

Chapter 51

21st Century Distance Learning in Sub-Saharan Africa: Distance and Blended Learning in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Distance education in Ghana is rapidly gaining recognition as a result of the increasing demand for higher education by qualified applicants, most of whom are denied admission due to the limited space and resources. Distance education promotes cross-national, multi-disciplinary perspectives in educational practice and equips students, faculty, and administrators with resources to compete in the academic world of the 21st century. Universities in Ghana have opted for distance learning as an alternative measure to reduce congestion and help remedy student admissions to the few universities available (Dzisah, 2006). However, little is known about the trend of distance and blended learning education in Ghana. This chapter addresses the trend of distance learning and university education; distance and blended learning in Ghana; information on African Virtual University and distance education, benefits, challenges, recommended strategies of distance and blended learning programs in Ghana; and a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, distance learning has become a major medium of instruction between instructors and students especially in the developed countries. However, in the developing countries,

most applicants are denied admission due to the limited space and resources. The demand for higher education in sub-Saharan Africa is higher than the few institutions can accommodate. The United Nations Organization (UNO) estimates that 3.8 million teachers will need to be recruited

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and trained by 2015 to achieve universal primary educational goals (United Nations, 2009). The number of student enrollments in sub-Saharan Africa between 1991 and 2006 increased by 16%, however, the various governments expenditure on high education rose to only 6% (World Bank, 2010). This leads one to conclude that Sub-Saharan African countries will not be able to meet the demands of increasing trend of student population in providing resources such as educational technology, staff, and training facilities (World Bank, 2010). Thus, various governments need to provide equitable access to higher education while considering other options of distance learning. An effective combination of different approaches of distance learning can lead to increased accessibility of students into tertiary institutions in Africa.

Ghana (formerly Gold Coast) is a country situated on the West Coast of Africa in the Gulf of Guinea. It occupies a total land area of 238,539 square kilometres (92,099 square miles). Ghana is a multilingual country with diverse local languages, predominantly Akan, Dagomba, Ewe, and Ga. English is the official and commercial language, and is taught in all schools. The rural population forms about 66% of Ghana's 25 million people. Ghana gained independence in 1957 from Britain, becoming the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to free itself from colonial power. It shares borders with Cote d'Ivoire to the west, Togo to the east, and Burkina Faso to the north. Major cities in Ghana are Accra- the National capital, Kumasi, Tema, Sekondi-Takoradi, and Tamale. It has a tropical climate, with an annual mean temperature of 26° C and 29° C. The majority of the people are employed in agriculture; however, there exists inadequate developed resources such as roads, schools, electricity, and health care (Millennium Development Goals Report, 2011). The country is divided into ten (10) administrative regions and 170 decentralized districts. The government is a presidential democracy with an elected parliament and independent judiciary.

Ghana became the second country in Sub-Saharan Africa to have full Internet connectivity. However, the Internet sector's expansion has been slowed by shortages of functional dial-up phone lines (CIA fact book, 2011; Lundkvist et al., 2004). Internet service is connected to the world's first submarine fibre-optic cable system, SAT-3/WASC/SAFE, linking Africa to Europe and Asia (Research-Africa.net, 2010). In 2002, the National Communication Authority (NCA) licensed 52 Internet service providers (ISPs); however, few of them are currently operating (Lundkvist et al., 2004). In 2005, Ghana was ranked 61st in the World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology Report (World Economic Forum, 2006).

In 2003, there were more than 750 Internet cafes in Ghana, mostly using dial-up connections. About 70% of them are located in Accra, and others in cities such as Kumasi, Tema, and Takoradi (Lundkvist et al., 2004; Opoku, 2004). Most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have taken the advantage of the technological advancement in distance learning to make strides in the advancement of education. These technologies offer tremendous hope towards providing its citizens with access to a higher education (Selinger, 2002; Isaacs et al., 2004; Shrestha, 2000).

The rapid growth of student population and limited space in the universities had called for urgent measures to widen university admission. For example, in 1996, only 6,088 students were admitted to the universities out of 22,477 qualified applicants 27%. Consequently, Universities opted for distance learning programs with blended learning focus as the best alternative (Nichol & Watson, 2003). Considering the high demand for access to tertiary education and decreasing budgetary allocation for educational provisions in Ghana, there has been a growing interest in distance education and open learning (Development of Education in Africa, 2002) as an alternative to efficient means of providing quality education to people. This chapter highlights the trend of distance learning

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