

Promoting access to post graduate distance education and development impact through collaboration, scholarships and appropriate use of technology in Africa

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Abstract

Since 2002, the Imperial College London Distance Learning Programme (DLP) has been the recipient of over one hundred scholarships, awarded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission for postgraduate masters level courses offered through distance learning. The scholarships were awarded to students based in Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries and Ghana.

The DLP courses taken by students are all relevant to development challenges. There is also value added locally through collaboration with local University partners: University of Pretoria and University of Ghana. This paper provides an account of the experience and development impact of this programme to date, and draws on results from a recent survey that invited feedback from the scholarship students.

The paper will also focus on some of the interesting and unforeseen impacts not only in the development of partnerships but also in the ways to sustain and support them. For example in the SADC region there has been close collaboration with the University of Pretoria Department of Educational Innovation, which has led to recent collaboration on a two year mobile learning (m-learning) research project funded through the University of London Centre for Distance Education.

OVERVIEW

Since 2002, the Imperial College London Distance Learning Programme (DLP) has been the recipient of over one hundred scholarships, awarded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission for postgraduate masters level courses. The distance learning scholarships were awarded to students based in Commonwealth countries in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region and also in Ghana. Underlying objectives of the scholarship programme are to increase access to the DLPs programmes aim to build capacity for the achievement of development goals.

This paper focuses on the SADC programme, and provides a preliminary account of the experience and development impact to date, drawing on results from a recent survey that invited feedback from the scholarship students, and reflecting on the value added and unanticipated benefits gained through collaboration with University of Pretoria (UP).

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

The Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme launched a scholarship programme for supporting postgraduate level distance learning study in 2002, with backing from both the United Kingdom Foreign Office and the Department for International Development (DFID). In addition to helping scholars obtain valuable qualifications, the scheme also seeks to achieve development impact and build capacity with Southern Partner Universities.

PROGRAMME FEATURES

The DLP offers an established range of postgraduate degree programmes awarded by the University of London. These courses are aimed at the international development

community. Between 2003 and 2006 the DLP has received support for 88 students based in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, and 20 from Ghana. Details of the SADC students are summarised below:

Number of Students: 88 Male: 54 Female: 34
 Countries:
 Botswana 12 Lesotho 3
 Malawi 13 Mauritius 9
 Mozambique 2 Namibia 7
 South Africa 7 Swaziland 4
 Tanzania 15 Zambia 9
 Zimbabwe * (* Admitted prior to leaving Commonwealth)

Each degree programme comprises ten modules, including a research methods module and project focussed on a topic typically relating to the students' country and organisational context. The table below lists the MSc programmes being studied and some of the main course modules

Programmes Followed	
Agribusiness for Development	9
Agricultural Economics	4
Biodiversity Conservation and Management	2
Environmental Management	10
Food Industry Management and Marketing	13
Managing Rural Development	1
Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development	18
Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development	17
Sustainable Development	14

Main Modules (468 Modules Studied)	
Rural Development	33
Applying Economics in Business and Development	22
Management in Rural Development	18
Project Planning and Management	15
Society, Gender and Development	15

This rest of this article reflects on the work done so far and the impact of the scheme to date. It draws on data from:

- DLP records on student registration and progression
- A recent survey sent to all SADC scholarship students in May 2006, designed with the aims of discovering more about the development impact of the programme, and obtaining feedback on how support approaches can be developed and improved further
- Face-to-face interviews conducted with students in Tanzania in July 2006.

Students register for a period of up to five years and study whilst in full time employment in their country. This means that it is still an early stage to reflect on experience and impact. An initial milestone was however reached in 2005, when the first two students graduated from this scheme.

Student Profile

Before exploring the scheme in more detail it is important to uncover some important details relating to the profile of the students supported under this scholarship scheme, since they are not necessarily typical of distance learning students in Southern Africa.

They represent a group who are very competent studying in English, who obtained good first degrees and are mainly mid-career development sector professionals. All 88 students were sent a survey in May 2006, and 43 responded. Respondents have unusually good access to technology, and also demonstrate a very good level of ICT literacy. The table below shows numbers who have access to computers and phones, and make use of email and internet:

Computer	Home	24	Office	40		None	0	
Cell Phone	Personal	38	Provided by Employer	11		None	1	
Internet	Home	8	Office	38	Cybercafe	18	No Access	1
Use of CD-Rom Drive	Yes	41	No	1		N/A	1	
Email	Regular	37	Occasional	6		No	0	
Internet Use	Regular	35	Very Limited	8		None	0	
Level of ICT literacy	Very Good	16	Good	21	Average	6	Very Limited	0

Responses indicated that these students do most of their studying at home, followed by studying in their office with study during visits to the field as the least likely. Interestingly when asked how much time is spent outside the office, for example doing field work, the responses suggest there are lengthy periods when study may be difficult:

Time out of the office	Never	2	1-4 weeks	9	1-3 months	18	> 3 months	13
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Academic Progress

The table below indicates the academic progress to date for each cohort. Whilst some students have withdrawn this has typically been in the early stages of their study.

Cohorts				
Cohorts	2003	2004	2005	2006
Course module progres				
MSc Graduates	2			
10	6	1		
9	3			
8	3	5	3	
7	1	6	5	
6	2	3	3	
5	2(1)	2	5	
4	1(1)	2(2)	3	
3	3(3)	4(2)	4	12
2	2(1)	2	3	
Withdrawals (shown in brackets)	5	5		
Total: Students in Cohort	23	25	25	15
Total: Modules Started	173	144	109	42

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

Providing scholarships for distance learning was considered to be a cost effective approach, reducing the risk of 'brain drain' out of developing countries and providing an immediate payback through the application of learning within the workplace. In the

longer term, key people will have received support that enables them to make a greater contribution in their careers.

Students were asked three main questions in the survey that let us reflect on the impact of the programme on their career, quality of work and development goals. Responses to the survey are encouraging, and strongly support the initial justification for providing distance learning scholarships. The sections that follow include a selection of representative quotes from the student survey responses.

Q1) Impact on career

Thirty two of the survey respondents stated that they are doing the same job now as when they commenced their study, and eleven indicated that they had changed jobs. Many of those who changed jobs had been promoted, and all attributed some of their success to their study. The box below shows a selection of the comments from respondents who changed their jobs:

"I was a Programme Officer within a livelihoods programme when I enrolled for the study. In the course of my study a new and challenging programme focussing on HIV/AIDS was developed. I (successfully) applied for one of the senior positions: Programme Coordinator.... I strongly feel that the DL study contributed to this achievement....it has broadened my understanding of development issues and during the interviews I had confidence because of the knowledge which I have acquired".

"I was promoted to work in Lesotho for a two year contract ending soon. I will be going back to Malawi but to hold a more senior position. The scholarship has played a major role in this promotion in that the organisation has recognised my improved performance at work which I personally attribute to the studies I am doing".

Q2) Impact on quality of work

Regardless of whether the student had changed job, most commented very favourably on how their study had enhanced their work. There were no comments suggesting a negative impact, and where a student did not comment favourably this was mainly as they were at the very early stages in their study.

"My job involves providing background information to MPs. This is much easier for me now because I understand most development concepts"

"I definitely think the DL course contributed quite significantly in my current role - especially the international environmental law. I am now managing a trans-boundary programme"

"Recently the management of FAO has been delegating most of its technical assignments to me due to the fact that I have built strong confidence within myself through the DL programme".

3) Development Impact

Aside from the personal and work quality benefits, students were also asked whether their study had helped them make a greater contribution to achievement of development goals. Many felt that it was too early to assess this aspect, though there were positive indications that the long term impact will be significant:

"Through my studies I have been able to make inputs to national environmental policy formulation processes as well as relevant sections of the country's long and short term development plans. This includes mainstreaming environmental concerns into the National Poverty reduction Action Plan".

"Living in my home country (Tanzania), my study has enabled me to participate well in the UN Poverty Monitoring Working Group (a group of UN agencies working

with the government of Tanzania to set up a working poverty monitoring system in the country) in which I participate as a member representing my work organisation”.

The views expressed in the survey response, were reinforced when these questions were discussed directly with six students based in Tanzania. These students included:

- A research scientist working on organic and alternative approaches to farming aimed at improving farmer income and production efficiency.
- A programme manager coordinating the food distribution work of World Food Programme (WFP) with a concern for promoting advocacy for children stunted through poor nutrition
- A veterinary officer working with communities on the outside of a national park in the 'Maasai Steps' region, making close links between natural resource management and livestock production
- A programme officer setting up a farmer group based micro credit system and new policies, to enable coffee and cotton farmers' access to collateral, and an increased involvement in the production systems, which provides them with a greater share of final revenues.
- A Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) officer working for an NGO providing water pumps to farmers to help improve production, whilst working innovatively with the private sector to create employment and distribution
- A recent graduate of the DLP's programme who has since taken on a senior post (related to M&E and research) in the national office of an international charity sponsoring children through school

In all cases they drew attention to the way in which their work supported by their study, had an important role to play in contributing to poverty reduction. It was clear, that these are people in key jobs who can make a difference, and they emphasised how their study helps them to make this difference.

COLLABORATION

In 2002, the DLP was part of the Imperial College Department of Agricultural Sciences which had an established research collaboration with UP's Department of Agricultural Economics (LEVLO). This partnership was extended to supporting the DLP's scholars in the SADC region, and through this extended collaboration, goals to develop and share course authoring and tutoring processes took shape.

Close links were forged between academics, administrators and learning technologists in both institutions. This has led to the following outcomes:

- LEVLO provide input and support for the process of recruiting scholarship students
- Regular project coordination meetings have been organised to explore ways of furthering collaboration. In particular this has led to significant links with the University of Pretoria Centre for Environmental Studies (CES)
- SADC scholarship students planning and embarking on research reports (which are a compulsory component within the DLP's distance learning degrees) now have the option of being supervised by a relevant academic within the University of Pretoria
- A regional tutor has been working on behalf of the partnership, visiting students in country and providing face-to-face tutorials

The goal is that the partnership be sustainable and add value to the work of both institutions as well as improving support to the scholarship students. Support (by 2007) for five separate cohorts of SADC students, has created a critical mass of students, providing a strong context for this institutional relationship to flourish. The relationship has now resulted in some significant and often unexpected benefits:

- A joint workshop held in Pretoria in 2004, resulted in a successful application to the Rockefeller Foundation for funding for a Bellagio residency, where experts came together to develop a book on 'New Institutional Economics (NIE)' which is soon due for publication. This book will provide a key text for (i) a regional collaborative Masters level programme in Agricultural Economics being developed with support from the International Food Policy Research Institute, and (ii) for a new module in NIE that the DLP will be jointly developing with UP and the Global Open Food and Agricultural University (GOFAU), for widespread use within programmes of all these institutions from 2007-8.
- Through the new relationship with UP's CES a module is being jointly developed on 'International Environmental Law' which is due to be offered to DLP students from the 2008 academic year.
- The development of strong links between the UP's Department of Educational Innovation and the DLPs learning technology team, led to the development of an innovative project proposal (outlined further below) to investigate the potential of m-learning support for students in the SADC region.
- There is also scope for linking emerging strategic plans within the DLP, most significantly plans to develop an MSc in Poverty Reduction: Policy and Practice with GOFAU, so that work done on this can benefit the collaboration with UP.

Whilst significant progress is being made, the main factors that have constrained progress also need to be highlighted. These have been at the institutional and staffing levels. Since 2004 the DLP has come through significant organisational restructuring at the departmental and faculty levels, and future uncertainties are created by the announcement in July 2006 that Imperial College intends to leave the University of London. There have also been periods when loss of key staff members, and discontinuity in staff support (within academic, coordination and learning technology teams in both institutions) have slowed down the achievement of our partnership objectives.

APPROPRIATE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Supporting a dispersed student group involves finding the right blend of distance based support using appropriate technology, and supplemented where possible with face-to-face tutorials. Students can access the DLPs online learning environment (OLE) which provides contact with tutors and fellow students, as well as access to downloadable resources. Survey feedback on use of the OLE and more generally the Internet, as well as on regular 'e-digests' from tutors, has been generally very positive.

In conjunction with UP's Department of Educational Innovation, specific options to provide additional support to scholarship students have also been explored. These have included:

- Development of a pilot portal environment using open source software, to promote collaboration among DLP and LEVLO staff and the project planning team
- Support for several in country tutorials
- Phone contact with LEVLO members

Whilst all of these approaches have met some student needs they are limited solutions in a context where (a) internet access remains limited and costly, and beyond reach of students when they engage in field work and (b) it has been difficult for students to get time off and costly to travel to in country tutorials.

The recent rapid expansion of mobile phone coverage and the development of mobile devices into powerful hand held devices that support communications and many other applications, offers huge scope for the DLP to support students wherever they are based. The relationship with UP (who have acknowledged expertise in 'm-learning') and the presence of a large cohort of SADC based students, has provided an unanticipated and significant opportunity to pilot the DLP's work in his field.

Funding has been obtained from the University of London Centre for Distance Education for a two year project investigating how mobile technologies can support

distance learning in the SADC context. In the first year of the project, four students from Malawi and Tanzania are helping the project team with insights from the context, and feedback on the usefulness of different types of learning activity designed for use on mobile phones. In year two, all SADC students studying the 'Rural Development' and 'ICT for Development' modules will be able to opt in and test out the 'm-learning' activities.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of the last four years, and the insight gained from the survey and meetings with students, highlights the importance of the context and student profile. A local partner working with a UK based University can provide substantial insight, and add a significant international dimension to a programme like the DLP.

The technology trends need to be regularly monitored, and as prices and coverage for both Internet and mobile communications improve, the scope for effective support to students in the SADC context is improving annually.

Presence of a critical mass of students, established through regular scholarship funding from the CSC over a number of years, has helped greatly in enabling new strategies for collaboration and student support to develop. The programme is clearly starting to have an impact on an important group of professionals who can be effective agents for change and for the achievement of poverty reduction goals.

The scholarship programme has made a significant impact both on educational innovation and also on development capacity within the SADC region. Most importantly, highlighted in the concluding quote, it is providing an invaluable learning experience for the scholarship student:

"I am doing the same job but with a different NGO with increased responsibility. The 'policy analysis study' and 'influencing change' played a big role in my securing the new responsibilities and so did 'approaches to rural development' in the context of collaboration with government. No doubt the course does not leave any trainee the same as before. It is full of insights linking to reality and the materials serve as reference in the work I do".

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