

# Issues with Distance Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

What are some of the issues relevant to **distance education in sub-Saharan Africa**? Some of these issues relate to the 'push' factors of distance education in sub-Saharan Africa, which include overcrowded tertiary institutions, the need for training in a globalised high-technology world, and the problem of government funding. These 'push' factors seem to match the alleged advantages of distance education such as its nonrequirement of residential facilities and its ability to accommodate a flexible number of students at a low cost. It was hoped that new technology, such as computer-based training and the Internet, would provide a medium to which individualised and flexible learning materials could be supplied and which, through online interaction, a form of support for distance education learning could be provided. In this article, we focus on the particular distance education issues in sub-Saharan Africa, such as the lack of government funding and the lack of affordability by potential distance education students, as well as reasons why new technology, such as computer-based learning and online courses which are popular in the developed world, are impractical in developing countries of sub-Saharan Africa. A case study of a sub-Saharan country, **Ghana**, is provided to demonstrate why various distance education programmes have failed and why **information and communications technology (ICT)-based** training, despite its promising future, lacks the supporting infrastructure in Ghana that it requires in order to operate effectively.

## BACKGROUND

Distance education could be defined as a set of teaching and learning strategies that are utilised in order to manage spatial and temporal separation between the educators and learners. Early distance education focused on print-based material, similar to lecture notes used in the classroom. Later, distance education utilised audio

and video media (Adea, 2002). Now, many distance education programmes utilise ICT which tends to focus on the World Wide Web but which may include computer-aided visualisation and instruction and computer conferencing. The advantages of ICT-based training include a sense of presence in online interaction with others, improved learning support, asynchronous learning, and global access to resources and teachers. Another important advantage is the availability of content management systems that allow culturally-specific material to be edited or removed for a new audience. However, ICT-based education requires access to a computer, which may be impractical at times such as during a student's commute. **Mobile technology**, which allows access to ICT-based learning anytime, may be a solution (McIntosh, 2005; Thorpe, 2005).

In terms of cost, residential education tends to be very labour-intensive while distance education tends to be very capital-intensive but with low flexible costs. The reason for the particularities of distance education costs is that high costs are involved in developing course materials but once developed, these course materials can be reused by thousands of students and, thus, the cost of course development can be easily recouped. **E-learning**, the presentation of computer materials electronically usually through information technology, has varying patterns of cost. A comparison of course preparation costs for a one hour lecture are as follows: 2-10 hours in a residential education setting, 50 hours for printed text distance education lecture, and 100 hours for a one hour video lecture. Development of computer-based teaching material tends to be more costly; costs vary depending on the approach taken with the computer-based textual approach being the cheapest and virtual reality being the most expensive. It has been argued that distance education **interactive courses**, which use media such as the Internet to help students communicate with other students and the lecturer during a distance education lecture, reduce cost because less of the lecturer's time is needed because students are able to learn from peers. The consensus is that interac-

tive courses take up to twice as much of the lecturer's time than face-to-face lectures due to the volume of individual replies (Rumble & Litto, 2005). Learners also find it difficult to participate during the window of time where group activities are scheduled (Thorpe, 2005). Due to the high cost of developing distance education materials, the number of courses offered is usually quite limited (Rumble & Litto, 2005).

## **NEED AND ISSUES WITH DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

Faced with an increasingly global knowledge-based economy, many workers are increasingly seeking part-time tertiary education to upgrade their skills and become competitive in the global job market (Saint, 1999). The gross tertiary enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa is 3.6%, which compares unfavourably to that of Asia (10.4%) and Latin America (18.4%). Exacerbating the problem of low tertiary enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa is the increasing demographic group of 18-23 year olds such that by 2010, access to tertiary education must be greatly increased in this region in order to maintain this present percentage (Adea, 2005). Because many African countries are currently spending a significant portion of their GNP on education, the additional resources needed to maintain the traditional residential model are unavailable. Faced with an increasingly youthful surge in population growth and an increasing number of graduates from senior secondary schools, universities in sub-Saharan Africa are under pressure to accept more and more students despite the universities declining educational quality and limited funding possibilities. As a result of this pressure, universities are often overcrowded with poorly equipped facilities and suffering from brain drain of academic staff, declining research output, frequent strikes, outdated and irrelevant curricula, and high graduate unemployment (Saint, 1999). Distance education is viewed as a solution to this pressing problem of low enrolment and lack of funds for residential education (Adea, 2005).

Distance education is viewed as a way to expand the limited number of places available, reach a wider student audience, provide continuing professional development to graduates, provide lifelong learning to adults, provide access to teachers with special expertise, and improve educational access to marginalised groups such as women (Adea, 2005). Saint (2000) argues that

distance education increases access to education, especially for the geographically isolated, economically disadvantaged, and women with domestic responsibilities. Distance education may have a more specialised role in extending literacy and numeracy skills, helping rural women develop entrepreneurial skills, assisting in the training of farm workers, increasing teacher training capacity, and providing continuous professional development for managers, healthcare workers, and administrators (Adea, 2005). In Tanzania, teacher training through distance education greatly increased the number of trained teacher far beyond that that could be produced through conventional methods (Adea, 2005).

However, distance education is often seen as a universal solution to all educational problems facing a country. Indeed, it is often viewed that merely introducing distance education would produce the desired changes rather than requiring the proper monitoring and adjusting of distance education curricula to the context and needs of its students. Due to poverty and overcrowded, poorly-equipped classrooms, and ill-trained teachers, many children will not complete their primary education, never mind be candidates for distance education. Governments in sub-Saharan Africa often are more concerned with ethnic unrest, political instability, unreliable rains, and low food production than with educational policy. As indicated from experience, distance education needs to be integrated in a national educational policy in order to work. However, governments in sub-Saharan Africa typically have low levels of political support for distance education. Additional problems for distance education include lack of professionally trained distance education personnel, governments not recognising the legitimacy of distance education credentials gained by their own employees, lack of support programmes for distance education learners, limited budgets, and poor domestic infrastructure for distance education (Adea, 2005).

The European Commission in 2000 defined lifelong learning as a combination of initial and in-service training that continues during the lifetime of a person; the Commission strongly advised on the use of ICT-based distance education to improve the occupational skills and personal development of the learner. Although this may be a lofty goal, this Western distance education model goal is impractical in sub-Saharan Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, few countries achieve universal education, in-service training is unavailable due to

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