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The Challenges of Open and Distance Learning in Kenya: The Case of Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

- The globalization of distance learning provides many opportunities and new sources of teaching and learning to both students and educators in institutions of higher learning. Open and distance programs started in 2000 in most Kenyan universities. This combined with internet services, ICT and mobile telephony, boosted chances for teaching new courses. However, the universities in Kenya are yet to embrace this new technology and boost funding to open and distance learning. The potential of ODL is yet to be fully exploited to solve various academic problems and promote admissions of more students in the universities. In East Africa, only Rwanda seems to have rose to the occasion

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- Indeed at Moi University where we teach, there is adequate preparation, we need to come up with profound changes in terms of infrastructure, policy and organizational structure. There is need for us to become a dual mode university similar to University of South Africa (UNISA). No doubt, open learning will boost enrolment levels, provide the much needed interconnectivity among universities among other things. This paper examines the challenges and opportunities in terms of costs, ignorance, poverty, conservativism in our universities and lack of clear government policy at university, tertiary, secondary and even primary school.

Introduction

- Kenyan education policy is based on a number of legislations including the constitution of Kenya (1961), Education Act (1968), Children Act (2001) and sessional paper no. 11 of 2005 on policy framework for education and training, among others, all of which commit the government to the provisions of at least 12 years of compulsory, free and continuous schooling to the Kenyan children (Government of Kenya, 2008). So far, however, no specific act or directive deals with Distance learning per se.

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- Our policy on DE are far behind South Africa and even post-conflict Rwanda who have prepared very proactive policy documents to increase access via open and distance learning. This due to various structural challenges that this paper attempts to discuss

- The ODL is defined as an education programme in which the learners are separated from the instructional phase or a teacher either is space or in time, for a significant portion of their learning, learning is accredited by an institution or agency, they use print, video and audio cassettes or is computer based.

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- Also there is teacher-learner interaction and possibility of face to face meetings for consultations (Commonwealth of Learning, 2000). The basic principles of distance education include, flexibility in increasing access to and equity in education, a variety of ways are used by the provider to open access to credible learning opportunities to a diverse range of learners by preparing learner friendly modules or teaching learning materials. ODL methods encourage learning as a resource in itself; it also fosters autonomous learning, placing the responsibility on the learner rather than the teacher hence enhancing the spirit of enquiry.

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In Kenya we have a PSSP or privately sponsored and self sponsored programmes-programmes for those who are qualified to join the university but are not join due space problems. Such students could benefit from long distance education but are currently admitted on the basis of self sponsorship and payment of tuition fees. There is also the school based programmes to offer degree and diploma courses for school teachers teaching in primary schools, who attend college only when schools are closed in the months of April, August and December.

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DE can be explained through various theoretical approaches such as Jean Piaget's constructivist theory, which emphasizes on the construction of knowledge by individuals hence involving learners in learning process. Another concept is Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which puts more emphasis on construction of knowledge in collaboration with others as stressed in group activities, for example in a class room situation, thus exposing learners to multiple viewpoints.

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Moi University there is a department of ODL headed by Dr Agalo, but it remains under funded and ineffective. The modules are yet to be written by lecturers who are not themselves trained in module writing. We are yet to agree on the format and type of modules. This requires funding and training hence the need to set aside funding for the same. The University of Nairobi, which began long distance learning in 1990's is the only public university able to establish a functioning ODL.

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In the case of Moi University, apart from the school of information sciences, the rest of the university does not benefit from interconnectivity of the computers, though there are good efforts to do that by the end of this year. We are still at level one where we at the school of arts and social sciences are preparing text based modules similar to the notes we use in the classroom but without any training. This lack of uniformity in the design of learning materials remains a major handicap to the whole process.

Challenges and Opportunities

The objectives of University education in Kenya remains: expansion of university education and training, promotion of private sector investment in university education, ensuring quality assurance mechanisms and provision of scholarships based on the needs of the economy, among others. Yet with no policy of ODL access can not increased as it is hinged on space availability on the campuses hence the need to institute ODL in our programmes.

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Realities in our universities indicate a higher market. They overestimate the market potential and under estimate the educational and logistical challenges. At issue is the insensitivity or slowness in responding to customers' expectation and essence of not obtaining accreditation. Our universities do not meet the quality expectations of learners, likewise do provide incentives for continuous private sector involvement in the partnership.

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A further problem is the question of what to develop: not only what must be developed, but in what format and in how much detail in order to provide for a unit of learning (both usable and re-usable) that can be delivered through computer facility. The other issue is that of disaggregation of existing course materials and sharing learning artefacts for re-us. The challenges faced by students with different disabilities may seem that designing accessible online courses is an insurmountable task or that the only solutions are to design plain and unattractive WebPages and avoid state of the art technologies for synchronous communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that DE is a programme in which the learner and educator do not meet face to face but exchange ideas through prepared texts. In Kenya most public universities do not have active ODL programmes due to finance problems, lack of training for the lecturers and poor policies. The solution is to effect and implement DE to increase access to e-learning and increase opportunities to the ambitious learners and professionals ready to upgrade and diversify their skills.