

Chapter 17

International Collaboration in Distance Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Trends, Trials and Tomorrow's Thrusts

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines international collaboration in distance education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), focusing on efforts aimed at utilizing technology. It identifies a number of significant collaborative endeavors. The collaborative efforts observed have a similar goal of pooling together ICT resources and expertise towards improving educational outcomes. The prevalence of teacher education and training across the initiatives, in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, is noted. Institutions outside Africa are actively involved in the funding and provision of expertise. Also, the AVU consortium model seems to be a viable approach to collaboration, with notable results seen. With the challenges facing technology-focused collaboration, such as a lack of enabling policies and the digital divide, the chapter suggests that African countries and institutions should pursue a culture of change and be more flexible. More formal training in distance education, utilizing Africans in the Diaspora and promoting dialogue across international spectrums are also recommended.

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BACKGROUND

The main motivation for the introduction of distance education in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 19th century, apart from the sub continent's problem of unsatisfied educational demands, was the need to utilize an available international educational innovation. In this early thrust, distance education institutions which awarded the first set of qualifications were based on foreign soil, the tutors and the content of instruction were mostly foreign, and the course materials were developed outside the continent. Even when local initiatives were first seen, in the activities of individual entrepreneurs and university centres and departments, external organizations and outside agencies provided the needed technical and technological support, and helped in organizing training programmes for the personnel involved (Adekanmbi, 2002). Government involvement in distance education did not reduce the thrust of international activities. Rather, it assisted in the establishment of the Commonwealth of Learning in 1988. Over the years, international collaboration has taken new turns, with collaboration addressing such issues as programme development, research and publications, technology-based collaborative initiatives and among others, the promotion of digitization.

This paper examines the trends observable in distance education development in Africa. It discusses the nature of international collaboration in distance education in Africa and examines the trials and challenges it faces. It also investigates the extent to which international collaboration could have an impact on the use of technology in distance education on the continent. The paper further explores the rationale for integrating ICTs in distance education and identifies some of the existing collaborative efforts in the area of ICT-supported Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Of particular interest, among others, is the African Virtual University (AVU) and the role it has played in increasing access to quality ICT-supported ODL programmes through its unique collaborative model. The paper further analyses the nature of these efforts and identifies what the challenges and prospects are. It also examines future directions for collaborative initiatives in distance education on the continent, against the backdrop of problems which affects many collaborative initiatives. This is with a view to suggesting strategies through which Africa could further benefit from international collaboration in ICT-supported distance education.

The thesis of this paper is that international collaboration plays a major role in the development of distance education in sub-Saharan Africa and can influence, among others, the desire for ICT integration in distance education practices on the continent.

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