

Challenges Facing Implementation of Distance Education in Kenya

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Abstract

In the world we are living in today, teaching and learning in the class room setting is being complemented by virtual and distance modes. This has been precipitated by the ease of access to information through the use of the internet and web technology. The development of distance education in Kenya has evolved over a period with some institutions of higher learning having programmes in distance education mode. Each institution has done this on its own volition without any guidelines from the governing authority. However, the rate of literacy and access to higher education in Kenya remains a challenge. Efforts to use distance education successfully in Kenya are still hindered by numerous problems despite efforts that have been taken to solve them. There seems to be some inertia by institutions to change this mode of education. This paper reviews issues and challenges on provision of distance education in Kenya through use of secondary data from previously published works. An analysis of the major issues facing distance education in Kenya is made. It is noted that several challenges influence implementation of distance education in Kenya. Factors responsible for this situation are identified as limitations of network infrastructure, ineffective policy framework and social and financial among others. The use of information and communications technology for education in the form of distance education holds promise and this paper recommends that teacher education embrace lifelong learning and follow the UNESCO-NIR guide for upgrade and preparation for distance facilitation. It also recognizes that there is need for consideration of socio-economic factors and improvement of network connectivity to enhance in improved literacy rate and access to higher education through distance learning in Kenya.

Keywords: Challenges, distance education, open learning, virtual university

Introduction

All students, regardless of their educational level, deserve nothing less than a quality education and training that would provide them with opportunities for lifelong learning in the world of work and meaningful participation in society as productive citizens. Distance Education is one of the models used for delivering teaching and learning in many parts of the world and to provide study opportunities for those who cannot or do not wish to participate in conventional classroom teachings (Holmberg, 1995). In its earliest form, distance education meant study by correspondence, but as time went on new technologies were developed whereby distance education is delivered through media such as; audiotape, videotape, radio, television broadcasting, and satellite transmission (Moodley,

2002). Today, distance education is delivered through computers, the Internet and the World Wide Web. However, its students are faced with numerous and complex demands when engaging in distance education instruction delivery (Garner & Bol, 2011). Kenyan institutions that attempt to use distance education are faced by various challenges in its implementation.

Concept of Distance Education

According to Edutech (2015), distance education or distance learning is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology and educational schemes that are involved in delivering education to students who are at a far geographical distance from their institution. Instead, teachers and students may communicate asynchronously by exchanging printed or electronic media, or synchronously by communicating in real time.

There are two types of distance learning based on California Distance Learning Project (CDLP, 2011) there are two distance education delivery system categories:

Firstly, asynchronous learning (student centered online teaching method) does not require all the students and instructors to participate at the same time. Furthermore, students do not need to be gathered together in the same location at the same time. Rather, they may choose their own instructional period and interact with the learning materials and instructor according to their schedules. This way of instruction is thought to be more flexible than the synchronous instruction; however, it requires time limits to focus and participate in the learning process. Secondly, asynchronous delivery includes; e-mail, audiocassette, videotaped, correspondence and WWW- based courses. Second is synchronous communication which requires that all students and instructors participate in the learning process. The advantage of this category is that it is done as it happens in real time. Examples of synchronous delivery include: tele-courses; teleconferencing and web conferencing; and internet chat among others.

Distance Education in Kenya

Distance education in Kenya has evolved because of various government policies for about forty years (1965-2000). For instance, Ominde report (1965), Gachathi report (1976), Mackay report (1981), Kamunge report (1988) and Koech (2000) report included the use of distance education in their recommendations. Distance education was mainly conducted through adult education programmes but now the systems are used by institutions of higher learning to deliver their academic programmes. According to Anyona (2009), some of the major providers include the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD); University of Nairobi; the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE); Kenyatta University; African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF); Ministry of Health and several vocational and training institutions. There are other institutions hosted in this country that provide and manage distance learning like the African Virtual University (AVU). Adult literacy teachers, primary school, secondary, and special education teachers have felt the benefit of distance education in Kenya.

Challenges and Issues in Distance Education in Kenya

Efforts to use distance education successfully in Sub-Saharan African countries, which includes Kenya, are still hampered by numerous problems despite efforts that have been taken to solve them (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, [UNECA], 2000). Across the world, distance education is transforming the way people teach and learn. Distance learning relieves the government of the responsibility of investing in new physical infrastructure and provides opportunities for continued learning. This transformation has been witnessed to be beneficial in developed countries as opposed to developing ones. This has created disparity in the digital divide segment. As a country if the trend continues, it will be marginalised in the new knowledge based economy. There are a number of resources and technological constraints that hinder distance learning. The main challenges in distance education are in its implementation and sustenance. The following are some of the challenges facing successful implementation of distance education in Kenya:

Infrastructure, Facilities and Network Access. There is need to avail infrastructure that is required for efficient delivery of distance education and for institutions of higher learning to maintain the existing infrastructure to prevent deterioration. This is a common problem in majority of Kenya public institutions of higher learning. Internet and communication infrastructure outside of major cities remain inadequate. Connectivity beyond major cities poses a potential problem in creating a national distance education strategy. As of now, internet connection and speed vary from one region to another. Students located in the northern part of the country are not connected through the internet and therefore face obstacles in accessing network.

Policy Issues Related to Distance Education. The absence of specific distance education policies in Kenya is an obstacle to the development of distance education. Currently, institutions of higher learning solely develop their own policies making them to be varied across all institutions in the country. Barasa (2010) submits that:

most distance education universities are trapped in residential national education policy environments. The country's regulatory agencies prescribe the minimum entry academic qualifications that learners must possess in order to be admitted into degree programmes (In Kenya one has to obtain a C+ grade in secondary Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations). This denies the opportunity of 'openness' on admission and this goes against the philosophy on which distance learning (DL) is grounded.

For dual mode institutions of higher learning, institutional policies for staff recruitment, training and promotion are often modeled on and similar to those in residential face-to-face institutions of higher learning. The result is that emphasis is on research with little evidence for effective teaching and learner support as criteria for promotion

(Barasa, 2010).

The lack of national policy has resulted in reduced efficacy of distance education. There is need for the country through the education ministry to develop national policy which should provide framework for development of distance education in Kenya.

Financial Constraints. This is one of the major obstacles in setting and maintaining distance education programmes as huge capital investment is needed. For instance, some institution of higher learning in Kenya cannot be able to meet the costs of setting up distance education infrastructure. Moreover, there is no specific budgetary allocation to DL programmes by the Ministry of Education and most of the open and distance-learning programmes have been launched as means of generating income to public institutions of higher learning hit by declining budgetary allocations.

Not All Stakeholders are willing to Support Distance Education. In every institution one or more stakeholders argue against distance education, thus unwilling to replace it with the traditional classroom courses. This is unfortunate because for distance education to be a successful method of delivering education, all stakeholders including faculty (school), staff, students and administrators should accept it as a practical and effective instructional method (Srinivasan, 2011). Furthermore, Doug (2002) argues that the quality of instruction delivered to distance learners should not depend on the attitude of the administration and instructors. But, many times it seems that the administration believes that the technology can improve quality of distance education class forgetting that technology on it's own cannot teach students effectively the way teachers would do (Fetherston, 2001). Moreover, if the administration and instructors lack true commitment in the distance education program it is likely to have a negative influence on the entire distance learning experience (Doug, 2002).

Distance Education Requires Changes in Classroom Teaching. Generally, staff members tend to initially try to use their residential classroom methods to teach at a distance which may then result in frustration when attempts are unsuccessful. Distance education, and Web-based instruction in particular, has changed a number of aspects of teaching, including course content, teaching roles and methods, assessment strategies, interaction and communication. This is so because teaching online requires use of different skills and pedagogies from those needed in the traditional, face-to-face environment (Fetherston, 2001). This then becomes a problem because so many aspects of instruction have to be changed when for example a faculty move from the traditional classroom to the distance education environment.

Distance Education Requires Innovation in Student Support Services. Accrediting agencies are required to create guidelines for the development of the institutional support systems for the distance education to enable students' access without physically going to campus. Some of the services students need to access includes library services, financial aid, registration and advising. Although many institutions have made effort in implementing these services, other institutions

have been unable to afford the changes necessary to meet accreditation requirements and they struggle with how to provide what distance learners require. For example, distance learners who might need or desire academic or technical support will get frustrated if these services are not provided. To support them, the distance learning instructor will be required to provide multiple methods of contact, including his/her phone number, Skype user name and/or email address, along with general availability and response times (Thomas, 2001). She however argues that these support structures might not be of any use to students if they are new to distance learning.

Faculty Must Gain Technological Expertise. In Kenya, there are inadequate professionals trained in implementation of distance education. The effective use of distance learning technologies demands that educators (teaching faculty) to be properly trained in using distance education as a delivery mode. Up to now, it has been established that few university lecturers are aware with teaching in online environmental surroundings. The lack of competent lecturers is a significant challenge towards the development of DE in various tertiary learning institutions in Kenya.

The technology required for use in distance learning class must be readily available and fully functional (Thomas, 2001). Thomas argues that students must have or acquire a certain level of competency with the technology, including hardware, software, and all related accessories, in order to be successful in the course. This is because unavailable or unstable technology can become a barrier for students in distance learning. However, the technology that is hard to learn or use may frustrate the students. Role of staff members in distance education requires some specialized skills and strategies. DE tutors need to plan, organize and regularly communicate with students in new methods. Instructors need to be accessible to students and work in teams when appropriate. Distance teaching staff members must be experts in maintaining communication, because there is increased demand for student interaction in distance learning (Anyona, 2009).

Distance Education May Change Institutional Culture. Distance education may change the lives of faculty members, and therefore, administrators should understand the impact that is associated with technological advances on the culture of their institutions. DL includes more than just transmission of information related to cultural and social paradigms among those who participate in this programme. Any design of a distance-learning curriculum needs to be sensitive to cross-national cultural experiences. Bower and Hardy (2004) argue that if there are new procedures and policies to be developed, faculty, staff, and students must be involved in adapting to the new changes. Furthermore, it is important that institution leaders provide support for distance education programs, because it is impossible to enact change without their support (Galusha, 1998). The institution leaders can help both faculty and staff to become comfortable with distance courses and services by providing them with professional development opportunities that address the changes in technology as well as the changes in their roles.

Interactivity. This is another problem that faces distance-learning students due to lack of face-to-face interactions between student, teacher and other classmates (Thomas, 2001). This then might become problematic for those students new to the distance learning environment. Additionally, Thomas, (2001) argues that an effective distance- learning class will incorporate interactive tools, such as discussion boards, wikis and blogs and synchronous audio or video components. She further states that group or paired projects can also be used to foster a sense of interaction and collaboration. Furthermore, Galusha, (1998) believes that lack of meaningful interactivity may cause students to feel isolated and become discouraged to continue with their study.

Commitment. Thomas (2001) believes that in distance-learning class, students must be committed to their own success unlike in a traditional classroom environment, which has a certain level of social pressure involving both teacher, and students on face-to face basis. The instructor in this case expects the students to come to class, complete the assignments answer questions and actively participate in group projects. These behaviours are expected in distance learning class as well, but the social pressure to comply is not there because these students are required to learn to develop the self-discipline and they are also required to organize their time effectively and participate fully in the learning process

Accessible Learning Materials. This is to do with ensuring that students are active participants in the learning and teaching process, and therefore, distance learning institutions should ensure that teaching and learning materials are evaluated to ensure that the full range of diverse learning needs of all students are accommodated (Moodley, 2002). In addition, students must be provided with learning materials in formats that meet their learning needs and the language used must be user-friendly and be understood by the majority of students. Additionally, when planning their learning material, distance-learning institutions must be sensitive to cultural diversity of their students (Moodley, 2002).

Similarly, Srinivasan, (2011) posits that there are three parties involved in distance education, instructors, students and institutions of higher learning, and that all of them have barriers that prevent distance education to be more effective.

Conclusions

Distance learning in Kenya is still in its infancy today. This is due to the limitations of network infrastructures, lack of national policy, experiences, cultural factors, lack of skilled manpower, effective policy, and financial constraints. Although distance education may not be new in the country (Kenya), it has not been adequately been received by higher institutions in Kenya and specifically among the teaching fraternity. Thus, scrutiny by stakeholders of the problems in distance education will help overcome problems encountered by students, instructors and faculty. In addition, understanding and mitigating technology problems is important, especially with the rapid expansion of technology. Furthermore, there is need for course development techniques to help learning institutions understand

which methods work best in the distance-learning classroom.

Recommendations

Institutions of higher learning and stakeholders should follow UNESCO (2001)-NIR guide on distance education in teacher education to upgrade teachers/faculty knowledge in the context of lifelong learning. There is a need to consider prevailing socio-economic and other factors in implementing distance education before rolling out distance education programmes. Often, solutions that have been formulated in the developed world are taken and applied without modification in Kenya. If any content is developed outside Kenyan education context, it needs to be evaluated and tested for cross-country effectiveness. The solutions need to take into account the varying political, economic and social situations in Kenya.

To address network connectivity problems, there is a need to set up a broadband access to information. To enhance the teaching and learning process, there is need to improve interactivity amongst students and faculties members and improving opportunities for feedback among students and their dons. Members of staff need to be trained in order to produce content for distance education in Kenya. Effort should be made to adapt relevant content where appropriate or where existing content cannot be used.

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