

Chapter 108

Reflections on Distance Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines literature about distance higher education in Africa, as presented by different scholars. The evolution of distance education has been well explored from the print to the current era of information and communication technology. Challenges and opportunities in the provision of distance higher education have been discussed and better practices for providing quality distance education have been suggested. It is concluded that the provision of distance education must be carefully planned and the technologies employed in its delivery must be reflective of the context in which they are used.

INTRODUCTION

Education in today's world is considered as a vital tool for human growth and socio-economic development. Studies have indicated that education, especially higher education, has a greater role to play in the socio-economic development of any country (Green, Little, Kamat, Oketch & Vickers, 2007; Bloom, Canning & Chan, 2006). According to the World Bank's African Action Plan for 2006-2008, the roles of higher education include the provision of relevant skills to the labor market; a capacity to understand and use global knowledge in science and technology, particularly for agriculture; a capability to assess existing information and generate new understanding through research; and a much closer working relationship with the productive sector of the economy (Bloom et al., 2006). It is further argued that higher education may create greater tax revenue, increase savings and investment, and lead to a more entrepreneurial and civic society (Bloom et al., (2006). It can also improve a nation's health, contribute to reduce population growth, improve technology, and strengthen governance.

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Investing in tertiary education in Africa may accelerate technological diffusion and technological catch-up, hence decreasing knowledge gaps and alleviating poverty in the region (Bloom et al., 2006). Thus, efforts by developing countries to improve their economies can only be fruitful through transformation and expansion of their education systems and practices, especially at tertiary level. The adoption of new pedagogical practices through the integration of ICTs in education is vital in improving quality, widening access and gaining competitive advantage in the global economy. One of the approaches to widening access to higher education is the provision of higher education through distance learning.

Therefore, the main purpose of this chapter is to examine literature about distance higher education in Africa, as presented by different scholars, with a view of identifying challenges and opportunities and suggesting better practices for providing quality distance education.

BACKGROUND

Distance education or distance learning is understood as a field of education “taking place with the student physically or geographically removed from the instructor using some form of technology to facilitate learning and contact” (Valentine, 2002). It encompasses programmes that allow the learner and the instructor to be physically apart during the learning process and maintain communication in a variety of ways (Keegan, 1986).

Some people think that distance education began with the invention of the Internet; which is a wrong perception (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Although scholars have diverse views on when exactly distance learning started, many studies indicate that distance education started in the mid-19th century (around 1840s) and that nearly all scholars agree that this education was delivered by correspondence (Keegan, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Nasseh, 1997; Taylor, 2006). Moore and Kearsley (2005) identify five ‘historical generations’ through which distance education has evolved from correspondence to internet. The authors summarize the five orderly generations as follows: Correspondence, broadcast radio and television, open universities, teleconferencing, and internet or web.

Distance education emerged in response to the need to provide access to those who would otherwise not be able to participate in face to face courses (Beldarrain, 2006, Rao, 2008). Today, distance education has become an education option for everyone who, for one reason or another, needs further education, but is constrained by family responsibilities, job ties, location, or income to attend campus education. Halimi (2005, p.14) precisely describes three categories of people who knock on the university doors today in the name of distance education or lifelong learning: First, the *postponers* – those who could have had access to higher education at the end of their secondary education, but they put it off for various personal or career reasons. Second, the *returners* – those who have already benefited from it, and come back for a ‘second slice of the cake’ with the purpose of upgrading their knowledge in order to get a better job or simply to enjoy cultural improvement for their own well-being. Third, *second chancers* – those who have not yet had an opportunity to benefit from academic learning, and who apply for or are offered another chance to do so. According to Halimi, most of these second chancers are from underprivileged groups that have been underrepresented in higher education, such as the disabled, people from minority ethnic groups and poor social background, women with family commitments, and those who left compulsory schooling without qualifications.

However, distance education was not widely accepted in the beginning. The criticism against distance education can be noted from Keegan’s (2005) words that the correspondence image was disliked, govern-

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