

EXPANDING THE HORIZON OF EDUCATION: THE CASE OF PRESIDENTS'S SPECIAL INITIATIVE ON DISTANCE LEARNING, GHANA

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the experiences of the President's Special Initiative on Distance Learning (PSI-DL) in providing distance education at the pre-tertiary level as an alternative means of expanding access to education in Ghana. The Ghana Government has realised the need to find alternative means of responding to the educational needs of her people. The PSI-DL was therefore established in April, 2002 to co-ordinate and make operational in Ghana alternative models of education to complement Government's efforts of ensuring that Ghana attains the target of "Education for All" by 2015. PSI-DL provides television lessons aimed at effectively bridging the educational gap between the well endowed and the poorly endowed schools especially in the rural areas and providing the youth needing remedial tuition the opportunity to improve upon their grades in English, Mathematics and Science. The paper also highlights PSI-DL open schooling in technical and vocational education and training aimed at providing learners with livelihood skills and the prisons project that targets prison inmates interested in acquiring skills vital for re-integration into society upon their release. In the implementation of all these programmes, PSI-DL has always aspired to be a quality ODL provider as reflected in the internal and external quality assurance initiatives presented in the paper.

BACKGROUND TO THE PRESIDENT'S SPECIAL INITIATIVE ON DISTANCE LEARNING

The Ghana Government has realised the need to find alternate means of responding to the educational needs of her people. The President's Special Initiative on Distance Learning (PSI-DL) was therefore established in April, 2002 to co-ordinate and make operational in Ghana alternate models of education to complement the efforts of Government to ensure that Ghana attains the target of "Education for All" by 2015. The PSI-DL has been planned to operate in three phases:

1. **Phase I:** A Junior High School (JHS) and Senior High School (SHS) unit offering English, Mathematics, the Sciences and other subjects to the youth both within and out-of-school system;
2. **Phase II:** An open college/school system offering courses in Information Technology, Business Management, Accounting, Entrepreneurship Skills and Technical and Vocational Skills within both formal and informal sectors at post JHS level; and
3. **Phase III:** A Teacher-Training Unit offering the teaching of English and Mathematics to complement Distance Learning Teacher Education being provided by University of Education, Winneba and University of Cape Coast.

PSI-Distance Learning Phase 1

Phase I of the PSI-DL aims at effectively bridging the educational gap between the well endowed and the poorly endowed schools especially in the rural areas and providing the youth needing remedial tuition the opportunity to improve upon their grades in English, Mathematics and Science. Phase I started on July 23, 2003 with the telecast of English and Mathematics lessons on the national television - GTV. Lessons on all the topics of the Junior High School (JHS 1–3) and the Senior High School (SHS 1-3) English and Mathematics based on Ghana Education

Service syllabus have been successfully telecast. In all, 1,040 half-hour lessons were telecast for both levels. For each of the two subjects at both the junior and senior high school levels, there were 80 lessons for the first year, 100 lessons for the second year and 80 lessons for the third year.

To ensure wider usage of PSI-DL programmes, handbooks, video-cassettes and VCDs (packaged into folders) have been produced from the already telecast English and Mathematics lessons and are being sold to schools and the general public as learner support materials. Additionally, PSI-DL has created learning centres countrywide in partnership with some churches, the Ghana National Association of Teachers and some NGOs. These learning centres have been equipped with televisions and video decks to enable out-of-school learners to access the lessons on television and from VCDs.

Science Lessons on GTV

Currently, PSI-DL is telecasting lessons of Integrated Science, Physics, Chemistry and Biology on GTV based on the West African Senior School Certificate Examination syllabus. In all, we anticipate transmitting 1,280 half-hour lessons covering SHS 1-3 (SHS 1 – 100 lessons, SHS 2 – 120 lessons and SHS 3 – 100 lessons). All the 100 lessons for the first year have been completed for all the four subjects and the production of lessons for the second year is ongoing. We have eight transmission hours weekly on the national television. Four lessons of half-hour each, covering the four subjects, are broadcast on Monday morning and repeated on Tuesday afternoon. Another four lessons of half-hour each, covering the four subjects, are broadcast on Wednesday morning and repeated on Thursday afternoon. The repeat broadcasts are to ensure maximum access to our lessons.

Similar to the English and Mathematics lessons, the science lessons will be dubbed onto VCDs at the end of the transmission for sale to the public. Before the ongoing transmission ends, PSI-DL will decide on which subject(s) to produce next. The decision will depend primarily on what the public and Ghana Education Service request for.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN SCHOOLS THROUGH TELEVISION LESSONS

Television is the primary medium of delivery of Phase I of the PSI-DL and it is complemented by the use of VCDs produced from the already telecast lessons. The television lessons are meant to provide the youth (both within and outside the school system) with alternate means of acquiring education outside the conventional classroom and thereby increasing access. The national television on which we telecast the lessons covers the entire nation and therefore a wide coverage is assured. Through television, excellent teaching can reach unlimited learners and vast areas and the same learning experience is conveyed to all - a sure way of bridging the educational gap between the well endowed urban schools and the poorly endowed schools in the rural areas. Also, television is a source of entertainment and has proven to appeal to many people when used to transmit knowledge.

Government has also introduced some interventions that seek to increase access to television and computers. For example, the Ministry of Communications is establishing 230 Community Information Centres countrywide with television sets and computers among other facilities. The Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development is ensuring that community centres are equipped for use as viewing centres and thousands of TV sets have been distributed to schools and district assemblies.

PRODUCTION OF THE TELEVISION LESSONS

The television lessons serve as alternate means of learning outside the conventional classroom. Therefore, in producing them, we try as much as possible to simulate the conventional classroom environment. The lesson delivery combines a number of approaches that include lecture, demonstration and role play. The pace of delivery is neither too fast nor too slow. The lessons are

delivered in conversational tone using first person pronouns to build intimacy with our learners. In some of the lessons we have students interacting with the presenters. Additionally, the oral presentation is backed by graphics that provide the equivalent of chalkboard summary in the classroom setting. Questions that arouse learners' curiosity and stimulating questions are posed. We provide encouragement to learners to hold and sustain their interest. Regarding access devices, the presenter gives decisive orientation to the lesson and what to expect: a welcome message, introduction of the lesson, the objectives, and sometimes discussion of home work given in the preceding lesson to assess learners' understanding. Each lesson ends with a summary that puts all the presentation in a nut-shell. Writers and reviewers are sensitised to make the lessons free from gender and ethnic bias.

The production of the materials is teamwork that brings together experts from the production house, experienced subject teachers from schools with consistent good performance in the subject and the production person from PSI-DL. The production process begins with an orientation aimed at:

1. providing members of the team with insight into Open and Distance Learning (ODL).
2. introducing them to the basic concepts in ODL.
3. exposing participants to the need for ODL at the pre-tertiary level in Ghana.
4. introducing participants to the basic principles in course planning and development in ODL.

A team of experienced practicing teachers write the lessons based on the Ghana Education Service syllabus to ensure that the content is relevant. Thereafter, they are thoroughly reviewed by experts in the subject area. The lessons so reviewed are then broken into production scripts for shooting. Subsequently, one of the subject teachers is selected after an auditioning process to present the lessons. After the shooting, the team sits together to look at the content and the technical aspects and make the necessary corrections before the lesson finally goes on air. Thus, the final output is quality educational material that is easily understood and made accessible to every Ghanaian irrespective of place of residence. Consequently, learners from both rural and urban communities are able to have equal access to education.

OPEN SCHOOLING IN TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has been identified as crucial to the achievement of any one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It has a big potential in making huge gains in poverty reduction and wealth creation. This fact has been well articulated by the National Development Planning Commission (2005) in the Ghana Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy (2006-2009) document which acknowledges a strong linkage between TVET and poverty reduction.

One of the aspirations of Ghana is to become a middle income earning economy and this depends largely on the ability to equip her citizens with knowledge and skills to produce quality goods and services on a continuous basis for income. The President of Ghana has also identified the acquisition of skills as a way of sustaining the socio-political stability of the nation and one of his priorities in his second term of office. Based on this realisation and to ensure that the Educational Reforms succeed, PSI-DL has planned an Open Schooling in TVET to ensure that the unemployed youth could have an opportunity to acquire skills for livelihood and to enhance their chances on the labour market.

In 2004, PSI-DL with the support of Commonwealth of Learning (COL) formed an eight (8) Member Steering Committee which started planning Open Schooling in TVET at the post JHS level to equip the youth with skills to:

1. set up their own businesses;
2. work in our industries; or
3. move on to acquire skills at the tertiary level.

The following programmes were selected as pilot courses:

1. Block-Laying and Concreting
2. Catering
3. Basic English and
4. Basic Mathematics

Members of the Steering Committee visited 127 public and private technical and vocational institutions countrywide to assess existing facilities and available human resource. On the basis of the feasibility study, 12 institutions nationwide were selected as part of the Open Schooling in TVET pilot project. Upper West and Western Regions are without institutions offering both Catering and Block-Laying and Concreting. Therefore, two institutions were selected from each of these two regions i.e. one institution for each of the two courses.

Beginning September, 2007 the PSI-DL Open Schooling in TVET became operational on pilot basis at the pre-tertiary level. Under the TVET pilot project, PSI-DL is targeting 1,000 needy poor and vulnerable students nationwide. Each institution participating in the pilot project is to start with 50 learners per course. The government is providing the learning centres with financial support for tools, equipment and consumables in addition to television sets, DVD players and learning materials according to the number of learners registered.

As mentioned earlier, four subject areas (Block-Laying and Concreting, Catering, Basic English and Basic Mathematics) were initially selected as pilot courses. However, the subjects have been expanded to include Integrated Science to conform to the Educational Reforms that started in September, 2007. Under the new Educational Reforms, TVET programmes must incorporate aspects of general education such as English Language, Mathematics and Science. Apart from the general education subjects making it possible for smooth progression to the tertiary level, TVET students need to be able to read and write complex prose, to be numerate, and be able to think and reason abstractly. Print materials and VCDs for Mathematics and English have been supplied to learners. As the Integrated Science lessons are currently being telecast, learners access the lessons on television and from VCDs purposely produced for the learning centres.

Training Workshops

As part of the preparations for the commencement of the Open Schooling in TVET, the PSI-DL collaborated with the COL and the University of Education, Winneba to organise a series of training workshops for course writers, graphic designer, editors, study centre coordinators and course tutors to equip them with knowledge and skills needed to effectively discharge their duties and responsibilities. As there was a significant time lag between the training of the centre coordinators and tutors, and the take-off of the programme, a just-in-time training workshop was organised for them in September, 2007, a time when we were just about to start the pilot programme, to sharpen the knowledge and skills acquired during the previous workshops. COL has also sponsored staff of PSI-DL to attend local and international conferences and workshops to build our capacity for meeting the demands of ODL delivery.

Production of TVET Course Materials

The TVET course materials are basically in print mode. A team of experienced practicing teachers of Catering and Block-Laying and Concreting were identified to write the course materials for the first year. The content is based on the Ghana Education Service syllabus. In addition to the writers, a graphic designer was also engaged to work on the graphics aspect of the materials. Editors who are experts in both TVET and ODL delivery were also identified to edit the course materials. A series of training workshops were organised for the writers, graphic designer and editors to build their capacity in discharging the duties of open schooling materials development. The editors' work involved content, linguistic, diagram and house style editing. In addition to the print mode, the practical aspects of the learning materials have been captured onto VCDs to help students conceptualise the practical activities in the manuals. Currently, the writing of the second year manuals is in progress.

THE PRISONS PROJECT

PSI-DL is in partnership with the Ghana Prisons Service to provide education for prison inmates interested in acquiring skills vital for re-integration into society upon their discharge. Prisons worldwide have been found to be ready-made study centres for Open and Distance Learning. For example, at the Fourth Pan Commonwealth Forum in Ocho Rios, Jamaica in November 2006, Barbara Deodat from the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education, University of Guyana presented a paper on her University's partnership with the Guyana Prisons Service to mend broken lives of prisoners (Deodat, 2006). This was found to be a very laudable intervention which has been replicated in Ghana.

Between August, 2007 and February 2008 we visited the prisons at Nsawam, Kumasi, Tamale, Wa and Ankafu. On our visits, we observed the following.

1. A youthful population of inmates between the ages of 18 and 25 years is available as a ready made student body.
2. Educational/training units with classrooms and workshops already exist.
3. Officers with knowledge and skills in various subjects of TVET needed as study centre coordinators and tutors are available.

Subsequently, PSI-DL identified two programmes: literacy and numeracy skills programme and livelihood skills programme. The programmes are providing opportunity for the inmates of our prisons to:

1. improve their literacy and numeracy skills through donations of television sets, DVD players, and VCDs of lessons on JHS and SHS English and Mathematics to Nsawam, Kumasi, Tamale, Wa and Ankafu Prisons.
2. acquire livelihood skills in Catering and Block-Laying and Concreting with the selection of Nsawam, Kumasi, Tamale, Wa and Ankafu Prisons as learning centres for our Open Schooling in TVET.

After identifying the two programmes, we proceeded with the identification and training of prison officers as coordinators and subject tutors in English Language, Mathematics, Integrated Science, Catering, and Block-Laying and Concreting. Thereafter, the officers briefed inmates about the project, stressing the need for them to take advantage of the opportunity to acquire skills vital for re-integration into society upon their discharge. The inmates who expressed interest in the project were then given orientation and subsequently registered. Both officers (who are the subject tutors) and the inmates have been supplied with learner support materials. The government is providing the partnership prisons with financial support for tools, equipment and consumables in addition to television sets, DVD players and learning materials according to the number of learners registered.

The TVET programme targets inmates who have completed at least JHS whilst the literacy and numeracy skills programme targets inmates who have completed at least primary school. The literacy and numeracy skills programme offers lessons in English and Mathematics at the three levels of JHS or SHS. The prison officers screen the inmates, assess their academic levels and assign them to one of the three levels of JHS or SHS. We are in the process of arranging with examination bodies for at least one of the prisons to be made examination centre where inmates could write their examinations upon programme completion. Prison regulations do not allow for interaction of ex-convicts and inmates. Therefore, inmates discharged from the prisons before completing their programmes would transfer to learning centres of their choice near them to continue with their programmes.

QUALITY ASSURANCE INITIATIVES

In relation to concept of the quality assurance in general, the word "quality" simply means 'conforming to requirements', i.e. the product produced or a service being offered meets, in every respect, the requirements of the ultimate user. In the context of PSI-DL, the participants/learners receive a service in

the form of teaching to acquire knowledge and skills; the society as a whole receives trained manpower. Thus, quality assurance in the context of PSI-DL needs to address such basic questions as:

1. How well is the teaching being provided through distance learning meeting the requirements of both the learners and society (stakeholders) as a whole?
2. How well is the teaching provided through distance learning recognised by other learning institutions?
3. Will would-be learners readily embrace PSI-DL as alternative mode of education of choice?

PSI-DL aspires to be recognised as a high quality ODL provider. In this regard we need to ensure that we are able to have positive responses to the questions posed above. We are therefore constantly guided by some external and internal quality assurance initiatives. With regard to external quality initiatives under the PSI-DL, a three-tier supervisory mechanism is in place: A high-powered Ministerial Committee, an Advisory Board and an Academic Board.

The internal quality assurance initiatives include detail programme planning and adopting measures that ensure quality learning materials and programme delivery. The programmes are always preceded with the setting up of a planning committee, followed by a pilot phase. The setting up of two different committees preceded the commencement of the TVET programme. First, a Steering Committee with membership from vocational and technical practitioners from both the private and public sectors was set up to plan the project. Thereafter, a team of TVET practitioners was also formed to undertake a study tour of TVET institutions, both public and private, and a report was submitted to the Steering Committee. The report greatly influenced the preparations for the take-off of the programme. Additionally, the report brought to our attention that workshops and equipment in existing institutions to serve as learning centres need to be improved, augmented and enhanced.

The major concern regarding the quality of our television lessons has been the quality of presentation. Subsequently, very experienced practicing teachers with good command over the subject matter and the English Language (the medium of instruction) were identified and trained to sharpen their presentation skills. Additionally, they were introduced to some basic “dos” and “don’ts” of studio presentation and recording.

As mentioned earlier, PSI-DL uses CDs, VCDs and print materials in addition to the television broadcasts. During the development of the materials, we are always mindful of quality in relation to: right content, appropriate readability, good physical outlook and durability of materials. In view of this, extensive workshops and orientation programmes were conducted for all the people involved in the development of the materials as already indicated. PSI-DL with the help of COL, RETRIDAL and the University of Education, Winneba provide continuous staff development opportunities for staff in pursuit of its aim of being recognised as a quality ODL provider.

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