

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

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Abstract

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. 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 is 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 in space or in time, for a significant portion of their learning. In addition, learning is accredited by an institution or agency, they use print, video and audio cassettes or is computer based. 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 and there is also use of various strategies of delivery such as guided self-study and a variety of media. 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. In addition there is proper relevant course design good for the learner, which makes the process of learning a lifelong process. As result, learning becomes an ongoing, permanent practice relevant to the ever-changing needs of the labour market and national economies. It is a learner centered education system that increases access to knowledge and information. It provides learning opportunities to the adult working and ambitious ones especially at the higher levels of learning such as diploma, degree and postgraduate levels.

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. Yet such courses could be handled best under ODL. This can go in line with the reforms in the Ministry of Education. Moi University has begun Masters in Public Administration (MPA) programmes for the senior civil servants like Permanent secretaries in the various ministries and District officers on line. The MPA course have been running as evening classes but by making it an ODL

course we hope to bring more students on course and train more staff for the government under our new constitution. Those enrolled attend classes in the evenings after office hours for the stipulated maximum number of hours before sitting for the requisite exams and then writes a project paper before graduating in two years. This has increased access for several senior government officers, for example, in the 2009/2010 academic year at Moi University, twenty District Officers (DO) and District Commissioners graduated with MPA degrees in the department of History, Political Science and Public Administration, then under the leadership of the veteran scholar, Prof. JJ Okumu. This programme is based on teacher learner interaction and has more learner autonomy in doing research and writing of the project paper.

The rationale of open learning is based on the fact that all learning cannot take place in the classroom. There are times when learners will be reading, thinking, using or talking about the learning outside the class room (Jensen, 2001). Jensen states that, DE is learning which takes place while the teacher and the learner are separated time, distance or both. Parallel or self-sponsored students in public universities have also benefited from government sponsorship through Higher Education Loans Board (HELB), which gives loans to students to support their tuition and accommodation.

ODEL 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.

A significant aspect in DE is preparing modules for self-instruction such as multi-media materials and documents, and lack of learner friendly pre-prepared modules like the ones used in the Republic of Rwanda's Kigali Institute of Education. While there we were trained for several months on module preparation, before we finally participated in writing a module for training secondary school teacher after 1994 genocide. 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 1990s is the only public university able to establish a functioning ODL.

COL (2001) recognizes four main stages of technical evolution towards distance learning education. The first generation is text-based correspondence courses, with similar notes used in the classroom. The second level is less of print based, self-instructional materials and the third level is self-instructional print integrated with media (audio and video). The last stage is the use of interactive ICTs to support course delivery and learning. 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. Moore (1993) observes that there is a degree of distance learning in all forms of education process. He states, 'the transaction that we DE occur between teachers and learners in an environment having the special characteristic of separation of teachers from learners. With separation there is psychological and communication space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner (but) in any educational programme there is some transactional distance' (Moore 1993). He points out that transactional distance between educators and learners is determined by the interrelated of there variables, ie, instructional dialogue, in which there is interaction between learner and educator. Then there is the programme structure which is the extent to which a programme can

accommodate or respond to individuals needs hence the need to have a multidisciplinary approach in preparing learning modules to cater for the needs of learner-educator dialogue. And finally, learner autonomy, which is the extent to which it is the learner rather than the educator who determines the goals, the learning experiences and evaluation decisions of the learning programmes. Thus according to Moore, the distance between the learner and educators depends on the educational philosophy of a programme and how this is manifested in the teaching strategies employed. He maintains that the difference between DE and face to face learning are blurred by increased use of resource based learning and distance education strategies. Our public universities in Kenya have yet have the basic infrastructure that would allow increased use of DE as a learning-teaching programme.

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 be increased as it is hinged on space availability on the campuses hence the need to institute ODL in our programmes. The final objective of the Ministry is 'establishment of an open university and promotion of open distance and e-learning to increase opportunities for university education' (Government of Kenya, 2008). But this noble of ODL has to be effected due to problems of access to ICT, electricity, training of staff on e-learning and especially module writing. These challenges remain hard to tackle due to lack of finance and expertise.

In an era of globalization and competition for strategic gains and resources, even the longest and established and most successful institutions must safeguard their positions through continuous improvement. The distance education providers and advocates of information communication Technology (ICT) integration need to sell the story of their success.

Realities in our universities indicate a higher market. They overestimate the market potential and underestimate the educational and logistical challenges. Moreover, they ignore the realities of ICT infrastructure, access and costs, overestimate learner readiness for e-learning. There is embarkment on large scale online learning programmes and projects without initial try outs. At issue is the insensitivity or slowness in responding to customers' expectation and essence of not obtaining accreditation. Equally perplexing in most of our universities is the fact that they do not meet the quality expectations of learners, particularly in regard to learner support, likewise do provide incentives for continuous private sector involvement in the partnership.

With regard to integrated e-learning (IEL), one has to develop digital learning artefacts such as units (courses or programmes) and learning objects. A major problem for organizations when introducing e-learning is the question of how to deal with this development process of digital learning artefacts. The development process is complex and expensive. Possibly, the most challenging point is that in e-learning the expected quality of the units of learning cannot be easily be provided by the one person who is traditionally responsible for this, the teacher.

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. In most institutes, there is a large quantity of existing materials that have not been prepared for and are not at all suitable for e-learning. Not only can be re-used but how should we deal with these materials? From an economic point of view, it is not appropriate to replace everything with the attributes of e-learning. Moreover, there is a problem of finding and sharing learning artefacts for re-use. We start from the assumption that there is a large, shared, distributed repository where users can search for learning artefacts,

obtain them, adapt them store new ones and where legal economic principals are supported in a workable manner. Such are pository functions in the context of what is called a 'learning object economy'. The principles for such an economy to succeed have not yet been established.

Campbell (2003) identifies the following issues in e-learning object economy: the granularity, interoperability, resource resumption and discovery, incentive, quality control and peer review, intellectual property rights and digital rights management, pedagogical frameworks and cultural barriers. Some sharing initiatives have already been put into practice for instance Ariadne (forte et al, 1997).

Quber Kramer, (2000) and Merlot argue that overall evaluation data relating to the success and failure factors of the approaches not yet available. Assessment in e-learning (EL) stills has many problems mostly because of the repositioning of the function of assessment in modern education. Moreover, new problems are also occurring in e-learning environments specifically the problem of learner positioning in learning networks, this raises the following questions: what is the current state of knowledge of the learner relative to the learning opportunities provided? The answer is needed to allow for differentiated delivery.

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. Some faculty faced with these access barriers may try to discourage students with disabilities from participating in their courses or create independency learning sessions to accommodate them. They may also decide to wait to make necessary design adjustments until a student with a disability who has already registered further course forces that to examine their materials and activities in light of that student's or her particular needs. More often though, faculty is simply unaware of the solutions available to increase accessibility.

Experience of using distance education methods for narrower ends is nearly discouraging. Having reviewed agricultural and nutrition programmes that used communication technology Harnik concluded bluntly that, 'most efforts to use communication technology for development do not do what they are meant to' (1988:ix). He examines three possible explanations: (i) information is no solution for lack of resources: (ii) audiences for information programmes are unresponsive everywhere such information might help and (iii) information programmes have not worked because they have not been done appropriately.

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.

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