

Chapter 10

Distance Education and ICT– Supported Learning in Lesotho: Issues and Evidence

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ABSTRACT

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are regarded as a major contributor to the transforming of distance learning. The researcher assumed that education practitioners in developing countries like Lesotho, have limited, or no access at all to ICT for supporting instruction, since they still rely heavily on print and tutor/learner meetings as their distance mode of course delivery. The study assessed the feasibility of introducing ICT-mediated education for tutors and learners on a Distance Education Programme in Lesotho. The paper specifically focused on issues relating to the place of ICT in teaching and learning at a distance, ICT policy initiatives and challenges of infrastructure, human resource capacity, and cost as they affect provision of, and access to computer-mediated learning. Interventions critical to alleviating the situation are also discussed. Policy-makers and distance education practitioners require this type of feedback to be able to effect meaningful improvements in ODL programmes.

INTRODUCTION

This College of Education which is located in Lesotho, originated from the government's decision to amalgamate the three prominent denominational teacher education institutions owned by the Roman Catholic Church, the Lesotho Evangelical Church, and the Anglican Church of Lesotho. Since then, the college has been the only teacher training insti-

tution in the whole country. In 2002, it became an autonomous college. The institution offers diploma programmes to primary and secondary school teachers through full-and part-time (distance) modes of learning. Both forms of programme delivery are administered and monitored from within a conventional setting; by the college management team. Decision-making processes that is typical of a hierarchical decision-making structure. The distance education programme was introduced 2000 for unqualified and under-qualified primary

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school teachers who are already serving in Lesotho schools. Unqualified teachers neither have appropriate content nor teaching skills as many of them go into the classroom straight from the high school; while under-qualified teachers have long years of teaching experience but basically lack professional training to become academically qualified even for further education.

The distance education programme uses printed course materials (modules) that are backed-up by face-to-face learner meeting with their subject tutors, held twice every three months in a semester. Learners are allocated to a nearest tutorial centre comprising of a cluster of sites. Finances of the college come in the form of government subvention that is largely used for the payment of staff salaries. Other expenditures are met partly through payment of tuition fees and by donors.

SETTING THE STAGE

To-date, the College of Education, which is the sole provider in Lesotho of basic, pre-service teacher education to the diploma level, and the only provider of in-service, part-time distance teacher education to the diploma level too, still relies heavily on the use of print-based self-study materials; often backed-up by meetings with subject tutors in designated areas. Of course, this paper does not in any way, intend to discredit print as a mode of distance education delivery; but simply attempts to highlight the pace of technological advancement in the country. In essence, distance learners in Lesotho still have limited use of, and/or no access at all to ICT devices. The computer, not to mention internet, still remains a foreign machine for most learners. Of the varied ICT equipment available, internet is often regarded as one of the latest tools that can be used to support distance learners, streamline administration and enhance communication among distance education staff (Commonwealth of Learning, 2009).

Given that Lesotho is one of the countries whose telecommunications sector is typical of least developed countries (Moloisane, Tlebere, and O'Droma, 2007); surfing its educational system with computers and internet services might indeed, seem like a luxury for a country struggling with poverty, disease and other basic needs. This perception is however, argued by (Madamombe, 2007, p. 16) who reported that experts in a recent NEPAD-sponsored conference in Nairobi, Kenya, warned that "development will be seriously hindered if Africa fails to bridge the ICT gap that separates the continent from developed countries". In the same gathering, he further noted, experts highlighted alarming figures of only 2.5 percent of Africa's 800 million people to have internet access, compared with 17.8 per cent in the rest of the world.

These figures are worrying in this century of ICT centred learning. Advanced institutions have responded to this challenge by developing online programmes. We need to acknowledge though, that ICT is not limited to computers or satellites and internet technologies (Evoh, 2007); but that radio, cassette and television are also part of ICT because they all have to do with information and communication. Therefore, this paper will highlight issues and evidence relating to accessibility of ICT as a supportive mechanism for distance learning. Understanding the basic problems leading to limited use of, and/or unavailability of ICT and overcoming them will be critical to successful introduction of, and user-friendliness of ICT-enabled education in Lesotho.

This college has a relatively small Information and Communication Technology (ICT) unit which, although served by only three people; that is, two lecturers and a technician, provides full-time students with computer literacy skills. The computer unit comprises of two computer laboratories, one used for students' lectures and the other used as a School of Technology Innovation Centre (STIC) whose objective is to serve as one of the centres

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