

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN UGANDA: ISSUES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND CHALLENGES

Musa Matovu ^a

^a Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur – Gombak, Malaysia.

^a Corresponding author: matovumousa@yahoo.com

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Abstract: This article addresses how distance education has enabled universities in Uganda to extend their educational services beyond their boundaries to student who are not on campus. This has increased on universities' admissions while minimally controlling overcrowding. The article highlights the nature and mode of distance education in Uganda, opportunities, and the challenges encountered by the universities in offering distance education. In summary, the article suggests the ways in which distance education can be improved, as such, the article answers the fundamental question to whether Information and Communication Technology (ICT) innovations in distance education can improve and sustain distance education in Uganda.

Keywords: Challenges, Distance Education, ICT, Opportunities, Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

“A total of 57,510 (65%) candidates who sat for Uganda Advanced Certificate Examinations (UACE) last year, [2008], qualified to join public universities out of the 89,921 students who sat for the UACE. But all universities can only take on 25,000 students with 32,510 students to miss university admission” [1].

The number of students who sat for UACE in 2010 and met the requirements for joining universities rose 62,440, but was still to be admitted to the same universities [2]. This shows that many students who sit UACE examinations miss the opportunity of joining universities. Students qualify to join the

colleges and universities, but, they are denied entry because they lack space and facilities to accommodate them [3, 4].

The colleges and universities which were built to serve a population of 10 million then are still the colleges and universities serving a population that has grown to over 30 million. The colleges which would have taken students who are not admitted to the universities have minimum space, are in poor state, and some colleges have been closed by the government due failure to maintain them [5]. On the other side in an attempt by government to increase university education some colleges were elevated to university status but are still in college facilities which cannot accommodate many students. To this effect, distance education was started in universities to help student who would have not been admitted in to the universities' traditional classroom programme to have education at their home [4, 6]. Aguti [5] highlights distance education is the only way which can increase higher education without an increase in colleges and universities. In 1991 universities started admitting students who merited on distance education degree programmes but were not admitted in traditional classrooms.

This article highlights how distance education has tried solved the problem of the increasing numbers of students who qualify for university education, but, are not admitted to universities. Also, the article highlights the opportunities and challenges faced in implementing distance education programmes in universities in Uganda. The ways to improve distance

education in Uganda are suggested as well. Generally, the article highlights that the broad goal of distance education should be to offer distance education students a learning familiarity as much as that of the traditional face-to-face classroom.

THE SITUATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The introduction of distance education increased the number of students who joined the universities. This is because distance education offers education to masses than to a limited number of students [7, 8, 9]. Students study from their homes, though occasionally go to the universities for face-to-face sessions. It is hoped that in future when Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is fully integrated in distance education students will no longer go to universities for face-to-face sessions [10, 11]. With the enormous challenges faced by universities in running distance education programmes in the past years most universities have gradually reduced their intakes on distance education programmes. The decline in the admission of students on the distance education programmes has been due to the universities failing to meet the required needs of the distance education programmes as they started the programmes in a hastily way. It can be accounted that universities jumped onto the 'bandwagon' to start distance education programmes without due diligence but because of the influx in numbers of students who needed admission. This has made universities to be over stretched by the endless demands of the distance education programmes.

MODE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

At the inception of distance education programmes at the degree level it was upon the universities to choose on the mode of instruction to use. Different universities opted to take on different modes of instruction; asynchronous mainly using print materials, synchronous, or, hybrid mode of instruction. Synchronous mode of instruction is the most suitable for distance education because it enables lectures and students to share resources and ideas at the same time, and it spreads over a wide area [11, 12, 13, 14]. But most universities opted for the hybrid mode of instruction which requires the use both the face-to-face sessions, and the print materials to enrich the face-to-face sessions [15, 16, 17]. Most universities use hybrid mode of instruction because of the lack of funds to fully support either the asynchronous or synchronous modern mode of instruction.

OPPORTUNITIES

The increasing numbers of students who qualify for university admissions every year made universities to think beyond their scope of the traditional classroom teaching. Through distance education universities

have extended their services to students who are not admitted into universities' traditional classroom programmes to study at their homes, places of work, and even in rural areas. Distance education increased universities' enrolments to extend to over 15% on average of the universities' total population but on a few programmes [4]. Students on distance education programmes are availed with print materials, audio and videos tapes, graphics, and a few universities use ICT to enable students to study at their homes, or any other given place. ICT in distance education improves access to information to the students, and also, narrows the gap between the on and off-campus learning [18, 19, 12]. ICT can support large numbers of students regardless of their national or international geographical location and is more effective than the traditional classroom [20, 12, 21, 22, 23]. According to this distance education gives students the liberty to control their own learning [22].

Distance education has two major advantages over the traditional classroom programmes. Distance education admits more students than the traditional classroom programmes, and it reduces overcrowding on university premises as the large numbers of admitted students do not come to the university daily. Again, distance education programmes are more flexible for students to learn and help them to complete their courses at their own convenience. Students on distance education programmes are given the liberty to take courses they feel they can accomplish in a particular semester, with more years allocated to their period of study than the traditional classroom programmes. Such time and liberty given to distance learners helps even the weak students to achieve effectively their academic goals. It is also known that distance education courses are cost effective compared to the traditional classroom courses [24].

CHALLENGES

Monitoring and evaluation, quality assurance, and standards management have always been emphasised in universities by National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) for universities to improve on their academic efficiency and services delivery in their academic programmes. Despite this emphasis, some universities have not well monitored, evaluated, and controlled the quality of their distance education programmes. The evaluation and quality control measures which would have improved the distance education programmes have been neglected by most universities. At the inception of distance education in universities it was handled in an ad hoc way for universities to enrol large numbers of students than they would manage. This created a big challenge ahead of the distance education programmes in attaining their goals. It is puzzling that universities

that embraced distance education by enrolling large numbers of students are gradually reducing on their intakes or closing some of their distance education programmes. Bray, Aoki & Dlugosh [25] highlighted that despite of the success in terms of increased numbers of students enrolled in universities, the quality issues in distance education in universities are still debated. This reflects that distance education in LDC universities has not been well conducted.

Though use of print materials was opted by most universities, it is hindered by the inadequacies in the locally produced modules which are sometimes unavailable. Also, sometimes the imported modules are not suitable for the distance learners as they are not user friendly to the category of students on the distance education programmes in LDCs. In promoting the use of ICT to solve the problem of the use of print materials universities have been caught at cross roads. It is only a few universities that can afford technology as a mode of instruction to distance learners due to the little resources invested in Information and Communications Technology [26]. This has always called for students who stay in different parts of the country to continuously go to universities for face-to-face sessions. It can be commented upon that the centralised students' support systems are weak and are not able to reach students at their homes [5, 11]. Most of study centres in major cities and towns of the country lack facilities while others were dilapidated by the military regimes and the continued civil war since 1970's to date which have never been fixed [4]. This has made universities to limit their scope of instruction to the hybrid mode which is the least effective in achieving learning among distance learners.

Hybrid as a mode of instruction to distance learners settled in the minds of people that it is the only mode of instruction in distance education. According to the deputy academic registrar of one of the public universities offering distance education programmes told a student who wanted to take distance education course at the university from India that;

"... you cannot study on a distance education programme while you are broad. You must be in Uganda because you will need to be face-to-face with the lecturer. So, if you are in India and want to study from, you ought to come to Uganda and register. If you are admitted you will find more information about the programme if you enrol [27]."

According to the deputy academic registrar to study on a distance education programmes a student must come face-to-face with the instructor. In universities students on distance education programmes are required to come and 'camp' at the universities during face-to-face sessions leading to overcrowding. This would not happen if universities had well

equipped study centres with ICT in all the major cities and towns of the country [28]. With poor or no ICT facilities in the different part of the country students are pressured to go to universities in person for registration, in between the semester for face-to-face sessions, and at the end of the semester to do examinations. During the face-to-face session period students face a problem of looking for temporary accommodation for the few weeks they spend around the universities [4]. This might not only be costly but stretching to working students who consecutively request for leave at their places of work to go for face-to-face sessions, registration, and examinations. This method of 'traditional' medium of instruction in distance education is not effective in this modern era of technology and it is likely to hinder the teaching of large numbers of students as globalisation has become the norm [22].

In most universities activities of the distance education programmes coincide with the traditional classroom programmes at campus. Face-to-face sessions and examinations for distance education programmes are at the same time when students in traditional classroom programmes are at the universities. Congestion is not only realised on campus, but also, on universities facilities such lecture rooms, libraries, transport, food courts, and many others. In rescue of the situation for lecture space college cafeterias and neighbouring schools provide space for the large groups of distance education students to have their face-to-face sessions, or, sit for their examinations. Universities enrolling large numbers of students on distance education programmes that still come for face-to-face sessions with little or no use ICT for them to totally study at their homes, several questions could be raised. Why do universities enrol big numbers of students when they do not have adequate facilities and resources? Were universities prepared to handle distance education programmes? With such questions unanswered one wonders whether quality assurance is taken as a priority in distance education programmes for these universities.

Although distance education enrolls large numbers of students into universities, it is limited to a few courses as it is not suitable for practical courses. This is because the practical courses might require consecutive use of specialised tools and equipment which might be too expensive for the students to afford as individuals. Practical courses might also require specialised environments like laboratories which students might not have in their homes. This has made universities to leave out such programmes from their distance education course schedule. According to Ray, former president of the U.S Distance Learning Association when he was asked if there were any subjects or disciplines that could not

be taught through distance education, he replied that there are probably some, but, faculty members sensitive to the audiences' needs can find the right mix of technologies to almost everything through distance education. In less developed countries where technology is still in its primary stages it might be difficult for practical courses to be offered on the distance education programme. This has given distance education a challenge of not being all embracing like the traditional classroom mode of instruction which can take on any course.

It has been highlighted that most distance education instructors lack the specific skills to handle distance learners. It is necessary for instructors of distance education programmes to be trained in specific skills to make them suitable to teach distance education programmes [5]. This makes distance education course instructors more efficient in handling distance learners and to help them evaluate the courses from the students' perspective [29]. Though the instructors get extra skills to teach distance learners, the pedagogies they use teach should not differ from those of the traditional classroom [14]. Ribiero [30] asserts that if universities are to maximise the potential of distance education they should critically improve the teaching skills of their instructors. It has also been noted that distance education programmes in universities have not been seen other university normal programmes, but rather, programmes which generate more money to the universities. Aguti [5] mentioned that distance education programmes had changed universities from relying on government subsidies due to their increased income from distance education programmes. This might be used as a tentative explanation to why universities enrol big numbers of students on distance education programmes despite of not having the required facilities. Universities which enrol big numbers of students are likely face a problem to offering good services to their students [31].

With plenty of time allocated to distance education programmes compared to traditional classroom course many students on the distance education programme are not able to accomplish their courses on time while also many drop out of the courses compared to students in the traditional classroom courses [32, 33]. This can be attributed to the students' laxity, lack of necessary study materials, or, due to lack of orientation on distance education programmes [34]. The high dropout rates of distance education students can be attributed to boredom, lack of tuition fees, lack counselling, perception of isolation, and not pursuing their academic goals as their career might be limited to the only courses available in distance education programmes [35, 36, 37]. The challenge in the dropout rate of students on the distance education programmes is that

universities have not been highly selective when admitting students on distance education programmes like the case for students in the traditional classroom programmes.

Like any other developing country there are inadequacies in finances, poor ICT and infrastructural facilities, absence of a clear policy on distance education, and shortage of expertise to develop distance education modules and multimedia courses. There is also no academic autonomy for distance education teaching departments or institutions [38]. Modern distance education requires constant and reliable access to technology such as computers, internet among others. There is still low computer and internet usage, and it is limited to a few areas of the country. Constant internet is found in cities where most universities are located, and hardly in rural areas of the country. In some rural areas where the internet can be accessed it is not in constant supply and quite expensive to be afforded by the low income earners who enrol for the distance education programmes. The distasteful experience in internet inconsistency hinders the effective teaching of distance learners [39]. Again, a large number of distance education students come from low income families which do not have disposable income to purchase technological equipment like computers to enable students to study when using technology from their homes [40, 22]. Also, computer and internet access media might be unfamiliar to distance learners [41].

It can be noted that some universities introduced ICT in teaching traditional classrooms but it has not been directed towards distance education. The emphasis of ICT has been put on the enhancing face-to-face delivery in the traditional classroom than to distance education. Ouma [11] mentioned that universities had made a stride in introducing Information and Communication Technology in the management and teaching processes of traditional classrooms but there was no infrastructure developed or policy for distance education. It can be pronounced that although distance education students study from their homes they need to be provided with good education which can lead to national development like their counterparts in the traditional classrooms acquire [6].

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The situation of distance education in distance education departments and institutions requires a combined effort to rectify the challenges for their improved service delivery. Distance education department and institutions need to improve their curriculum in order to meet the demands of students attending the distance education programmes. The success of any distance education programme depends on the students who merit attending the right

distance programme taught based on the right curriculum that suits them. The curriculum and clear procedures of implementing it should be highlighted and should provide sufficient planning and timelines across all institutions offering distance education programmes. After the curriculum has been implemented monitoring of the programmes is needed to be done on time, effectively, with the review and evaluation of internal and external factors to avoid programme discrepancies across universities. This could help in finding out whether distance education programmes are achieving the same objectives, or not, across the various universities offering distance education programmes.

Technology is a necessary tool in the teaching of students on distance education programmes. By use of ICT distance learners can study effectively through the use of the internet and other technological media of instruction. Using technology in distance education would lift the mode of distance education delivery from the classical first and second generations, to a third generation level of operation [42]. It is also imperative that technologies used to teach distance learners are appropriate to teach them for effective delivery [43, 44, 45, 46, 47]. This is because it has been noted that if distance education students are taught with appropriate methods and technology they perform in the same way like their counterparts in the traditional classrooms [48, 49, 50, 51, 52]. It has been highlighted that distance education well facilitated with ICT makes students to achieve better grades [53, 45, 42]. It is also important that technology is regularly improved to match the content taught and technological innovations of the time. Improving technology in distance education teaching makes learning quicker, simpler, easier, and probably more liked by the students.

As media for distance education might change anytime due to change in technology, this might also require universities to change in their media of instruction to use ICT. Inventions of technology into distance education have made distance education to be more appreciated by the students as it is more convenient for studying [54, 55]. It has been highlighted that the changes in technology has variable strength to the enhancement in distance learning, while out dated technology can pose a barrier for students and instructors [56, 57, 58]. Internet usage in form of web blogs or blogs, mobile or m-learning [59], and personal digital technology powered assistants are some of the technological changes in distance education universities should adapt to increase students' interaction with their instructors [54]. It can be suggested that to ensure successful distance education programmes technological infrastructures must be integrated with the latest appropriate software to make learning easier

[60, 61]. Students would enjoy the technology and at the same time use it for learning [14].

Through the use of technology students who might have not previously had access to higher education might have the opportunity to study at locations that best suit them. ICT in distance education can support large numbers of students regardless of their national or international geographical location [23, 21]. ICT offers distance learners an easy access to study materials and increases their learning outcomes [62], while also it increases their class participation [62, 63]. Instructional technologies such as audio conferencing, teleconferencing, audio graphics communication systems, video-conferencing, and computer mediated communications when used they bridge the physical gap between the instructor and the students [22, 6, 64]. Ouma [11] noted that when ICT is fully integrated in distance education delivery it can greatly improve distance education in Uganda. Maximum use of ICT in distance education programmes would be realised if the government would fully fund distance education programmes in universities, and also, design a system to fully maintain and run distance education programmes on Information and Communication Technology [5]. The government should also ensure that a distance education policy is in place and implemented, constant supply of electricity, facilitate internet in distance education, help in purchasing ICT equipment, give tax waiver on ICT equipment, and investing in the integration of ICT in distance education programmes [3, 42, 11].

Training is an initiative tools that universities can employ to enhance instructors' knowledge and skills to handle distance education learners [65]. Training can help instructors to develop adequate skills to use ICT and other teaching resources in distance education [66, 67, 21, 20]. Volery [31] argues that technical expertise on its own is not of great values unless it conceives ways to utilise it. Trained human resource in specific skills might be needed to facilitate the new technology in order to improve and match the unprecedented demands of distance education. Inadequacy in instructors teaching skills on distance education programmes is a reflection of lack of quality in teaching and learning support for students [3].

Due to limited funds in universities, universities should be supportive in the development of distance education facilities and course materials. There should be collaboration between universities to avoid duplication and wastage in development of resources. This would be in establishing study centres through the country, designing of teaching modules, and planning for distance education programmes. For example, to reduce on expenses universities can come

together to design modules for students which would have been expensive for individual universities. In distance education department or institution the ultimate way of improving instruction to students who study off campus should be by use of Information and Communication Technology. This would help students to register, study and even to do examinations in any place in the world without necessarily coming to the universities. With full integration of Information and Communication Technology in distance education universities will be able to offer education to a bigger number of students without limitation to boundaries.

CONCLUSION

It is the role of the universities to ensure that distance education students study like their counterparts in the traditional classrooms. Investment in Information and Communication Technology to improve on delivery in any distance education programmes is expensive, but, it is imperative that funds are available to purchase the required technology [53, 68, 42]. Information and Communication Technology makes distance education to be efficient and convenient in delivery, and, it gives immediate responses and support from instructors and departments to students' problems. Its efficiency and wide coverage would help students study from their homes, register and get resources online, and even to do examination away from universities. Integration of Information and Communication Technology into distance education would be the best way to increase enrolment to distance education programmes, reduce on the challenges, and to be ensured of quality and sustainability in distance education in Uganda.

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