

Open and Distance Education as a Strategy for Improving Higher Education in the 21st Century in Kenya-a Case of the University of Nairobi

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Abstract

This article is grounded on basic argument that higher education is a necessity for all citizens and not a right for a privileged few. The authors advocate for the adoption of Open and Distance Education (ODE) in all the higher learning institutions in order to ensure access to higher education by all. Studies done on ODE reveal that there is no significant difference between the performance of students who go through ODE and their counterparts in the traditional classroom. Data for the study was collected through desk review. Discussion of empirical studies on ODE is done with a view to demystify the concept of ODE as a viable strategy to improve and develop higher education in Kenya using the case of the University of Nairobi.

Key words: Distance education, Open and Distance Learning, Learner support Systems

1. Introduction

The value of higher education lies in its capacity to improve the quality of life through socio-economic, political and technological development of the society. This is realized through development of knowledge, intellectual inquiry and research, acquisition of skills and competencies, inculcating appropriate value systems and desire for lifelong learning (Republic of Kenya, 2006). In Kenya, only 2% of Kenyans have university education (Republic of Kenya, 2010 p23). This is in direct contrast to some educational economists who have observed that at least 12-15% of a nation's workforce must have tertiary education if it is going to compete in the new global economy (Teferra & Altbach, 2003 p74).

A critical issue facing the Kenya is how to increase access to higher education to cater for the increasing number of students completing secondary schooling, diploma holders and others who desire university education (Republic of Kenya, 2006). For instance in 2010/2011 academic year, students enrolled in both public and private universities increased from 177,735 in 2009/2010 to 180,978 (MoEST statistics unit, 2011). Some of these students are adults who cannot afford to enroll on a full-time basis because of work, family responsibilities, and business commitment. They have children to feed, clothe and send to school, mortgages and insurance premiums to pay, and businesses to run (Magagula and Ngwenya, 2004, p3). The Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) candidates who attain the minimum university entry requirements miss admission in public universities because admission is tied on the bed capacity and resources allocated to each university by the government (UON, 2008 p 9). For instance, in 2009/2010 academic year, a total of 81,048 candidates scored C+ and above. But because of bed capacity, only 24,221 secured admission by joint admission board meaning that 57,000 were locked out. In 2010, the number of candidates who scored C+ and above in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education increased to 97,134 students, an increase of over 16,000 students. (Muindi, 2011).

Due to the above, higher education in Kenya has experienced a shift from conventional classroom teaching to distance education, from the margins to the mainstream of higher education policy and practice in many countries. However many institutions of higher learning have been down playing the role of ODE on the assumption that it would undermine traditional education, limit student interaction with peers and lecturers and eradicate the platform for which a deliberate academic discourse takes place (Mathews, 1999). Despite this, the University of Nairobi (UoN) has embraced the strategy and has joined other leading universities that offer ODE courses such as the Open University of Tanzania, University of South Africa (UNISA), Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), and United Kingdom Open University among others. 'Distance learning or distance education, is not a future possibility for which higher education must prepare, it is a current reality creating opportunities and challenges for educational institutions; a reality offering students expanded choices in where, when, how and from whom they learn; a reality making education accessible to even large numbers of persons' (UNESCO, 2007, p.16).

2. The Concept of Open and Distance Learning

From time immemorial, teacher-lecturing/ student-listening was the primary mode of traditional academic education. It was 'assumed' that the teacher and the taught must be gathered together in one place- frequently in

a special building dedicated to learning. This, after all, is the basis on which schools and colleges have been built, and why a high proportion of their floor areas consist of spaces in which face to face teaching takes place (Reddy, 1998, p.10). One student described the stultifying pedagogy at most institutions of higher learning this way:

“I find sitting in a lecture hall listening to someone essentially summarize the main points of a textbook to be not only boring but a waste of my time. Furthermore, examinations that is nothing more than a memorization exercise do not accurately reflect or encourage the understanding of key concepts, the development of critical thinking, or cognitive synthesis of new ideas or theories developed as a result studying the content. Worst of all, I have found this type of educational experience to sometime dampen interest in the subject rather than stimulate the student to explore the subject further” (Harry, 1999).

This case depicts a need to move from the traditional mode of instruction to a more student centered mode which recognizes students as problem solvers and not knowledge consumers (UNESCO, 2007). Distance education is thus changing the physical face (i.e., massive buildings) of academic establishments. Students can now learn from the comfort of their homes or offices with no need to commute to campuses. Cutting-edge data are easily accessible on compact discs (CDs), portable personal computers (PCs), and have taken the place of instantly obsolete books. Online classrooms and libraries are replacing traditional campus facilities. Rather than requiring students to travel to a specific physical classroom or library, the Internet has facilitated the delivery of (nearly) unlimited learning resources to students.

3. Distance Education in Kenya: Special reference to the University of Nairobi

The first Education Commission in Kenya, the Ominde Commission of 1964, recommended that the only way to open for the newly independent Kenya to overcome her huge manpower shortfall especially in education was to involve herself in correspondence education. In 1967, USAID together with the University of Minnesota set up a Correspondence Course Unit (CCU) at the University of Nairobi's (UON) Institute of Adult Studies (IAS). This course was to upgrade P3 teachers to P2 grade by giving them a two year secondary education (Kenya Junior Secondary Examination). This could only be done through correspondence as the teachers were required in their schools and in any case majority were well beyond the age where they could fit in conventional secondary schools (Mboroki, 2007).

In 1969, the Ministry of Education extended distance education to the in-service training of primary school teachers to raise the Unqualified Teachers (UQTs) to P3 status. This was to last three years unlike the ordinary P3 which took 2 years. The face to face sessions were conducted in TTCs and selected secondary schools in Kenya. This was done in collaboration with the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) and the CCU. This initiative produced 10,000 P3 teachers by 1972 (World Bank, 1975 as quoted by Mboroki, 2007 p66). The next on line was to offer degrees by distance. The government felt that the shortage of manpower at the graduate level could also be addressed though in-servicing. A feasibility study conducted in January – February 1976 by a team of the United Kingdom Open University led by Lindsay Young and a report of the Task Force set up by the Deans Committee in January 1983 recommended the establishment of external degrees by the UON under the management of the IAS which had managed the correspondence courses successfully.

The reasons given for the need to start the degree program were that the University could offer courses to a wider clientele without having to add any new structures. Secondly, the country had only one university at the time for a population of nearly 14 million and the government ‘could not afford to build, equip and staff immediately a second or third university at the present standards and costs’ (Kinyanjui, 1977). In September 1985, the university senate approved the establishment of External Degree Program (EDP) and the first batch of 592 adult students was admitted for a Bachelor of Education degree program in 1986/1987 academic year and this program has been running successfully to date. The University has expanded EDPs to other disciplines. Currently the University of Nairobi offers the following nine courses by distance: Certificate and Diploma in Adult and Community Development, Diploma in Commonwealth Youth Program, Bachelor of Education (Arts), Bachelor of Education (Science), Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Commerce and Master of Distance Education. These programs have over 10,000 students. The distance learning programs at the University of Nairobi aims at: providing learning opportunities for those aspiring but cannot secure places in the existing internal faculties of the public universities ,providing an opportunity for adults to learn at their own pace, providing an opportunity to maximize the use of the limited educational resources both human and material by making University education available beyond the lecture halls.

4. The Practice of Quality Assurance System at the University of Nairobi

Open and distance learning (ODL) has evolved rapidly, resulting in concerns about the quality of its course provisions. As a result of consumers' increasing demands for high-quality education, quality assurance (QA) has become a major concern of educational leaders, policy makers, and teachers, and has become a fundamental aspect of ODL planning and management (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007). QA in higher education is a set of

management and assessment procedures designed to compare performance with objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements (Harman, 2000). It is a systematic and continual internal process combined with external evaluation in the attempt to ensure that expected levels of quality are reached and stakeholders' confidence maintained. The following mechanisms have been put in place.

Admission of Students

In promoting the quality of distance learners (substance), the University practices an equal opportunity when it comes to student's intake, new applicants have to meet the minimum entry requirements as the fulltime students and those who have not met the minimum requirements could compensate it by bridging professionally by first enrolling in a Certificate course, then diploma, degree and finally post graduate.

Curriculum Development

The curriculums are designed by panel of experts in one particular discipline. This is to ensure the curriculums fulfill the need of the industries, learners, government, regulators and other stakeholders. The course writers are taken through a rigorous training on how to write distance study materials because the material is supposed to communicate to the learner and are open to scrutiny by peers and anyone else(Smith and Kelly, 1986) .

Support Services

A study by Mills and Tart (1981) as quoted by Odumbe (1984) found that students lack background knowledge of the course, unaware of demands of time and sustained efforts required, and lack of developed study skills. They therefore need reassurance and guidance and feedback in academic work. The following are the forms of student support services at the University of Nairobi:

Residential sessions- students converge at the campus for face to face tutorials and examinations. These serve the purpose of orientation, learning resources, instructional and remedial tuition. Learners get an opportunity of meeting fellow learners, discuss issues and also establish personal contacts.

Study centers- Extra Mural Centers outside the UoN have been set up to coordinate the support services especially the supply of learning materials, advising learners in academic matters, registration of new students, distribution of CATs and take away assignments and general counseling. They also act as the link between the student and the university.

Regional visits- face to face meetings are held twice in a semester at the study centers. During these meetings, members of academia of the university use the opportunity to encourage the students, give them tips on the best ways of studying as distance learners and general counseling. They also provide opportunities for fellow students to meet and share their experiences, discuss their study areas and socialize.

Learner friendly study modules- Print modules/study units developed by course writers are distributed to all the distance learners. These modules are designed in lecture form and each lecture has the specific objectives which are specific, measurable and attainable, content, leaning activities and references for further reading. The module is designed in a way that it provides two-way communication through the use of instructional motivational devises for instance learner oriented objectives, in-text or reflective questions and take note symbols

Online Course Registration- Using the Students Management Information System (SMIS), the student is able to register for courses, keep track of his/her fee payments and also get information regarding the course, and examination results.

Continuous Assessment and Final Examination- The assessment and examination are strictly based on the university requirements in ensuring quality. These examinations are set by a panel teaching a particular unit, internally and externally moderated before being administered to the students.

Handling Students' Complaint- One of the characteristics of adult learners is they come back to school with very high expectation. Therefore, anything they feel not up to their expectation will be voiced out in through the class representatives. The students are also free to call the Chairman of their department or the Dean in case they have an issue that needs their attention. These forums have become the official channels for the students to complaint and for the management to receive feedback from the students besides suggestion box, email and letters.

ISO Certified (ISO 9001-2008) certification- all departments follow the procedures as stipulated in the Quality Management System Documents-UoN Kenya ISO Version 2 of 2009, meaning that managing quality of distance programs is well guarded by a performance management systems that monitors the management of the inputs, processes and products of these programs.

5. The No Significant Difference

Distance Education is an effectively planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and provide the satisfaction of learning. Research comparing distance education to traditional face-to-face instruction indicates that teaching and studying at a distance can be as effective as traditional instruction, when the method and

technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, there is timely teacher-to- student feedback and there is student-to-student interaction (Tilwani and Jain, 2005).

According to the 248 studies that Russell (2000) compiled, there is no significant difference between distance learning and traditional classroom learning. In other words, distance learning (can be) considered as effective as face-to-face learning, (Dean, et al., 2001 as quoted by Simonson, 2003). Instruction delivered to distant learners is effective and that learning outcomes can be successfully attained when offered to students at a distance (Hanson, et al., 1997). In 1983, Clark stated that the media used to deliver instruction had no significant impact on the quality of learning. He further stated that: 'the best current evidence is that media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in nutrition...only the content of the vehicle can influence achievement'(Clark, 1994).

Pascallera and Collins (2003) conducted a randomized instructional experiment between a group of 46 students in a Fire Fighting Tactics and Strategy course learning on campus and learning at a distance at a Community College in IOWA. In one format students received face to face instruction in a traditional classroom on-campus while the rest received the same course instruction by two way Interactive Television on the IOWA Communication Network (ICN). The findings of the study were post-secondary students can master course facts and concepts as well when they receive instruction at a distance as they can when they receive the same instruction on-campus in a traditional face to face.

Unterberg (2003) carried out a study whose purpose was to compare the learning outcomes of students in a specific course, given different learning environments. The two learning environments were the in-classroom environment, where students met in a classroom with the instructor present, and the computer-mediated distance environment, where students worked independently, receiving information and communicating with the instructor via e-mail. Twenty-nine students participated in the traditional classroom environment, and 27 students participated in the distance education environment. All participants were undergraduate students in health science degree programs. The same instructor, using the same textbook and course materials, taught students in both groups. Students' learning under both conditions were assessed using the same methods and criteria. The percentages of above-average (A or B), average (C), and below-average (D or F) grades were determined for both in-class and distance groups. The relationships among education outcome and learning environment were determined by comparing the percentages of above-average grades in the two learning environments. The above-average scores were evenly distributed among the two groups, 47% of the distance group and 43% of the in-class group. The researcher concluded that the classroom or the distance environment did not influence learning outcome.

McCaan (2006) carried out a research which was focused on the learning environment and student success. She used 42 Agricultural Extension workers as the sample. Three different types of learning environments were exposed to the learners: traditional face to face instruction, distance learning with minimal face to face sessions, and purely interactive multimedia-rich online instruction. A ten-question post-test were used to gather data for this study. A 4 x 3 factorial ANOVA was used to test the data at 0.10 level of significance (McCaan, 2006: 1). Results showed that there was no significant difference between the environment and the student success. Thus she concluded that equivalent learning activities could be equally effective for distance, online and traditional classroom learners.

LaPorte (2008) investigated the differences between the academic performance and satisfaction levels of distance education students' videoconferencing atmosphere, as opposed to that in a more traditional on-campus course. The study population included on campus students and students at a distance, who were enrolled in an engineering course. Results showed that there was no significant difference in the performance outcomes between the two groups. Females were found to enroll in distance education classes at a higher rate than males, and tended to score higher grades than their male counterparts as well. All distance learners, however, reported that they felt that they had learned just as much as those in the on-campus portion of the course. (Laporte, 2008: 24).

The findings of these researches imply that distance learning can be just as effective as the more traditional face-to-face instruction and that the educational outcome is not dependent on the learning environment. Students in distance education settings perform as well or better on assignments, class activities, and exams when compared to campus-based students (Delors, 2000). Nevertheless, students must maintain persistence and a clear focus to succeed in a distance learning situation. Self-direction, a passion for learning, and strong individual responsibility are important influences on achievement.

6. Conclusion

Distance education is not a panacea for the difficulties and barriers encountered in traditional educational settings, but it does provide the potential for greater service to more individuals seeking learning opportunities. The key to successful distance education is in the design, development and delivery of instruction. Distance

education courses should be carefully designed and developed before instruction begins, adequate support systems must be in place to provide the distant learner with access to resources and services, interaction between the instructor and students and among students must be possible and encouraged, and lastly assessment should be designed to relate to the specific learning outcomes of the instructional experiences. Access to educational opportunities for all is a major challenge facing many countries. Distance education, no doubt, should be one of the means to increase and broaden access to education.

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