

Chapter 4

Planning a Quality Education System: Using Technology to Increase Access to University Education

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ABSTRACT

Responding to the social, technological, economic and political (STEP) environmental factors, UNISWA established the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) in 1994 to increase access to university education by offering its programmes using the distance education delivery mode. The success achieved by this intervention has led to a number of problems and challenges that now confront the Institute which work against the realization of its goals. An evaluation of these challenges points to the urgent need to use new ICTs in the delivery of content. Doing this, would enable the institution to increase its enrolments at a lower cost per enrolled student. It would further lead to the blurring of the boundaries between the conventional university and the IDE. This chapter argues for the use of online learning, and the need for a new strategic plan for the university.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The University of Swaziland (UNISWA) developed from the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS), which had its headquarters in Roma, Lesotho between 1964 and 1975. UBLS was equally funded by the three Governments of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, and had until 1970, little presence in Botswana and Swaziland. Following student unrest at Roma, and strained

relations between the UBLS administration and the Lesotho Government over the implementation of development plans or devolution plans, the Roma Campus was withdrawn from UBLS in 1975 and named the National University of Lesotho. This led Botswana and Swaziland to form their own University in 1976, which was named the University of Botswana and Swaziland (UBS). UBS had two constituent colleges – the University College of Botswana and the University College of Swaziland, and it was planned that these two colleges would later develop to become national universities. Indeed,

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in accordance with this plan, the University of Botswana and the University of Swaziland came into being in 1982.

The chief mandate of UNISWA has been manpower production to assist in national development. Enrolment of students at UNISWA rose steadily until it reached a point where the university facilities and resources could not handle the numbers, resulting in a large number of qualifying candidates being rejected. In addition, the demand for tertiary education from people who were in full-time employment, self-employed, housewives, etc. was increasing. All these factors led to the creation of the Institute of Distance Education (IDE), which was to offer the university programmes and courses using the distance education delivery mode. The IDE was set up as one of the Faculties of UNISWA. The Institute is headed by a Director, who reports to the Vice Chancellor of the University, and performs similar duties as those of a Dean of a Faculty. Current plans, as reflected in the Draft University of Swaziland Strategic Plan (2009) are that the IDE will become a College of Distance Education and have more autonomy to carry out its mandate. The main sources of income for the University are from the Swaziland Government (about 74%) and from Student fees (about 20%). As the country's economy has grown at lower rates than in the past, funding the University has become a major problem, and the Institution has had to find ways of being more efficient and of controlling its expenditures. This case study is important therefore in that it provides one viable way that the challenges facing the University can be addressed, and the quality of education offered improved while at the same time the costs are minimised.

SETTING THE STAGE

At the Fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning held at Ocho Rios, Jamaica in October/

November, 2006, a special session was organized to discuss the unique challenges that face dual-mode institutions. Key papers were presented in this session by Ms. J. N. Aguti from Makerere University in Uganda, Prof. R. Siaciwena of the University of Zambia, and Dr. O. Tau from the University of Botswana. The author, who attended the session, noted that the challenges that were highlighted were similar to those faced by the IDE at UNISWA. These presentations left the author with one major question: how can these challenges be addressed, and what organizational structures, delivery modes and mechanisms should be devised and adopted to increase access to a quality education at a competitive cost? This chapter seeks to address this question.

Many Swazi nationals were unable to enrol in the conventional face-to-face (CF2F) university for several reasons, the main one being shortage of space. This necessitated that other options of broadening access to a quality university education be explored and existing barriers removed. Distance education (DE) was the option chosen as it has become a rapidly growing alternative of access to higher education in both developed and developing countries. DE is convenient as learners do not have to leave home or work, this mode of instruction is achieving institutional maturity, and it has become an important complement to the mainstream CF2F system (Srisa-An, 2006; Salawu & Ogunsola-Bande, 2005; Perraton, 2004a; Lentell, 2004; UNESCO, 2002; Keegan, 2000; Reddy & Manjulika, 1995). Daniel (2006) further reports that it allows education to break the "iron triangle" in that it increases access, improves quality and cut costs - all at the same time. Jegede (2000) has further claimed that it is the most appropriate mode for the disadvantaged, underprivileged and underrepresented members of society. DE has moved from the margins of educational policy and practice to being a respected and widespread mode of delivery alongside full-time and part-time study (Tait & Mills, 1999). In Southern Africa, its importance has been shown

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