

Chapter 6

Development of E-Learning in Niger: Opportunities, Challenges and Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The University Abdou Moumouni (UAM) of Niamey in Niger mainly focused on traditional face to face learning, and even the existence of the African Virtual University since the years 1999 did not change the situation. It is only after the official opening at the University of the Francophone Digital Campus in December 2003 that lecturers and students started overseeing and taking advantages of all the benefits of e-Learning and distance learning. The present paper builds on the author's personal initiatory experience in e-Learning to highlight some specific challenges that traditional universities such as the UAM face in their efforts to introduce e-Learning and distance learning as a new mode of course delivery. The study shows that even though challenges are big, political and institutional support can freshen the perspectives and change opportunities into realities.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Niger is a vast West African country of 1,267,000 km² locked between Burkina Faso, Benin, Mali, Chad, Nigeria, Algeria and Libya (Figure 1). On 25% of the surface area live two third of the populations while the remaining 75% is occupied by the Sahara Desert. Agriculture employs three quarters of the population and accounts to 40% of Niger's GDP (Agyeman, 2007). Statistics from a World

Bank study (World Bank, 2006) give some socio economic indicators (Figure 2). The demographic growth in Niger is one of the world's highest with a fertility rate of 7 live births per woman. A recent study from the Ministry of Finance projected that the current population of about 13 million inhabitants will grow to 55 million by 2050 (Cabinet Premier Minister, 2003). Uranium contributes 31% to the country's total export earning, but sixty percent of the population live below the poverty line (Agyeman, 2007).

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Figure 1. Map of Niger (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/africa/niger/>)



Figure 2. General statistics on Niger (World Bank, 2006)

Indicator	Value
Total population	13 499 000
Annual population growth rate (%)	2.9
Population of age 0 – 14 (%)	49
Rural population (%)	78
GDP per capita (US \$)	835
Total fertility rate (%)	7.1
Infant mortality rate (%)	154
Life expectancy at birth (years)	45
HIV rate (%) in adults of 15 – 49	1.2
Primary school enrollment for girls (%)	32
Primary school enrollment for boys (%)	46
Secondary school enrollment for girls (%)	5
Secondary school enrollment for boys (%)	8

Niger's education system consists of six years of primary school, four years of junior secondary school, and three years of senior secondary school and two to four years of tertiary education. Primary school enrollments for both boys and girls are less than 50%, while less than 10% of the children attend secondary schools. Tertiary enrollment concerns only 1% of the population having finished secondary school (Salmi, 2000).

Until 2004 there was only one university in Niger. It was created as a public training institution in 1971 under the name of High Education Center of Niger. In 1973, it became the University of Niamey, and in 1992, it received the name of University Abdou Moumouni (UAM) of Niamey in memory of the first Nigerien physicist and former University President. Created under a governmental law, the University Abdou Moumouni (UAM) of Niamey is a public institution

almost entirely financed by the Niger government despite some assistance received through bilateral and multilateral cooperation. It is administered by the Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education, Science, Research and Technology (MESSRT).

Like the majority of tertiary agricultural education institutions in Sub Saharan Africa, the University Abdou Moumouni (UAM) of Niamey was created as a pure traditional university using talk and chalk with the main objective of providing the government with graduates to fill up the public sector positions left vacant by departing colonial personals. This happened in a context where the telecommunication network was largely undeveloped and regulated by the Ministry of Communication. Since 1996 the only Internet service provider was the National Telecom SONITEL through fiber connectivity.

In favor of the globalization occurring in a knowledge-based developing world, and confronted to the numerical divide, the University Abdou Moumouni, like the other Sub Saharan African Tertiary Education institutions, is in the process of developing new ways of delivering higher education programmes. Under the supervision of CAMES (Le Comité Africain et Malgache sur l'Enseignement Supérieur), deep reforms are being introduced through the Licence- Master-

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