

Chapter 24

Enhancing Learning Opportunities Through Development of Open and Distance Education in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Africa's success in today's information-based world economy will require an accelerated demographic transition to a flexible, educated, and healthy workforce. An analysis presented in the World Bank's "Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?" states that African economies will need to replace reliance on natural resources with skilled labour in order to halt the erosion of its share in world trade and to achieve a reduction in poverty (World Bank, 2001). Tilak (2009) submits that only between 6 and 7% of those qualified to obtain tertiary education do get placement in African universities. As a result of this shortage of places in African universities, many qualified candidates turned their search towards open and distance learning institutions. The growth of information and communication technologies has facilitated the expansion of open and distance mode of education. On the African Continent where resources are scarce and higher education provision is poor, ODL has been accepted as a viable, cost effective means of expanding provision without costly outlay in infrastructure.

1. INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic progress and socio-cultural development all over the world has, and continues to depend upon education (Teferra and Skaug). The important role that education plays in the process of socio-economic and socio-cultural development has been further catapulted by what has been referred to as the "knowledge era". Evidence suggests that the said importance has been well embraced by the developed and with increasing vigour the "emerging economies". The same, however, cannot be said

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about Africa, which by all indications continues to grapple with multifarious problems which particularly confound its education (Francis, 2008). Traditional learning methods do not meet the contemporary needs of our information society any more (Gütl *et al.*, 2004). With the increasing demands of education at all levels, various constraints for learners, and inadequate facilities of formal educational system, distance education was found to be an important option for meeting the needs. Distance education has become a popular method of instruction, especially for those with demanding fulltime jobs or who find it difficult to invest time and expense in travel.

Distance Education is “a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both” (Honeyman and Miller, 1993)

Distance education has been around for a long time, its form has evolved in a number of ways. However, open learning is a more recent phenomena and its definition varies from country to country and is evolving in recent years. The combination between distance education (i.e. the ability to study from the distance) and open learning (i.e. the ability for anyone to access the educational offer) is often referred as Open and Distance Learning (www.distancelearningportal.com).

Open learning has been described as primarily a goal, or an educational policy: the provision of learning in a flexible manner, built around the geographical, social and time constraints of individual learners, rather than those of an educational institution. (Bates, 1995). According to this view, open learning may contain distance education as well as other forms of flexible learning. Open learning strategies may include provisions for learners not to need certain prerequisites for admission and afford some degree of learner control over what, when, or how something is learned. As described by Glen (2003) Open refers to policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning.

Distance learning on the other hand, is a process of education which emphasises learning; it is an educational enterprise during which, a facilitator of learning who is usually separated from the learner by spatial or mental distance, gathers, oblates and presents information in a learnable form to one or a group of learners who have accepted the responsibility to learn While in distance education, the facilitator does the most that it could to help learners learn, distance learning assumes that the responsibility to learn is the learner's; and this responsibility includes the choice and decision to enroll on a programme, the choice of media through which to learn and most importantly what to learn and how to learn it (Biao, 2012).

Globally, online learning has become a key channel of instructional delivery in higher education institutions (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Carlson & Jesseman, 2011), driven by increased costs of conventional education, and decreased costs of storing and transmitting information electronically (Çakiroğlu, 2014). Bharuthram and Kies (2012) refer to the positive impact of e-learning in distance education. In emerging economies, online education is increasing (Çakiroğlu, 2014; Todhunter, 2013).

Distance learning needs not be open at all (Rowntree, 1992). This suggests that there exists a difference between “Open Learning” and “Distance Learning”; for many decades, the term “Distance Learning” has been used to describe learning organised, dispensed and acquired from a distance; the prefix “Open” became attached to Distance Learning towards the end of the 20th century as a result of three significant developments, namely, criticisms against the formal school system, GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and Globalisation.

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