Analysis of Distance Education Programmes in Kenya

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Abstract

Distance education is an important mode of education delivery. In the 21st century the importance of education cannot be underscored. Therefore, any methodology that can provide access to education for all (EFA) should be embraced. The current surge of interest in distance education has been brought about by contemporary technology that facilitates communication between the instructor and learner. Objectives of distance education have a high output especially improving skills, cost effectiveness, efficiency and improved content delivery by use of technology. In Kenya some students have relied on this mode of study to access education. Institutions of higher learning have embraced this mode though faced with several challenges. Despite this, distance education should be made accessible and designed to meet the needs of different types of students. With support from the government, the national goals of education can be met, hence a recommendation by this research that distance education be embraced alongside the conventional teaching mode.

Key words: Distance education, technology.

I.   Introduction

Distance education dates back to the end of the 18th century, but it was towards the end of 19th century that it became firmly established. At that time several large correspondence schools were founded and distance education was then first applied to university education. In its early stages in the 20th century the only media available for it was print and so the programme was called correspondence education. Since early 1980s when other types of media began to be used the term was changed to distance education. From its inception, distance education has been characterized by mediated subject matter presentation and mediated interaction between students and tutors (Juma, 2001). But what is distance learning?

In today's information age, learning is no longer within the four walls of a classroom. The instructor armed with a text book is no longer the sole source of educational experience. Information resources are everywhere, often separated from the learner by time and space. Verner(1994) therefore defines distance learning as the process of connecting students with these remote resources. It uses communication technology to harness the vast resources available and stimulate the development of lifelong learning skills.

Distance education is defined by Cassel(2008) as a systematically organized form of self-study in which presentation of learning materials, securing and supervising of students' success is carried out by a team of teachers. This is made possible at a distance by media which can cover long distances. Panlsen(2001) agrees with this definition but adds that technical media is used to produce high quality teaching material that makes it possible to instruct a high number of students at the same time even when they are at different locations.

Moore(1987) says distance education is a student centred instructional format which allows a student to study without having to commit to regular campus attendance. Interactive telecommunication systems are used to connect students, resources and instructors. Burton et al (2002) in their definition include the needs for special techniques, technologies and even special organizational and administrative arrangements.

According to Edmunds(2001) distance education is a mode of learning where students can learn but are separated from their tutor. This is done via print, multi-media and on-line materials. The tutor is available to answer telephone and e-mail questions from the student about course content and comment on their written assignments. Mboroki et al(2011) say that distance education can be defined as a form a form of education which students in universities and institutions of higher learning do not attend regular classes but instead study teaching materials specially prepared for this purpose by lecturers and experts. The medium   of interaction is technical media like, letters, printed materials, telephone, video, audio-tapes, satellites etc.

From the definitions given above, distance education is characterized by features like separation between the student and tutor, use of communication technologies, organized learning materials, and self study on the part of the student. This features distinguish it from the convenience face to face learning common in formal school and college settings. Other terms used to refer to distance education are correspondence education, home study,independent study, external studies, continuing education, self instruction, adult education, technology based education, open learning, open access, flexible or distributed learning.

II.   Rationale for Distance Education Programmes

Distance education has developed into a much applied and frequently praised mode of education with millions of students taking their studies in various parts of the world. It has been applied in secondary and tertiary education as well as to occupational and professional training. Since there has been an upsurge in distance education all over the world, government departments and private organizations have established distance education systems to deal with increasing educational needs that are unable to met by traditional school systems. Simonson et al (2003)These distance education systems have basically been influenced by local needs and local environments.

This mode of study is an out of class study that allows a student to learn when they have the desire and time. They can study in a place they like or while doing some other activities. All they need are the necessary materials which include content and mode of delivery (internet). In Kenya many students have registered for Module II programmes where they pay for themselves to study for higher education certificates. Such students have self motivation and learn purely at their own will. The programmes are offered over the school holidays or in the evening after work. The programmes are flexible allowing students to be involved in other activities as they learn. Many other have successfully gone through these programmes.

Distance education has been introduced to respond to growing educational needs which are not easily met in traditional forms of education. For example there can be courses for students in scattered communities that are sparsely populated or large geographical areas like those found in Australia, Canada, North America, Africa and in even Kenya. Students from North Eastern parts of Kenya characterized by conditions like insecurity, nomadic life and hostile weather would benefit from such programmes. This is because most tutors are unwilling to work under such hostile conditions yet there are students willing to take up education.

Training of personnel like teachers who are already working and cannot be away from their places of work for long periods would call for distance education programmes. In the Kenyan context teachers, bankers and other civil servants register for distance education because they are engaged most of the working hours. Teachers opt to go for holiday based sessions in colleges and universities to further their training and update their skills. Civil servants go for evening and weekend classes in nearby colleges especially those who stay in urban areas where most of the college are located. Their efforts have not been in vain since with certificate workers have been given promotions, pay increase, motivation and better working conditions. This is a credit to distance learning programmes.

Distance education is learner centered giving the student integrity and freedom to negotiate sequence of study, learning methods, assessments, support mechanisms and learning objectives and content. This is important to adult learners who may have other engagements or have specific needs to achieve. They sieve out content relevant to them as opposed to the contemporary systems where one learns what has been stipulated in the syllabus in a given context and within a specified period. One of the national goals of education in Kenya is to promote social, economic, technological and industrial needs for national development. By giving learner centred education this goals would be met (Mbwesa,2007).

This mode of study is a good opportunity to provide access to educational opportunities in a cost effective manner to those who would otherwise have been denied access. One can take courses from where they are at their convenience. Those whoare far from schools, colleges and universities are targets by distance learning programmes. The financial obligation are slightly lower compared to traditional mode of learning which requires boarding and tuition facilities, books, face to face instruction by tutor. Hawkridge(2002) says distance learning can deliver training at a faster and cheaper rate as compared to the traditional system.

Universal Primary Education(UPE) objectives especially in developing countries can be achieved through distance learning. Due to poverty, civil strife, insecurity, lack of learning facilities some students within the range for UPE do not achieve this objective. With distance learning an opportunity is availed for them to learn even just the basic numeracy and literacy skills. Even those who may have left school for one reason or another now have a second chance. This is because students can learn as they work, they are allowed

to gain access to education at whatever level they qualify to. The system is flexible and convenient such that students can enroll for a course anytime regardless of their previous education. This mode is therefore recommended for nomadic tribes in North Eastern and Rift Valley regions in Kenya.

Distance education is a platform for those whom for reasons of geographical proximity, financial constraints and the desire for flexibility in their learning may not be able to attend traditional face to face classes. The British Open University and Unisa(University of South Africa) were started with this objective and they dedicated their programmes to distance learning. This also served to bridge the socio-political distance as was witnessed in 'a part-heid' policy in South Africa .Distance learning aims at linking learners across cultural, social and economic divides. It provides a broad out reach that can foster continental and global collaboration through interaction and dissemination of ideas. Even in the Kenyan context distance education will promote respect for Kenya's rich and varied cultures and foster positive attitude towards other nations.

Distance learning is a break through in the use of new technologies in education. Through this program, students learn by use of synchronous technology which requires all participants to be present on-line at the same time. This is done through video conferencing, direct broadcast, telephone, satellite, radio or internet. Participants can access course materials by audio-cassettes, e-mail, voice-mail, video cassettes or print mode. These new inventions improve education delivery because they can reach out to a larger population within a short time making the programme cost effective. Students in this programme will get the necessary skills and attitudes for industrial and technological development in line with national goals of education.

More and more governments and individuals are beginning to look at distance learning as the only alternative to meet the massive demand for education. Daniel(1996) say the commonwealth secretariat in 1990 confirmed that 48 million students participated in higher education. This number had more than doubled in 2010. This increase, coupled with constraints on facilities, then distance learning becomes a better option.

In Kenya, one of the objectives of higher education is to provide opportunities for those aspiring citizens who cannot secure places in the existing internal faculties of public universities. This mode of learning will enable them acquire the much needed high level skills, they will learn at their own pace and in a friendly and motivating environment (using technologies). This programme is an avenue to maximize the limited education resources both human and material making education available beyond the lecture halls. This has been done in Kenyan universities through introduction of Module II(parallel) programmes.

III. Distance Education delivery methods in Kenya

Learning in the 21st century is no longer confined to the classroom or lecture hall. A host of communication technologies are applied to distance education as expounded below:

Print Based Distance Education.

Print materials in the form of study lecture units, course notes, practical guides and assignments is the primary delivery strategy. Students review printed materials from tutors, read, do assignments and send this back to the tutors. The tutors in turn correct and then guide the students further. Such is practiced in England, Germany, USA and Japan. Despite this, there are other support components used together with print materials. Many of the larger scale distance education programmes in the Faculty of External Studies in the University of Nairobi use print (paper) based mode of study together with other media to deliver content to students.

Institution-Based mode of study.

This mode of study includes the full-time residential mode where students in this program study with the rest of the regular students or in their own groups. The full-time institution based mode has students who are in employment during their entire period of study. Such students are required to attend residential sessions at the university during the vacation period i.e. April, August and December. This mode was started at Kenyatta University but has now been adopted by other Kenyan universities. Many teachers at both primary and secondary school level have opted for this mode of study. Examinations consist of course work assessment, assessment of practicals contributing 50 percent of the total marks and one final university exam which contributes another 50 marks to enable a student get the final grade.

Mixed mode provision.

Here, there is use of a combination of face to face and distance learning strategies. Most universities in Kenya have adopted this method with students who are taking module II, also called 'parallel' degree courses, diploma and postgraduate diploma in different fields. Learning is via technology but again at specific periods like evening, weekends or holidays, seminars and short on-campus classes are held.

Satellite and web based distance education.

Such is an example of African Virtual University (AVU) model currently being used at Kenyatta and Egerton universities. The main aim of this mode is to bridge the digital divide and knowledge gap between Africa and the rest of the world by increasing access to global educational resources throughout Africa. This is achieved through integration of satellite technology and the internet to allow cost-effective and efficient delivery of education programmes throughout the continent and increased access to global educational resources in Africa. Benefits of AVU include increased enrolment at affordable cost, access to digital library, and provision of improved quality teaching and learning materials.

There is another mode where learning is supplemented by tutors and demonstrationson radio, television, computer and internet. Here the computer is programmed to perform important teaching functions as is done in the USA air force. In Kenya, the Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation (KBC) has a programme named Radio Broadcasting to schools where content in various subjects and classes is broadcast live on radio during school hours.

Group distance mode

In the Group-distance education mode, a number of students enroll for the same course, meet regularly to recapitulate, check and discuss what they have learned after reading the teaching materials provided.

IV. Challenges facing implementation of distance education programmes in Kenya.

i. Scarcity of funds.

Since the government does not have a distance education policy in place, there is no specific allocation of funds to support this programme in the overall national budget. Faculties of distance education in the universities have to generate funds to plan, run, coordinate, supervise and evaluate such programmes. Some rely on donor funding which is hardly enough. In the end some of the much needed infrastructure and equipment is not available and this hinders the smooth running of the programs. High poverty levels and the rural geographical location of some students may deny them access to internet services.

ii. Lack of clear understanding of distance education.

Some key players in distance education like Ministry of Education staff and Senior University management do not understand principles and application of open and distance education. This creates a gap in policy planning and implementation. Many scholars from Kenyan universities do not believe that quality education can be delivered through information technology. This negative attitude towards digital literacy hinders implementation of distance education. The common belief is that education is only valid if there is face to face interaction between students and tutors.

iii. Inadequate resources

Most distance education programmes in Kenya use print as the medium of instruction. Supplementary media like audio, video cassettes, slides and experimental kits which would reinforce learning are not in use due to poor design of course programmes.

Many of the institution lack study guides that would give a broad view with the context of the courses to be studied as well as information about examination schedules, contact programmes or students assignment. Students rely on asking for information from one another. Apart from the college of Adults Distance Education in the University of Nairobi, other universities lack study or

resource centres which can provide facilities for learning for different groups of students. This is an important mode of transmitting content.

Production of high quality distance learning materials for Kenyan programmes appears very expensive. The cost includes design of the curriculum, authorship of content, review and evaluation of the programmes require skilled personnel who should be remunerated well. Such personnel are unable to access current journals and publications, e-libraries because of limited funds available to universities.

iv. Slow and high cost of internet connectivity.

Technology enhanced distance education like Africa Virtual University relies heavily on the internet for delivery of academic courses and digital library. Slow internet connection and low bandwidth in Kenya impedes the effectiveness of AVU courses. Internet services provider (ISP) subscription charges are high. Transmission signals are not available in some areas whichhinders some students from accessing learning materials. Fuel prices are high so the use of generators to supplement electricity is equally expensive. Computing technology resources that can enhance distance education are scarce. Both hardware and software resources are expensive for any university to afford in reasonable quantities and quality. Since technology is dynamic, some universities cannot cope with these changes in terms of cost and relevancy.

v. Lack of skills in Information Communication Technology (ICT) use.

Most faculty members and students lack skills and competencies in ICT use hence AVU's digital library, e-learning platform and other digital products are not fully utilized in distance education. Some have even adopted behavior patterns in traditional education delivery which is not appropriate for distance education. Teacher training is theoretical and does not give practical teaching on use of ICTs. Most people use ICTs for personal communication and entertainment without viewing it as an important tool in education delivery. The lecture method is preferred in content delivery by most tutors hence shunning use of ICTs.

vi. Communication policy.

Due to high international tariffs and lack of circuit capacity, obtaining sufficient international bandwidth for delivery web pages over the internet is still a major problem in Kenya. This problem is further enhanced by the National Communication sector that has monopoly hence ISPs depend on it. This kind of scenario poses a major challenge to proper functioning and delivery of AVU products. Communication regulations in Kenya which do not allow Two-way satellite based internet services may deny AVU capability to deliver content from Africa to other AVU sites globally.

V. Ways of improving distance education in Kenya.

Advances in internet use to make distance education efficient and effective are a fundamental innovation in higher education in Kenya. For technology enhanced distance education to succeed, the Kenyan government, universities, industries, and non-governmental organizations all have a role to play as stakeholders.

There is need to prepare a web-based database and a back-up base in print format. Have adequate information on institution offering distance education, available opportunities and different modes of delivery. Provide information of course material and format. The knowledge base can then be linked to other existing relevant databases in the world.

Lower of cost of distance learning technologies for all students to afford. For example, the cost of internet should be subsidized by well-wishers, donors and service providers in learning institutions. Low cost computers, easily accessible to students would also help in smooth running of distance education.

Improved training in ICT use is very necessary for tutors. It should be mandatory, and with regular refresher courses to improve their skills as newer technologies come. The importance of ICTs should be stressed to create a positive attitude using these technologies in teaching. Graduates of distance learning programmes should also be good role models while working just like those students who went through the conventional system of education.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has discussed at length the concept of distance education with reference to the Kenyan context. Since modern technologies through advanced internet-based courses can also be used to meet learning objectives this study recommends its adoption, Reasons advanced for use of distance education in this discussion are worthy being adopted. Despite the challenges faced, distance education is the way to go in order to meet global educational needs.

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