Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Skills Development through Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

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Abstract

Reducing poverty is one of the fundamental aims of the internationally agreed-upon Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs). Developing countries strive to enhance their international competitiveness for the well-being of their people. One of the many strategies being actively promoted to achieve this goal is to provide training and retraining for many unskilled workers to enable them to move out of low-skill, poor wage situations and into higher-skilled and higher-wage opportunities. TVET is well placed to offer these skills if supported and facilitated. More than half the world's population requires access to better education and health, safe food and water and a sustainable environment. The access to knowledge and skills to all people regardless of status, gender, age, race or location is enormously important. Education and training must be all-inclusive and reflect the vastly diversified present economy and various fields of human-power needs. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) strives to meet this goal. ODL, as the modality for TVET, allows vast numbers of people, hitherto unreached, to take advantage of education and training opportunities. This is because the traditional systems of training individuals for technical and vocational careers often cannot meet the massive need. Thus, there is an immense value of using ODL methods to provide continuous, “just-in-time” training for workers in a range of fields such as farming, health, textile and others. Although ODL is a comprehensive term for the modality employed, it naturally leaves outside those programmes of TVET offered in formal education and training institutions through conventional contact schooling practices; and while the thrust of ODL is on various conventional disciplines of liberal education, the growing diversity in various learner groups and advances in educational technology lead to acceptance that the benefits from TVET through ODL are far greater than from other types of courses. This paper focuses on skills development through ODL. It supposes ways in which skills can be developed and delivered to ensure quality and relevance.
Flexible Learning is all about finding out what the learners want to do with their lives and the plan towards achieving that. It is designed to meet the interests and learning needs of each individual. Depending on their needs and interests, they may learn: reading, writing and arithmetic in ways that are relevant to them. Others are arts, crafts, music, dance and theatre, life and study skills, parenting skills, driver education, cooking, technology and computer skills, hair and beauty and car maintenance. They will gain many valuable skills which employers are looking for or which will help them get into further education and training courses such as using technology, communications and group skills, goal setting, problem solving and creative thinking and researching and analyzing information.

The available evidence points to the need to rethink and explore innovative ways to boost learning in the education system (www.col.org/flexible@col.org). These programmes can be especially important for less prepared learners as these technologies can provide them with specifically tailored supplementary instruction.

There is a link between poverty reduction and skills training and increased growth, productivity and innovation, in particular for the informal sector (Fluitman 2002). Skills development improves output, quality, diversity and occupational safety and improves health, thereby increasing incomes and livelihoods of the poor (www.col.org/SkillsDevelopment; http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/99018.). Skills are vital for poverty reduction, economic recovery and sustainable development. As a consequence, policy attention to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is increasing worldwide. TVET comprises formal, non-formal and informal learning for the world of work. While TVET opens a window to the world and vice versa, institutions should explore and exchange information about innovative teaching and learning methods.

There is growing recognition within Kenya of the importance of the TVET sector and its vital role in skill development (Government of Kenya, 2008). The recent curriculum reform which has introduced a modular curriculum is an important step in the right direction as it provides students with greater flexibility. However, more reforms and policies are needed to improve the effectiveness of this sector. Across the country there are just over 1,600 registered private and public vocational centres, with public institutions accounting for 45 percent of the total number of institutions (Ministry of Education, 2009). The supply of vocational institutions has grown recently, with much of the growth in the private TVET sector. Ministry of Education statistics show that the number of public institutions grew by 7 percent from 2004 to 2007, while private institutions grew by 16 percent over this period. This growth in part reflects the rapid growth in the demand for vocational training (Hicks et al 2011).

THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND EFA AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

Despite the remarkable progress made since the 2000 World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, the international community remains far from achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals. Across the globe, 67 million children and 74 million adolescents are out of school; 793 million people continue to lack basic literacy skills (UNESCO, 2007). If current trends continue, the number of out of school children in 2015 could be higher than today (EFA Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2011). Eighty (80) % of employment is in the informal sector hence, the support of the expansion of skills training opportunities for people working in the informal economy is crucial.

Even in settings where educational opportunities are widely available, inequalities remain in the ability of all social groups to avail themselves fully in them, leading to early drop-out and failure to obtain a useful qualification. Yet all people, regardless of their sex, race, religion, disability or national, ethnic and social origin, are entitled to a quality education. Indeed, education that is restricted to certain social groups deprives a country of significant assets and skills that could be tapped to build prosperous communities. Furthermore, it limits the impact of national efforts to create peaceful, just, fair and cohesive societies.
Inclusive education is therefore non-negotiable. TVET institutions through ODL have the ability of helping to close up this gap in the skills development sector.

Ensuring the right to education among disadvantaged populations can be an arduous task given the various difficult situations and conditions they are subjected to. UNESCO promotes three critical strategies for achieving rights-based inclusive education for all children, concentrating on those in the most difficult circumstances. TVET institutions can come up with policies which will enable programs ODL programmes to be designed and implemented taking into account the ‘4 As’ principle of the rights-based approach to education: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability:

**Availability** implies that good quality education must be made available to all by eliminating all barriers, be they financial, physical, or institutional/systemic. Currently in Kenya many learning institutions both public and private have opened up satellite campuses in diverse regions and have developed flexible programs and packages to reach more people. Most of these programs are offered in the evenings and weekends. The formal TVET programmes have not yet ventured into this field. However with the new TVET act and the push for competence based training Rift Valley Technical Training Institute (RVTTI) among other similar institutions is developing modules in computerized motor vehicle diagnosis for jua kali mechanics (mainly youths who acquire skills through apprenticeship) and cake baking and pastry making for rural women. Some of these programs if not all will be offered through the formal system and ODL. Digital training content is being developed using skills acquired from Commonwealth of Learning (COL) facilitated Flexible and Blended (FAB) training. Such initiatives will assist youth and others who have been excluded from the formal systems acquire the much needed skills and thus become employable or self-employed.

Currently, in RVTTI, the ODL institutional policy is in its completion stage and we intend to roll out programmes immediately the formal policy is approved. We intend to start short courses using this mode of learning. The institution has a computer laboratory in the seven departments. About 30% of the staff has gone through some form of training on open and distance learning sponsored and supported by COL. A number of short courses such as training on entrepreneurial skills and finance management for youth and women in youth and enterprise who can benefit from these flexible courses in the community are being prepared currently by the Business Studies Department and the intention is to offer these courses through ODL. However, there are challenges which include; the teaching staff not appreciating ODL as a mode of learning as well as the institution not having a library and learning resource centre that can facilitate ODL. The institution intends to roll out sensitization to enable them understand and appreciate the learning through m-learning, local press, posters and education through local leaders. The plans to set up quality assurance committees are in advanced stage in order to coordinate the ODL programmes in the institution. It is hoped that COL will partner with the institution in this undertaking.

**Accessibility** implies that once available, the education must also be made accessible to all, by eliminating all forms of discrimination and through installing flexible modes of education, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalized who otherwise may not be reached by conventional modes. Training modules have been run successfully by churches and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that target specific sectors and develop simple and flexible teaching material and posters that can be used by both literate and illiterate learners. A case in point is a business curriculum for small and medium entrepreneurs organized by Partners Worldwide which trained three groups in western Kenya through the ODL mode on basic business principles. Many of the participants, though not well educated were able to improve their business profitability and in the long run expand their business and employ more workers particularly the youth. TVET institutions can purpose to design such programs using its resources and expertise and net-work with local administration, churches and other social networks for grass root mobilization and dissemination.

**Acceptability** implies that it is not enough that learning opportunities are accessible; they must also be acceptable in terms of quality and relevance to the learners’ experiences and environment, and respectful of their circumstances and culture if learners are to truly benefit from education. This means ensuring that education meets the minimum standards set by governments, including the medium of instruction,
curriculum and teaching methods. TVET is uniquely positioned to provide such training based on its experience in the formal sector. Using its structures, and blending with those of the informal sector, it is possible to design tailor made courses that suit the needs and relevance both of the trainees and industry and meet legal and statutory requirements. A booming market in Kenya is the mobile phone repair industry where most technicians acquire their skills through apprenticeship. If the particular skills were made available through ODL, it would open access, improve on quality and encourage creativity and innovation.

Adaptability: Education programmes must be adaptable to the various needs of the learners rather than expecting learners to fit in with a prescribed syllabus, uniform pedagogical style or system. This is particularly important when dealing with marginalized and vulnerable learners. Interventions should focus on strengthening interactions between learning in diverse settings, through increased synergies across various delivery modes of education – formal, non-formal and informal. In Kenya, the Ministry of State for the Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands introduced a Nomadic Education Policy in 2008. ICTs have the potential to address diverse learning and skill development needs. Content can be personalized and, therefore, is more meaningful to the learner. The learner support services which is a component of ODL for TVET presents the academic areas of student support such as study centres and tutoring along with an in-depth discussion of audio, video, telephone and computer-based technologies as and when applicable. It must be stressed here that appropriate learning materials are of critical importance.

Education through ODL has for years been an important mode for ensuring and expanding the right to education for millions of learners who have been underserved by the formal school system. Whether operating separately or as a part of a broader activity, ODL education provides alternative pathways for disadvantaged groups, including out-of-school learners to continue learning and acquiring skills and where possible, be reintegrated into the formal sector. More recently, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in ODL education has opened up further opportunities by expanding the availability and accessibility of education to learners of all ages and needs.

TVET institutions in Kenya need to introduced ODL programs to cater for the needs of the youth who have been locked out of the formal system for various reasons. Moreover, programmes become more acceptable to learners when they promote diversity as an enriching element in the teaching and learning processes. The introduction of appropriate languages, the design of curriculum taking into account local knowledge and flexible enough to be in line with local lifestyles are essential considerations. In Kenya, for example, the government has introduced a youth enterprise fund which has become popular among the youth in the informal sector. Unfortunately, those who benefit most from the fund are youth who have had some formal education and have acquired useful skills for business. TVET through ODL can design programmes to cater for those who may not have the qualifications to assess the funds because of lack of appropriate technical and life skills which can help them carry out business activities.

COMBATING EXCLUSION

If the right to education for all is to become a reality, we must ensure that no one is excluded from access to quality education and effective learning. The international legal framework supporting inclusion is already in place, with a number of normative instruments laying down governments’ obligations. In order to ensure that this framework is translated into real results in countries, the development of appropriate ODL programmes must be accompanied by changes in the power relationships and enabling environments of education. This requires the adoption of relevant legislation aimed at expanding the entitlements of disadvantaged groups to quality learning opportunities, resources and services, but also social and political mobilization to strengthen the voices of the marginalized in decision-making.

The broader community must, therefore, be actively involved in programme activities and the formulation of policies. Implementing inclusive policies, including, for example, policies aimed at promoting flexible
learning modalities, also requires strong political backing. In this regard, while governments hold the ultimate responsibility for achieving the EFA goals, they must recognize the role of TVET and other stakeholders such as the non-governmental organizations and non-state providers increasing opportunities for quality education through ODL. Their contribution must, therefore, be integrated into the design of systems.

Flexible and blended programme offered through ODL will increase the enrolment numbers in TVET institutions and also reach out to those excluded from the formal systems. Well designed, these programmes will become popular among the youth and others in the informal sector and many of them will acquire knowledge and skills that will increase their chances of being employed or getting into self-employment. Governments can assist the TVET institutions by training the teachers and instructors on how to prepare quality ODL programs to meet the unique needs of the youth and others in the informal sector who have been excluded from the formal programs. The government and other stakeholders can also support these ODL programmes by sponsoring the learners through scholarships and bursaries thus, ensuring many disadvantaged learners are able to enroll.

Conclusion

Vocational training in Kenya can have positive impact in skill development and eventually reduce unemployment. It is hoped that when the youth are equipped with skills they are in a better position to secure jobs or venture into business activities. TVET with an integration of ODL is an asset in terms of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability all of which are characteristic of flexible learning. The flexible models if embraced by TVET will have less focus on full-time face-to-face contact and this will enable more youth to register and acquire quality skills that are recognized and this will help them secure employment or get self-employed. ODL, distance and flexible learning courses are more resource-based for individual and group learning and have media components that can be used in the classroom and in distance learning which includes elements of online programme delivery and formative assessment. After all is said and done it must be realized that staff training and retraining for ODL to succeed the initial training as well as retraining is a viable proposition. It is important to think of the needs of the learners when developing these programmes and also when implementing them.

References


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