first hand experience and without long term commitments. Large-scale school partnerships, such as consortia, allow educators and their staff to discover (1) the benefits of shared expertise from across the members, (2) the



substantial cost benefits when negotiating technology services for a group of schools, and (3) the increase in institutional control over software decisions, greater data security, and improved quality of the technology and support services when leveraged by a sizable group of schools — all without the loss of institutional privacy or distinctiveness. As a member-led organization every school has an equal voice in making decisions, such as when the best time is to upgrade a software system.

Consortiums in higher education are not new but advances in technology over the last decade have made them even more cost effective when sharing technology and software systems essential for higher education, such as financial or student information systems.<sup>22</sup> Large and small groups of schools are creating consortiums to leverage their scale in order to reduce fees for online library databases or to share the costs of a new software system. Creating a large scale consortium for majority world theological education has great potential but will take a sufficient visionary investment to allow schools time to “test the waters” before they decide if they are ready to become fully invested.

Theological educators hesitant to join a consortium need the opportunity for their staff and faculty to experience a “fail-safe” period where no school loses (data or privacy), all members gain strength and added resources, and any member can leave the consortium annually. All within a fee structure sustainable by majority world schools when there are large numbers of participating schools. It is this “taste and see” experience that will likely be necessary for a sufficient number of schools to become convinced of the benefits and embrace member led consortiums at the scale necessary to achieve the greatest cost benefits and to be able to set membership fees low enough for majority world schools to carry the costs on their own. This may be a critical step for sustainability rather than more familiar models that remain dependent on Western funding sources.

#### Discipline Investigation

New innovations in theological education can often lack the sound practices of assessment that foster increasing confidence by skeptical educators. This study noted a lack of suitable assessment practices across the participating schools that indicate the degree of effectiveness of their educational programs. An important contribution that OCI can make toward new sustainable models is the priority of and support for regular disciplined investigation focused on critical aspects such as student learning in new models -- studies that can offer insight into educational practice while providing credible data.

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<sup>22</sup> The Kualu Foundation has developed non-licensed software systems to support the financial and student information needs of small and large colleges and universities. This open source design serves consortium very effectively. <http://www.kuali.org>

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Planning Meeting Schedule

Theological Education and Student Learning:  
A Multi-Case Research Study  
6-7 May 2011  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Sponsored by Overseas Council International  
Conducted by Meri MacLeod, Ph.D.

Principals and deans from participating schools worked in small groups representing different regions. Groups worked to assist in the co-creation of the research design.

#### **Friday, 6 May 2011**

- 2:30 p.m. Study Overview and Our Planning Work Together
- Designing Theological Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: New Models of Student Learning at Each School. The intent of the research study is to discover what each school is doing that they see as uncommon or unconventional.
- 4:30 p.m. Prayer Together
- Need for Greater Clarity of Student Learning within New Models  
What do you most want to learn regarding student learning in your uncommon models?
- 6:30 p.m. Dismiss for dinner and fellowship

#### **Saturday, 7 May 2011**

- 8:30 a.m. Prayer Together
- 9 a.m. Research Topics/Questions to Illuminate Student Learning
- 12:30 p.m. Lunch
- 2 p.m. Consolidating the Research Focus
- 4:30 p.m. Next Steps and Concluding Information  
Schedule the research visit

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Questions

#### I. Student Questions

Opening Question to begin Conversation

1. Tell me a little about yourself, where are you from?, what do you do?
2. How did you learn about this program? How long have you been a student?

RQ #1: Program Attraction

1. What attracted you to this program?
2. What benefits do you hope to experience from it?
3. How have you seen the program make a difference in your life?

RQ #2: Design

1. Tell me about one of your courses, a typical example, and how does it work? What do you do?
2. What kinds of things do the teachers do? Tell me about any other things that are part of how the program works.
3. How is the program different from what you expected?
4. How does the program fit the needs of students?

RQ #3: Powerful Experiences

1. Think back over your time in the program and tell me about one of your most memorable experiences.
2. What made this experience one of the best?

RQ #4: Describing the Program to Another

1. If a friend came to you and asked you to tell them about this program, how would you describe it? What would be most important for them to know?

RQ #5: Future Redesign

1. Imagine that it is 5 years in the future and you have been made the leader of this program and have been told to make any changes you think would be best. What would you keep and what would you add?
2. Why would these be the most important things to do?

CONCLUSION:

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences with this program?

#### II. Faculty and Administrator Questions

Opening Question to begin Conversation

1. Tell me a little about yourself. What kinds of things do you do at the school?
2. How are you involved with the new program?

RQ #1: Design & Timing

1. Describe the new educational program and what is unusual about it for your school?
2. When did it begin and what were the reasons it was the needed?
3. Tell me about any influences on the new program that may have come from places outside of your school. Government? Church? National or International leaders? Publications? Scholars? Other school examples?
4. When you reflect on the how the program is designed, describe any features that reflect your local context.
5. RQ #2: Distinctives

1. From your experiences with the new program, what makes it unusual, distinct from a standard (traditional) educational approach?
2. What kinds of things have you found to be different than you expected?
3. In what ways have any of these distinctives changed since the program has existed?

RQ #3: Educational Experience

1. Tell me about the teaching and learning that occurs in this new model. How is it different from more common experiences?
2. Tell me about the student experiences. What is this design like for them?
3. What factors stimulated these new approaches?

RQ #4: Theological & Educational Values/Convictions

1. Tell me about any particular theological convictions that influenced this educational model.
2. Describe any educational values or convictions that influenced the design of this new model.
3. As you think about your local context can you tell me about any ways your context has influenced this?

RQ #5: The Future

1. What are the next steps in the development of this new program?
2. What is needed for the new program to become established and able to sustain itself?

CONCLUSION:

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences with this new educational model?

## APPENDIX C

### **SATS and ProMETA: Contrasting Models of Distance Learning** An Extended Description From Interview Transcripts

Two of the nine schools included in this study, SATS and ProMETA, utilize a distance program design for adult students who remain in their geographic location, as opposed to various models that offer a blend of online and face-to-face learning. EST was originally identified as offering distance education but it was discovered that since courses were only offered at the school in face-to-face intensives with the online system used for administrative support of the courses and not for learning, it could not be considered a distance learning program.

The model of distance learning at ProMETA and SATS illustrates key distinguishing elements of distance education that of structure and interaction. Distance learning models are conceptualized across a continuum where structure is highly emphasized at one end and interaction the primary emphasis at the other. ProMETA and SATS are at different points on this structure-interaction continuum. SATS choose to emphasize organizational structure and a system of mass distribution of pre-packaged courses. Since efficient, repeatable systems are considered the key to successful functioning, this structural priority has a significant influence on the nature of learning. ProMETA, on the other hand, chose to focus on the priority of interaction and that priority also clearly shapes the educational and organizational model of their programs.<sup>23</sup>

While there are clear distinctions between the two schools, they are each committed to provide much needed theological education to the vast numbers of churches and leaders spread across great geographical distances. They realize that traditional programs could not begin to meet the huge need. A second similarity the schools share is the type of student they serve -- working adults established in communities who need flexible learning opportunities that can be accessed where they live and blended into their lifestyle. Finally, these schools faced the same challenge of transitioning their original courses to the Internet since they began just before the Internet was in widespread use. ProMETA saw early on that the Internet supported greater interaction, a core element of all their courses and key to student learning. They ceased producing CDs and made as rapid a transition to online courses as their students were ready for. In 2012 all ProMETA faculty went through new training to redesign their courses according to Fink's design for significant learning experiences.<sup>24</sup>

Conversely, SATS is early in the process of adopting Internet technology for their courses with approximately three courses reportedly available in 2012 for students to select as an option. One administrator admitted that the challenges of moving to online was more than expected since both students and assessors comfortable with the text-based course packets and individual study were struggling with the online courses that require an interactive pedagogy.

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix D for a brief overview of the historical developments of distance education models. In the 1960s a German scholar adopted the industrial paradigm and proposed a strong focus on organizational structure. Research on learning and the increase of accessible interactive technologies have shifted the emphasis to social interaction to the point where most Western based distance programs assume significant interaction in distance courses.

<sup>24</sup> Based on L. Dee Fink's model in *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers, 2003). See Appendix F for the curricular components.

### ProMETA's Model of Distance Learning

ProMETA's model of online learning appears to be substantially "unconventional" as a graduate distance learning program in general and as a distance learning program for theological education. ProMETA works to incorporate a transformative learning approach that includes various aspects of the person. There is intentional effort to incorporate character formation, spiritual formation, ministry skill development, and expansion of the student's knowledge base. Further, all courses are open to faculty peer review which seems to occur regularly as faculty bring their own disciplinary perspective to the various courses. Course assignments and engagement with the mentor/facilitator are ways that this approach is integrated across a course. Faculty admit that this type of course design is not something they experienced in their own education and as one professor confessed mistakes are made along the way and one needs to be humble and open to change. He gave this illustration:

We don't know how this is working. I was telling ( ) and ( ) I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm praying and trying to think and to be able to change and make modifications [in the course]. In the courses I just finished a week ago, for their assignments I had groups of three people. [The students] said, "I'm not so sure." One of the students started with the whole thing that this is not helping us . . . . Okay, this is not working. Okay. From now on, for the rest of the course you work individually. Can we do that? Of course. But that will be too much work for you. I said, "who cares? I'm here for you to learn, not for me to be comfort-level-not-have-to-do that much work." It will multiply my work. So what? "You are paying for the course. You are investing all of this time. It wouldn't have any sense for me to [keep doing this], only because I designed the course that way." [transcript 450]

Online courses at ProMETA typically incorporate principals of adult learning such as allowing flexibility for the adult learner to modify assignments, with faculty approval, in order for the assignment to be more relevant to their particular context. Faculty also will modify assignment deadlines in order to accommodate unexpected demands in their other responsibilities. This is especially appreciated by pastors. In addition, faculty view the adults as professional peers who are expected to contribute to the learning of others, including the professor, and to learn from the contributions of their classmates; they are "compadres." Professors admit that this can be challenging at times since the learners come from as many as 22 different countries with all their own cultures and expectations.

ProMETA's commitment is to education that is transformative and relevant to the local contexts and includes a strong curricular focus on servant leadership. Their courses are designed to develop pastors and Christian leaders who can faithfully exegete both scripture and their local contexts. They strive for students who are able to bring about the cultural changes called for in scripture as they make a difference in their communities from lives of integrity, humility, and justice. Taken together ProMETA is a model of unconventional theological education -- all the more remarkable within a fully online program. As one professor described,

[W]e don't want to focus on education. We want to focus on learning. Education is understood as the professors just pouring out the information to students. It doesn't make sense. I went there before and it didn't work. I myself went through school that focused on providing more information for me, information that I cannot use in Latin America. They didn't focus on my skills and what I need for Latin America. It was information. They gave me information but not many skills or ways to understand reality. The idea is we want to focus on how people learn and primarily on significant learning. Every time we write a

course we go into the future, what we want people know and what the skills they can apply five years after graduation, instead of asking how much they remember. They can remember a lot, but not being able to apply it. The idea is then we come back and say, “Okay, in order to know this and be able to apply these skills, how do we write the courses?” “What kind of assignments? What kind of readings? What are the new developments in how people learn, etc.?” [transcript 450]

### *Highlights of Student Experiences*

ProMETA students identified the collaborative interaction, personal relationships they developed, the practical relevance of the courses, and the personal impact the program has had in their life as aspects they most value. Several pointed to the particular value of interacting online with peers from different countries. One student described how,

During the forum you can share from your activities in more practical ways what you are doing in your own community, and you receive feedback on what is fine, maybe what needs to be fixed and things like that. This is very powerful because you have classmates from many countries with many backgrounds working on different things, and so the experiences are so rich that you learn a lot. [transcript 055]

One pastor, who began his studies in 2005 and was nearly finished in 2012 when he was interviewed, was asked what had kept him taking courses for those seven years. “Relevance of the studies to what I was living and the relationships,” he stated. Then he added, [T]he idea is to make shorter the real distance, geographical distance that is there between professors in Costa Rica and for example us in Venezuela or any other country. It’s a complex interaction trying to make that distance shorter. Another aspect is the international community of students because yes, we are not physically in one room - we understand that we are in different places of the world but we are a group. We are a generation - live in this together. . . . We are a class. [transcript 664]

This same pastor went on to describe the practical relevance of his courses was like receiving a “tool box” that was useful to him.

When I finished my first seminary program, I felt like I had a huge box of tools and it was very heavy and full of tools, maybe tools I would never need, and some of those tools were nice but I did not know how to use them in my context. When I came to ProMETA I felt [like] they gave me a box full of tools but I was familiarized with these tools and the tools were exactly the tools I was going to need for my work. [transcript 664]

Another pastor described the “methodology” that he appreciated.

[W]e the students are the one’s building the knowledge. It’s not that we are [just] accepting what a professor says, but we together are building what we learn and I think that is extremely important in the education of adults because we have the power of creating knowledge and it’s not something imposed from the outside. [transcript 358]

Student transformation, a goal of the curriculum, was evident in each student interview. For example, one pastor described how he grew up as a Baptist and knew that,

You just keep yourself in the lines of your denomination. So the chance of having classmates with other points of view, from other cultures and also theological and denominational backgrounds made me see that first, I don’t know everything and that there



is something really powerful about this diverse context of people. Then that changed me as a person even in the way I relate as a pastor with people because I think that this has made me more humble. [transcript 358]

One student, a young professional, described his sense of personal change as thinking of himself as “who he was before ProMETA and who he is now after ProMETA.” A pastor said that his most important memory with ProMETA was when he knew he was not going to meet an assignment deadline due to unexpected demands in his church. When he contacted his professor he received a warm caring acceptance as the professor related how he too understood the demands of being a pastor. The reply from the professor said to him,

‘We understand you. Don’t worry. Take your time. There’s no problem.’ That made me feel like a person, as someone who counts. I’m not just a number for scores or grades but I’m a person and they can understand what it means to be a pastor and have complex weeks. That really touched me. I felt treated as a person. I felt like someone pulled their blanket on me and made me feel warm. [The cultural meaning was that the student felt the professor communicated they were in this together.] [transcript 358]

#### SATS Model of Distance Education

This study was limited to a brief review of the BTh, Honors, and Masters level programs and did not investigate any PhD programs. In addition, no program supervisor at the Masters level was included in the interviews scheduled by the school. In order to gain an understanding of student experiences twice as many students were interviewed at SATS than at most other schools, including ProMETA. In addition, a number of documents were reviewed including: (1) the Bachelor of Theology program outcomes and course summaries, (2) the course reader for Biblical Worldview, (3) the 2012 Undergraduate Student Handbook, (4) an undergraduate application form, and (5) a course study declaration form with course evaluation.

SATS states that its educational “role” is to provide “lifelong learning opportunities” and that, *The responsibility for the learning process should be placed upon the student within the context of the local church.* (emphasis added) We see our role as a provider of reasonably priced, academically sound Christocentric, theological distance learning tuition, via the latest course delivery technologies.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, academic practices seem largely consistent with their particular educational model where emphasis is placed on students to provide almost all that is needed for their educational success in a distance program. The primary emphasis is on the “adult” student to stay on track with their subjects, initiate any desired communication, and secure the books necessary for graduate assignments when not available through SATS.<sup>26</sup> There appeared to be limited program support for the students—such as degree program advisors, academic support or student support services, or registrar to personally advise students in course selection such as that provided at ProMETA. SATS staff seem focused on organizational aspects such as course payments, shipment of materials, and rotating assignments of assessors. Educational leaders secure supervisors for the graduate programs, collect and review course evaluations (not submitted anonymously) and give attention to increasing student “thru-put” rates also known as completion rates. It appeared that information on completion rates per course and for a degree program is limited and recent attention has been

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<sup>25</sup> SATS Prospectus 2012, 7.

<sup>26</sup> An interviewee described how a graduate student had to fly from his own African country to Nairobi, at considerable personal cost, to spend time studying at a seminary where he could have access to the forty books on Matthew that his program required.

given to improving the number of students who remain consistently active. There is also indications that added support for students is a topic of discussion but senior administrators were not in agreement that it was necessary.

When attempting to understand SATS student data or student support practices there is the added complication of students from “partner” organizations. These partner students are reported as SATS students but the support expected for high levels of distance student success appears to come from the investment of the partner organization more so than from SATS. It was reported that technically, due to accreditation requirements, SATS is required to identify students from partner organizations as their own in order to grant them an accredited degree. Yet, operationally all academic and student support costs are the responsibility of the partner organization. SATS’s per student fee charged to the partner organization on a recurring basis is for record keeping in their system. As a result of the disparity in support provided to students through SATS and by partner organizations not all students taking SATS’s courses will have the same kind of educational experience. This disparity became evident through interviews and the research site visits of partner schools in the study. By examining the thru-put rates of partner students with their student support experiences contrasted with SATS’s students valuable insight may be gained with regard to support SATS could provide students that may contribute to increased thru-put rates.

SATS’s organizational system is not new and as described in Appendix D had been widely adopted in earlier decades. Known also as the industrial paradigm, it was influential in the development of the British Open University and may be a familiar model of distance education in South African universities. The model of distributing pre-packaged courses to individuals with an assigned “assessor” (grader) appears consistent with the standards of distance education set by two national South African professional organizations, SAIDE and NADESA. These standards state: “in distance education it is the materials that are the main teacher – rather than the lecturer standing in front of a class or managing a tutorial.”<sup>27</sup>

Consistent with the national standards in South Africa SATS creates “readers” for their courses based on the knowledge of a small group of approved content experts. Course readers include selected readings (10% of any chosen article or book), some written lecture material, periodic reflection questions with some recommended assignments, and several required assignments submitted to an assessor who replies with a written response. It is assumed that the student fully comprehends the assessor’s written comments, even if the student is from a different culture and not a native English speaker. Additionally, it was reported that assessors receive no formal training. They are selected for their content knowledge and expected to model what their assessors did. At the time of the research visit an online course was in development intended to mentor assessors for the future start of their online courses. One interviewee noted that SATS courses were not correspondence courses since they were much different than the correspondence courses he took for his education. The main difference was that SATS students had information available to them so they could communicate with their peers and assessors if they desired.

Relationships with students were a high value for educational leaders across all schools, but they appeared less so at SATS. If an educational leader at SATS was not an assessor or a graduate supervisor they appeared to have little if any direct personal contact with students. The one exception seems to be if local students come to the office and initiate a conversation. It is in those cases where students report they enjoy welcoming conversations. Otherwise, students are largely

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<sup>27</sup> Tessa Welch and Yvonne Reed, eds. *Designing and Delivering Distance Education: Quality Criteria and Case Studies from South Africa*, n.d. Accessed at [www.saide.org.za](http://www.saide.org.za) on April 15, 2013.

engaged through conducting “research” as they “analyze the data” from text-based reports. Only one member of the executive team was an occasional student supervisor. This was in sharp contrast with all other schools where administrators are frequently engaged personally with students, especially as teachers.

Drawing on premier ethnographic studies on schooling,<sup>28</sup> observations were made regarding the daily office environment over the course of a week while at SATS and ProMETA. As fully distance learning schools with no face-to-face classes how was it apparent that people were interacting with students in support of their learning? Each office setting reflected their primary educational model: SATS respondents described primarily operational efficiency, and ProMETA staff described signs of the social interaction and personal relationships that was a high value for them. To illustrate this contrast: a map of Africa (one of few visuals) was mounted in one office at SATS marked with locations for shipping subjects (courses). In contrast, in the registrar’s office at ProMETA hung a white board that listed the names of all the students and the course they were taking at that time. Staff, regardless of their educational role, knew the students by name and regularly used personal name, country location, and occupation as they referenced the student in general conversation.

In distance education models like SATS where “nearly no one is turned away” there can easily be a gap between the preparedness of admitted students and their ability to function as fully self-directed learners in the way that SATS requires — to carry the primary responsibility for their educational success. This gap may contribute to the reported success rate (“thru-put”) of somewhere between the 40 and 50 percent range. The executive team indicated they saw this as a good level and that it was consistent with similar distance education programs. It was unclear what distance education programs they were referencing but their reported rate, either for a course or a degree program, would not be viewed favorably in academically minded distance learning programs in numerous other countries, especially at the graduate level. Student support has long been established as one of the essential components of strong distance learning programs, whether reviewing the scholarly literature in North America or Africa.<sup>29</sup>

Academic institutions are generally expected to take direct responsibility for providing knowledgeable oversight of a student’s curricular program. In theological education this assumes that schools provide educational leadership for a student’s growth in spiritual and practical ministry. At SATS it appears that the primary responsibility lies again with the student. It is up to the student to locate a church where the pastor(s) are willing and able to provide ministry mentoring, as well as spiritual nurture. SATS reasons that since the best ministry and spiritual development is done through the local church, students are urged to gain these benefits from their local church. While courses do include ministry assignments there appears to be no educator coaching the students regarding skilled practice. Further, SATS’s approach assumes that students are located in areas where established churches with trained pastors are readily accessible to students. This assumption seems inconsistent with their intent to reach students in remote locations with little access to theological education. These seem to be the very places where established churches with trained pastors are least available.

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<sup>28</sup> George Spindler *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling: Educational Anthropology in Action* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1982)

<sup>29</sup> William Saint, “Tertiary Distance education and Technology in Sub-Saharan Africa,” in *African Higher Education: An International Reference Handbook*, ed. Damtew Teferra and Philip G. Altbach (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 93-110. See the recommendation on page 108, “strive for strong and effective student support services.” Also Janet C. Moore, *Elements of Quality: The Sloan-C Framework* (Needham, MA: Sloan Center for Online Education, 2002).

SATS use of technology for their courses appears quite modest for a distance education institution. It was anticipated that all student interviews would be done with contemporary technology such as Skype, but this was not the case. After considerable urging, and with poor audio quality, a student from Cape Town and the senior professor were each interviewed through Skype. All courses have an administrative “shell” in their learning management system used to upload assignments and post contact information. No communication is required in these courses but the two or three online courses use forum discussions. Given this voluntary approach to most communication, students could complete a BTh program and most of the Honors program without having had any interaction with another student or with an assessor beyond receiving the written report on an assignment.

The majority of students interviewed had recommendations for how SATS could improve their courses by making greater use of technology. Students recommended the increased use of widely adopted technology, such as cell phones so there could be greater interaction among students and with their assessors or supervisors.<sup>30</sup> One interviewee described how mobile phones could enhance his learning and that of others enrolled in SATS.

I wonder how it would work if through Skype or through mobile phones this lecturer can actually give the student those comments in person, talk to him. How can one convert that [the written communication] to a more personal way? I think it would be probably a luxury to have your professor or your supervisor sit with you and discuss your assignment. That to me would be a tremendous valuable thing.

What I sense with our guys there, in the field, in the most remote areas that they all can buy one cent of airtime. That’s how the African market works. You buy one tomato and three tomatoes and two onions at a time. You don’t go and buy a whole supermarket full of stuff. That’s how they buy it. What I do see is, thinking of your curriculum, thinking of your assignments, now I know if you write a big assignment then you can’t break things into this marketplace mentality thing of Africa. At the market everything happens. You buy a little tomato. You can buy one cent of airtime. I tell you and they want to be connected and the mobile phone makes them connected. They like talking. That’s where the oral part comes in. I think in the African context yes, that’s something I would like to see, something like that.

I think the mobile possibilities there with the cell phone and I know it is possible because our friends there, man they like talking. You will find the guy in the deepest bush, if he has a signal he will have a mobile phone, no doubt. That poses another possibility. They already have these most advanced but they get them cheap because they all come from China so they don’t mind if they break quickly, they buy another one. They actually download their assignments from these things. They’re on the thing all the time. Maybe restructuring coursework, maybe break it more into typical African style, two and three tomatoes, not big assignments like that but small pieces. Yes, that can work.

Then there’s interaction. I think, encouragement-wise, I think it will help a lot for our students to talk. I think in many rural parts where writing skills are not great, maybe discuss with the guy and hear from him, does he understand the concept? Maybe the difficulty is in writing the thing, but maybe if he speaks to the lecturer and the guy can

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2012/07/17/mobile-phone-access-reaches-three-quarters-planets-population>. The rapid pace of mobile phone penetration has surprised even the World Bank and both SATS and ProMETA were surprised at how fast their constituents were getting connected online.

actually say aha, this guy actually has the concept; he understands. But to write it in proper English and all the spell words and the words are correctly spelled, I think that's a possibility, I think. [transcript 533]

### *Highlights of Student Experiences*

Students consistently appreciated the bible-based study they experienced at SATS. Each felt they were receiving a high quality education and was grateful for the opportunity to study the bible in an in-depth way. One student explained,

At SATS, because they're nondenominational and they are trying to build thinking practitioners, they expose you to as much as possible in a variety of ideas, so it forces you to read, delve into it, forces you to think about it, forces you to interact with it. Now if I, say I'm full of specific doctrine, I've got a much bigger foundation of why I believe in doctrine, in that doctrine, not just because that's only what I've been taught. That to me I think is quite significant. [transcript 095]

One student explained how he would describe SATS to a friend.

I would tell them that SATS is a bible-based course, that the content of what you're studying is really good quality. You can think of any subject and it doesn't have all those unnecessary things added to it and that kind of makes it difficult. It's really as if the course has been simplified to contain the most important things that you need for a specific subject. It's easy to understand. Not that it's easy to get a degree; it's a lot of work. It's made simple and it's applicable and the things that you study, you can apply. It really encourages you to watch your relationship with God. It's not just theory but it really encourages you to strengthen your relationship with God and to apply what you're doing through practical application, which I would recommend. I think the benefit of it being correspondence is that you can do it from home. [transcript 183]

Through the study of Christ in one course a student described his greatest highlight.

I think one of the great lessons to me, something that I always share is, through SATS I have developed this relationship with Christ very closely because of their approach. I think one of the subjects I enjoyed a lot for one reason because I understood who Christ is to me. One of the subjects I took talked about His works, His person and His words. From there I was able to have this personal intimate relationship with Christ. [transcript 066]

When asked about the future one student reflected,

I think in the future if we can have our own materials in the African perspective I think it would also be interesting. Reading is not a part of our culture. We transfer knowledge from the word of mouth, orally. If the program can be brought to a level where you can transfer it orally, it would be more difficult in the Greek course because Greek is not spoken. For instance, we can use the alphabet. Alphabet can be used as a song. If we can make it like a song maybe someone can memorize it easily because of the melody. If can make a way to make it easy to memorize and it can be interesting. [transcript 418]

Another would increase the practical focus.

I think on the practical part of it, they call it practical, "But how do you apply this?" The hands-on part of it, I think it's important somehow to be integrated because I believe most of the churches, one of the things that the churches may be attracted to this type of program is when they see the people who are ready because they have got this hands-on experience of which is critical for the church. I think this is one of the things that definitely we need to consider. [transcript 066]

Another pointed out the difficulty in accessing study resources.

Accessibility to resources is a problem in Africa. Physical libraries, there's no way a Sudanese can get near to anything. I can sit here at SATS and do it. I would say eResources need to be made available to the students. In other words, I did a bit of research now with Logos and some of these other big guys in our center SATS. Actually when I was doing my research I actually had to come here physically and I was just doing a BTh. Where do you get forty books on Matthew? Where do I go as a student to get forty books on Matthew? I came to the library here and I could find most of them electronically and also some of them in the library. I had to come and photocopy them here just to have something to read. That was even difficult for me [a South African]. I know our one guy who studied the Masters in South Sudan, he had to fly into Nairobi because where do you get the books? I would say develop an eLibrary where your students can log into. That is something definitely resource-wise, because they do demand quite a bit. [transcript 533]

The SATS students did appreciate the access they had to “biblically based” study and resulting accredited degrees. And some indicated a positive impact on their life through their individual study of scripture. One student in the postgraduate program in children’s ministries expressed a positive impact of her studies and interaction with the program’s supervisor. This student was especially grateful that the program did not require any “unnecessary” courses or study materials like that required by the government in the universities.

## APPENDIX D

### Distance Learning Paradigms: An Overview<sup>31</sup>

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In the 1960s an influential educator (C. Wedemeyer) broke from the familiar model of correspondence study and focused on issues of independent study and learning. He noted that “a particular philosophy of teaching and learning usually lies behind” the concepts of independent study and learning.<sup>32</sup> By the 1970s Wedemeyer’s thinking had significantly influenced the development of the British Open University along with Otto Peters proposal of effective organization.

Peters advanced a robust understanding of the structure of distance learning. His organizational model was based on the system in business production of reproducibility, mass distribution, a division of labor, and economies of scale. It became known as the industrial production model of distance education and was a dominant model for nearly forty years. It emphasized the organization of the educational process so that economies of scale could be efficiently realized. For this reason, teaching and learning issues were not of particular importance. Peters (1994a) described the industrial approach as ‘objectification of the teaching process’.<sup>33</sup> According to Peters (1994b), ‘it reduces the forms of shared learning, and keeps learners away from personal interactions and critical discourse’. As a result, Peters did not advocate this approach for all of distance education.’<sup>34</sup>

For several decades distance education scholars were engaged in the debate between the independence of the learner over against the value of learner interaction. With the development of first computer-mediated communication (CMC) and now the global advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that debate has been rendered moot as current technologies support both learner independence and numerous forms of interaction.<sup>35</sup> Peters remains an advocate for independent self-study, now enhanced with social interaction, but structured in an informal and individually controlled manner. From his perspective self-learning and tele-learning are very much autonomous approaches to learning. His ideal of complete learner independence remains consistent with his industrial model.

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<sup>31</sup> This summary is largely drawn from Theoretical Challenges for Distance Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A shift from structural to transactional issues by D. Randy Garrison, University of Alberta, Canada. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2000. [www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/viewArticle/2/333](http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/viewArticle/2/333). Accessed on April 12, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>35</sup> In early 2013 the World Bank reported the global penetration of mobile phones at nearly 86%. This data was very likely drawn from 2012 reports and mobile technology has advanced globally at a rate far greater than experts expected.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Borje Holmberg influenced the field through his introduction of ‘guided didactic conversation’ understood as simulated conversation with the emphasis on the content and conversational character of the written pre-produced course. ‘Real conversation with the tutor is, by economic necessity, supplementary to the pre-produced course. . . . It is the responsibility of course developers to create this simulated conversation through well-written materials.’ Although *conversation* was the defining characteristic in Holmberg’s theory of distance education, this theory was directed to the pre-produced course package and clearly within the industrial paradigm.<sup>36</sup>

Holmberg’s conception of teaching and the role of the teacher are largely simulated by way of written instructions and commentary. Teaching becomes primarily one-way communication within pre-set course packages. It was not long before scholars began to question this approach to distance learning. For example, Garrison asked, “can an inert learning package, regardless of how well it is written, be a sufficient substitute for real and sustained communication with the teacher as both content and learning expert (a tutor does not always fully meet this standard)?”<sup>37</sup> Garrison further noted that, “organizational assumptions and the principals of the industrial model and dependence upon written communication seriously constrain and limit the role of conversation and the full emergence of a transactional perspective.”<sup>38</sup>

Transaction as a critical aspect of distance learning, first introduced in the early 1970s in the “seminal work” of Michael Moore, was based on his recognition of the limitation of structure and the independent learning package. Moore established what has become a fundamental component of distance learning with his emphasis on the place of dialogue and interaction in the context of the transactional distance in distance education. As a result an assumed design element today in distance learning courses is the interweaving of his three transactional components; the interaction of the learner with content, with the teacher, and with other learners. For example, the North American accreditation of distance theological programs by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) requires students have sufficient interaction to foster the sense of a community of learners.

Over the last several decades a paradigm shift has been underway as an emphasis on learning over organizational structure has become the focus in course and program design. Simultaneously, an expansive body of research in learning is influencing the field including: situated learning, experiential learning, and culturally compatible learning, as well as influential brain research. There are promising signs that these, and other socially informed research is contributing to fundamental changes in the design of online learning.<sup>39</sup> For example one model based on a collaborative understanding of learning proposed courses be designed based on the “five dimensions of the learning process – participation, interaction, social, cognitive, and metacognitive.”<sup>40</sup>

Distance learning courses and programs involve both structure and various kinds of interactions. Fundamental to blending each component effectively is an understanding of the educational purposes and the learning intended for the participants. Additionally, contextual opportunities and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Australian and U.S. scholars have published research on the changes in the paradigm of Instructional Design. Mark Hendricks, PhD. of ProMETA, whose PhD is in the field of instructional design recently indicated he is seeing change underway.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 5.



constraints inform the way distance learning is designed. No one model is considered the standardized format for every purpose in every location.

## APPENDIX E

### **FIET's Unconventional Model of Culturally Compatible Education**

Culturally contextual education is a core value that, from the beginning, informed FIET's approach to theological education. Leaders, experienced with western universities from their own graduate theological education, were convinced that effective education for the broadest number of church leaders across the country would require culturally oriented adaptations to fit the characteristics of Argentina and the needs of the church. Over time changes were made to the original western missionary training program with its individually oriented "study-on-your-own" format of TEE. After many years of experimenting, FIET has created an unusually effective model of contextual theological education reaching across many dispersed regions and hundreds of churches with over three thousand students involved during the fall of 2011.

One of the most creative and influential cultural adaptations was the addition of a Peña style weekly gathering of students with a tutor. As one noted, "Peñas are a natural part of our lives." The Peñas were often identified in interviews as important to the educational effectiveness of the local church program. Several identified Peñas as characteristic of the Latin and Argentinian cultural context. When describing his experiences in a Peña one student stated it was "life changing." At times staff talked about how FIET is known for Peñas and new students request a Peña when starting a program but are often disappointed to learn that Peñas are used only for non-degree programs. The following two examples describe the purpose of the Peñas in the local culture.

Something that has to do with the Argentinian culture is the fact that this program has these group meetings [Peñas]. The idea of a group of people, an informal meeting, where you can sometimes meet in a house or meet in the church or anyplace, it's not a formal meeting, its weekly meeting. It's very informal. You have drinks together, coffee. You share and you have the freedom to speak, to share. It's not a classroom. It's very informal like a small group or thing. In that sense that's something that has to do with our Latin culture. Something informal, something that is outside the classroom, something that is not too structure with the program because you share, you exchange, you share drinks, coffee. That's part of our culture that was something very important for the program. [transcript 397]

I would say that the program adapts to our culture. For me, I'm talking about me because I'm kind of lazy to study and I think in our group most of us are in the same situation. The way that the material, for example the classes and the material that we have to work with, is leading you through different questions. Then you have to review the content. In that way it helps you to be involved. It's not difficult for someone like me to work with because it teaches you something and then you have a review, a common goal all the time. [transcript 159]

Other cultural modifications to the missionary created study program included:

[we added] some instructions, some obligations, some responsibility, including the cost to pay, and that was a success and today it is. . . You have to charge; the student have to pay. You have to put obligations on the students. . . . When you create some kind of strong relation with the students, at least here in our context that works. [transcript 298]

These cultural adaptations seem to reflect what scholars identify as “culturally compatible” educational programs.<sup>41</sup> Culturally compatible education involves the modification of some practices based on the knowledge of the students’ culture in order to develop students’ positive engagement with and success in academic goals not commonly assumed in their peer community. The goal is . . . “a version of school culture, shaped to be compatible with the students’ home and peer cultures in ways that have the desired educational effects.”<sup>42</sup> Research has shown that when appropriate modifications are made, student populations who were once failing begin to experience substantial academic success.

By adding Peñas, FIET incorporated an important culturally compatible educational component. These weekly community oriented meetings facilitated by a tutor, rather than a professor, focus on mentoring students as they seek to understand and apply the weekly scripture study. This has proven vital to student success as it encourages individual responsibility for personal study, creates communal accountability, and deepens ministry relationships among lay leaders in a church. With the support of tutors “students are helped to know they can do more,” explained one church leader.

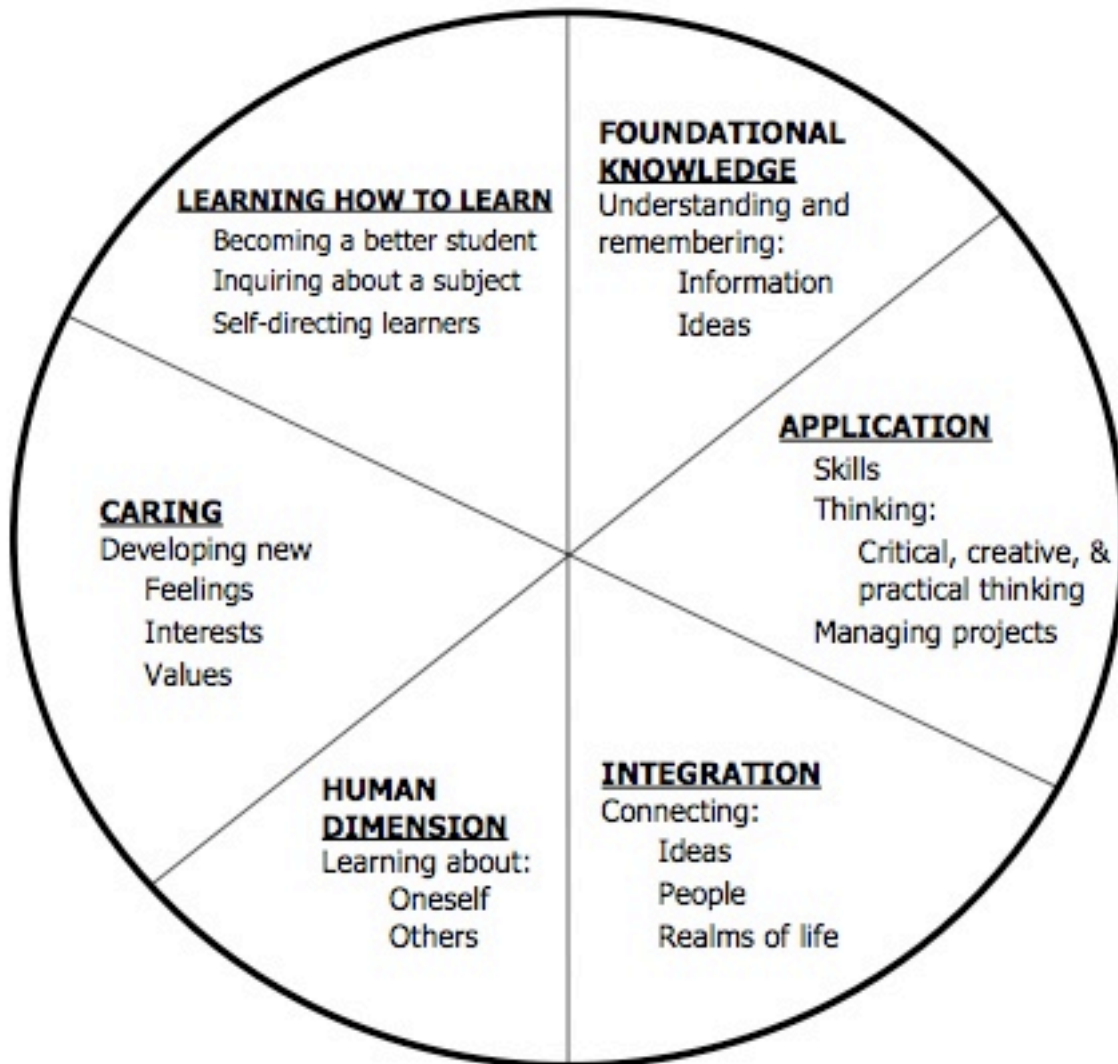
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<sup>41</sup>. Cathie Jordan. “*Creating Cultures of Schooling: Historical and Conceptual Background of the KEEP/Rough Rock Collaboration.*” *The Bilingual Research Journal*. Winter 1995, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 83-100. Accessed on February 4, 2013 at [http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/rcd/BE021530/Creating\\_Cultures\\_Of\\_Schooling.pdf](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/files/rcd/BE021530/Creating_Cultures_Of_Schooling.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. pp. 88

## APPENDIX F

### A TAXONOMY OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING



Taken from : L. Dee Fink (2003). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. (San Francisco, CA: Willey & Sons Publishing), p 30.