

# **SHARING INFORMATION AND EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A PREREQUISITE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND SURVIVAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN AFRICA.**

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## **1. Introduction**

As elsewhere in the world distance education is one of the fastest growing developments in education in Africa. The ADEA Report (1997: 14) reports that there is growing recognition in the whole of Africa of the value and relevance of distance education and training needs at a variety of levels. Distance education in Africa has experienced a number of changes over the past few years. These changes are reflected in the range of programs/courses, introduction of new media and more attention to student support. In order to provide high quality programs, courses and services to distance education students it is vital that institutions share information and experiences in a wide range of areas in distance education (for example research, resource people, collaboration, workshop reports and programs/courses). At a PAN-African meeting (in Tanzania, 1990) the importance of information among distance education institutions in Africa was pointed out as one of the most crucial factors on which distance education in Africa depends. The field of distance education demands constant review and therefore needs worthwhile information in planning and implementation of distance education courses/programs. Distance education is used to widen access to education, raise quality of education (through teacher training, as well as by bringing resources into the classroom), and to bring new methods and approaches into schools. Distance education attempts to address the geographical problems that confront most educational systems on the continent. Distance education is valued in the sense that it means to offer economic advantages which are significant to any ministry of finance or education (Perraton 1992: 8).

This article focuses *inter alia* on reasons why distance education institutions in Africa should share information and experiences in delivering courses/programs by means of the distance education mode. The need to share information and experiences emanates from specific needs in distance education institutions. This paper will briefly examine these needs seeing that they relate to the sharing of information and experiences. In relation to the topic of this article it is vital to look at the advantages of sharing information and experiences (for example the widening of support for ideas and services, as well as reducing duplication of programs), as well as ways to obtain information.

## 2. The need to share information and experiences

We live in an information age. To keep in pace with this information age and to face the challenges of the Twenty First Century education, communities should be aware of the significance of information as it plays a vital role in economic, social, cultural and political development. The focus should strongly be on maximizing the benefits of information for the education sector. Examining the sharing of information and experiences it is important to pay attention to the need/s in sharing them among distance education providers. It is also necessary to have information on what courses are delivered in other countries, for example training at different levels (Botswana: post-literacy and vocational training of middle-level administrators from the private and public sector, as well as headmasters), extension of science teaching (Kenya), vocational training (Namibia) and short training programs for civil servants (Uganda) in order to prevent situations where institutions develop courses from scratch in stead of collaborate with other institutions that deliver similar programs. In sharing information and experiences it is important to pay attention to the following needs. Obviously needs will vary from country to country. However, some countries will share common needs and may communicate with each other regarding the fulfillment of common needs.

- Some institutions need to improve on the design and production of their study material. Some institutions have developed study materials and sell them to recover costs invested, while others suffer to produce quality study material. In this context the need for training in design and production exists.
- There is a need to improve on distribution / delivery of systems. In this regard the need to transport equipment, an effective postal system, creation of proper distribution centers, surveys for the choice of and use of media and so forth come to the fore.
- Another need is to raise awareness of the status of distance education at national level. Relating to this need is greater support and commitment from governments.
- There is also a need for more equitable sharing of resources and materials. This need calls for sufficient collaboration among national/international distance education organizations.
- There is need to exchange information (for example by means of periodical reports, newsletters and the establishment of communication networks). This information also covers the following areas:
  - \* research and evaluation
  - \* training in different categories of specialists (for example, trainers of trainers, planners, designers and producers of study material and tutors)
  - \* design and development of study material, experiments, adaptation and/or translation, production of suitable study kits for technical

subjects and a pool of training materials.

- \* exchange of expertise, study tours, fellowships
- \* organization of workshops for specialists
- \* seminars
- \* training and production centres (Sub- regional Seminar, 1994)

- There is also a need for information sharing with both public and private sectors. The sharing of information should not be restricted to institutions only, but to all distance education providers in Africa.

### **3. Why is it necessary to share information and experiences?**

In the current age of the Information Explosion, as well as the availability of a great variety of electronic technology, the assumption exists that societies have access to many sources of information.. However, this assumption is (at first) misleading, seeing that many countries, especially in their rural areas, lack the technological infrastructure to access necessary information. Despite the lack of technological infrastructure the provision of information services is regarded as an integral part of the educational framework. Consequently distance education providers should guard against a situation of widening the gap in educational provision (caused by the absence of information) between Africa and the rest of the world. Although different kinds of information exist (amongst institutions, between institutions and learners and amongst countries), this article focuses on the sharing of information between providers of distance education. Due to the rapid movement towards a global knowledge- oriented society knowledge is being treated as a commodity. Making knowledge a commodity means that people should learn skills regarding the use of information (Anderson 2000:6).

We are living in a changing world. Changes are rapidly taking place. Among many other changes, knowledge, gaining of knowledge and the application thereof are changing at high speed. To be in pace with these changes, distance education providers should react to the new forces in change. One way of responding to these changes is to share information.

In this global world teaching/study occurs across national borders. Distance education providers should have the necessary information whether their programs/study courses are accepted in other countries or not. Movement of people among countries (immigrants or refugees) is unavoidable reality and many people wish to further their studies in their new homeland. In many cases they would like to proceed with studies

started in another country. Sharing information may lead to collaboration regarding study courses and students may then move from one institution to another and retain already obtained credits.

Seeing that the mode of instruction in distance education is essentially different from traditional face-to-face instruction, distance education systems cannot survive on their own structures (John 1990:4). They are dependent on existing structures of various kinds, especially if they want to deliver quality programs/study courses and services. In sharing information providers ensure quality programs by exposing them to scrutiny by other distance education providers.

Obviously circumstances will vary from one institution to the other, but surely there exist areas of common interest and barriers. In sharing information, support for ideas and services will widen and may lead to more effective services to distance education students.

Sharing information and experiences creates opportunities to promote new study courses/programs. In this way status could be connected/attached to study programs/study courses, especially where one institution is in collaboration with a better known/more established institution. By exposing study courses/programs to scrutiny by other institutions the quality thereof will be ensured. Consequently competitive risk will be reduced, seeing that small distance education institutions will not run the risk of competing with larger institutions.

By sharing information and experiences it would be possible for distance education providers to examine the possibility of different media applications for developing learning strategies. The possibility exists that many distance education institutions are well aware of the various media to be used in distance education, but they lack the knowledge and experience in the utilization thereof. In addition, institutions can compare support facilities provided at regional study centers (in cases of institutions in the same country) to achieve optimum learning.

Surely the sharing of information and experience will impact on personal relationships and informal communications. The advantage of personal relationships and informal communications is that gaining new knowledge, skills, values and competency is ensured in order to promote self-development, as well as the ability to contribute to sustainable development.

Finally, the sharing of information and experience will strengthen countries' individual capacities to implement their own educational policies and programs, leading towards Education for All.

#### 4. **Ways to share information and experience**

Currently distance education is the most modern form of educational delivery. It is innovating rapidly and expanding around the world (Saint 1999:7). In the light of this statement it is likely that distance education practitioners share information and experience in order to make optimum use of all available resources in a cost-effective way. Following the discussion around the reasons / rationale for the exchange of information and experience, it is important to identify ways to share the collection of relevant information and experience in Africa.

Distance education associations and providers (national and international) should meet. Discuss and decide on a sub-regional information base where information could be gathered, processed and distributed. This base could be at one institution. In fact, in each country could be an information base. These information bases can then be serviced by one institution of the member countries. The establishment of such a base, which serves all member countries will, obviously, require assistance. Assistance could be sought from ICDE, UNESCO, the World Bank, Non-governmental organizations, local governments, the Commonwealth of Learning, and so forth.

While many distance education providers in Africa are relatively isolated, it would be good to establish regional networks that will establish regular contacts, as well as a forum for exchanging information. Newsletters and research reports, distributed among members, can disseminate information about new resources, programs, activities, services and research. Within a wider framework in Africa an international collaborative venture can provide services to subscribing members. A network of information services could be an extremely valuable scheme from which collaborative ventures in course production and training might result (John 1990:8).

Distance educators in Africa should be innovative in their efforts to share information and knowledge. They should become members of distance education associations (for example, DEASA), as well as getting involved in projects like IMFUNDO.

Distance education providers in Africa could utilize modern electronic technology to gain information regarding the latest developments in distance education study courses/programs/training. In this regard I am thinking of the World Wide Web, which opens literally up the world to anybody with Internet access. There are enormous resources available and waiting for utilization. I am sure that many (if not the most) distance education providers in Africa now have websites or are in the process of establishing them.

Finally, funds should be available to attend workshops and conferences on distance education. Distance education practitioners should have the opportunities to attend workshops/conferences (nationally and internationally) in order to have personal

contact with distance education experts, as well as sharing experiences with other practitioners in similar circumstances.

## **5. Recommendation**

In sharing information and experience distance education providers in Africa should not act autonomously and do things their own way. Part of an education system, in which every institution has its own specific role to play (a role that complements other providers), is to provide quality education to its clients (distance education students). In order to render quality education, collaboration among distance education providers in Africa is essential for effectiveness, seeing that the providers are often not, in themselves, the “whole” answer to the students’ requirements (Paul 1990: 143). To share information and knowledge proper procedures of communication should exist. In this regard I am thinking of language barriers that may prevent some countries to benefit from collaboration. In relation to the language aspect special arrangements should be made to ensure the availability of resources for translation.

## **6. Conclusion**

Since the development of distance education systems in Africa has been along national lines, none of them can organize themselves in such a way that they could benefit from a large student population in order to achieve economy of scale (John 1990: 10). The relative isolation in which African distance educators operate emphasizes the need for collaboration. Collaboration can only take place when one has the necessary information. Dissemination of information and knowledge is a mechanism to promote cooperation in distance education for African countries.

Several countries in Africa have had substantial experience of running distance education study courses/programs/projects over the last twenty years. If they could share information and experience on their activities with other distance education providers in Africa the quality of education can be improved. In addition distance education can be cost effective and cost efficient. Finally, distance education in Africa will survive and grow in strength.

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