

Chapter 10

AVU's Experience in Increasing Access to Quality Higher Education through e-Learning in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

Universities and other tertiary institutions in developing nations around the world are facing major challenges in meeting the demand for increasing access to higher education (HE): limitations imposed by inadequate funding, poor infrastructure and sometimes lack of political vision, added to the demographic explosion, make it almost impossible for some of these developing nations to ensure access to all to higher education solely through the conventional face-to-face mode. In this context, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are providing an alternative to face-to-face education. Moreover, they have the potential to significantly increase access to quality higher education, improve management of tertiary institutions, increase access to educational resources through digital libraries and open education resources, foster collaboration and networking between universities, foster collaboration between the private sector and tertiary institutions, enhance sub-regional and regional integration and facilitate the mobility of teachers and graduates. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the African Virtual University (AVU), a Pan African Inter-Governmental Organization initially launched in Washington in 1997 as a World Bank project, works with a number of countries toward reaching the goal of increasing access to quality

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higher education and training programmes through the use of ICTs. The AVU has been the first-of-its-kind in this regard to serve the Sub-Saharan African countries. In this chapter, the AVU's twelve years experience in delivering and improving access to quality higher distance education throughout Africa will be discussed. The AVU has trained more than 40,000 students since its inception; this is the proof that it is possible to achieve democratization of tertiary education in Africa despite many challenges.

INTRODUCTION

A demand for the democratisation of the access to university has been formulated during these past two decades in developing nations around the world where a great part of the population has limited access to higher education. Universities and other tertiary level institutions in these countries are facing major challenges in meeting the demand: access limitations imposed by inadequate funding, poor infrastructures, sometimes lack of political vision and in addition to the demographic explosion, make it virtually impossible for some of these developing nations to ensure access to higher education to all solely through the conventional face-to-face model of education. These universities are thus faced with record student enrolments that far exceed their existing capacity to accommodate and provide for effective learning.

In Africa, the demand for admission into universities has never been greater: there is a high demand for post-secondary tertiary and non-tertiary education and, as Africa's population continues to grow, the pressure for access to a university education is likely to grow. Akilagpa (2004) describes the challenges facing African higher education as follows:

- Inadequate resources to meet demand,
- Small number of universities per country,
- Small but rapidly increasing number of private universities,
- Low tertiary education expenditure per person, but very high relative to gross domestic product (GDP) per capita,

- Low household incomes affecting the ability of African students to attend higher education,
- Poor infrastructure for teaching, research, and ICT with consequent weak links amongst African Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and the global knowledge system altogether,
- Ageing faculties, lack of incentives to attract younger staff and continued brain drain,
- Inadequate financial and logistical support from governments,
- Weak linkages between academia and the social and productive (private) sectors of the economy.

To mitigate this challenge, an increasing number of universities have launched innovative methods of delivering education by embracing Open, Distance and e-Learning programmes to run alongside the conventional face to face programmes. In SSA,, one of the strategic objective of the the African Virtual University (AVU) is to help a number of countries to overcome obstacles by enhancing the capacity of universities so they can increase access to quality higher education programmes and training through the use of ICTs. The objective is to build capacity and support economic development by leveraging the power of modern telecommunication technologies to provide and/or improve access to quality education for large number of students and professionals learners (including those who otherwise would have been denied access). More so, it aims at bridging the digital divide and knowledge gap

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