The Challenges Facing Distance Education in Southern Africa

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Introduction

Distance education has hit the developing nations with a vengeance. The advent of political independence in Africa has been associated with greater educational opportunities for the majority of the people: people who were denied these opportunities before. There is tremendous pressure on governments to provide education to all who want it. However, there is not enough room in educational institutions to accommodate all who clamor for educational opportunities. Distance education is seen as the means to accommodate the ever-increasing demand for education. The last ten years has witnessed a rush for distance education by most African societies. However, in most cases the rush for distance education has been headlong. Large numbers of students have been enrolled before the procurement of the necessary resources.

This chapter examines the challenges facing the provision of distance education in selected African institutions and the implications thereof.

The Inevitable Push Toward Quantity of Education and Not Quality of Education

Education is considered a very valuable commodity in Africa. One of the major reasons for the rise of African nationalism that led to the many liberation wars was that colonial education systems favored the European minority. In many cases the African took up arms in an attempt to correct that injustice.

Political independence in Africa became synonymous with education. Politicians from all corners promised more and more education. No politician would live to see a single day in office if he/she did not promise more educational facilities - particularly schools for children. Suddenly each and every child was at school, something that was simply not possible before independence.

Unfortunately, the opening of the flood gates has been, to a large extent, the reason for the downfall of the education system in a number of African countries. Standards have been compromised in the name of quantity. The necessary resources, both human and material, have been in short supply. The pre-independence educational systems were not ready for the overnight influx of students. Although the Ministry of Education in most African nations receives a larger portion of the budget than any other Ministry, the amount still falls short of what is required to run a viable educational system. There was very little planning prior to the opening up of education to all and sundry.

Quality education continues to be a prerogative of the rich and the educated. The children of the elite do not go to public schools that allow all to enter. Instead, they go to private schools that offer quality education at a price that the poor cannot afford. In other words "real education" remains in the hands of those who can afford it. Children of the elite do not attend just any university. They go to better places like Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Witwatersrand, Rhodes in South Africa, and Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom. This puts the children of the poor at a serious disadvantage when they compete for limited job opportunities.

The poor masses of Africa remain the most significant group in African politics. Without the unqualified support of the poor, the current crop of African leaders would have long been voted out of power. To reward the poor for their undying love and thus be seen to be responding to their ever-increasing demand for education, African governments have made education a political issue. Hence education remains the biggest business in all African countries.

Distance Education As a Viable Alternative to Formal Education

Despite the high demand for formal education, African societies cannot afford it. Apart from the fact that formal education is, to a very large extent, a misfit to the needs of the continent, with thousands remaining unemployed after "completing" it, it is very expensive per person. It has slowly dawned on most African governments that there is a need for an affordable alternative. Distance education offers African societies an opportunity to bring education to all at an affordable price. Accordingly, distance education initiatives have sprung up all over Africa.

Three generations of distance education can be discerned in Southern Africa (Mpofu, 2003). The first generation has been correspondence teaching via a single media where there is no face-to-face interface between the tutor and the students. The second generation of distance education features multi-media, predominantly print, broadcasting and cassettes for teaching. In addition, it features occasional face-to-face tutorials, largely for student support purposes rather than for instructional purposes. Lastly, the third generation features advanced technologies such as telecommunications, computer networking, and audio and video conferencing. Tutorials, particularly through video and computer conferencing, are regular features of the third generation of distance education.

Three Generations of Distance Education

First Generation	Correspondence Teaching using Single Media
Second Generation	Multi-media Teaching using Print, Broadcasting and Cassettes
Third Generation	Advanced Technological Teaching using Telecommunications, Computer Networking & Audio/Video Conferencing

The practice of distance education in Southern Africa has barely entered the second generation of distance education (Mpofu, 2003). In this regard, distance education institutions are no more than large correspondence colleges. Students are provided with a set of readings and assignments.

Using the readings, and very little else, students do the assignments and submit them for marking. Tutors mark the assignments and return them to the students. There is very little human interface between the tutors and the learners.

Four distinct categories of distance education institutions can be distinguished in Southern Africa. Each category represents a different approach to distance education and reflects the organization and history of the institution in which it is practiced.

Categories of Distance Education Institutions

Category 1	Programs Available Only Via Distance Education	University of South Africa (UNISA)
Category 2	Distance Education As An Extension of A Conventional University	Center for Continuing Education - University of Botswana
Category 3	Public Correspondence Schools	Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL)
Category 4	Private Colleges Offering Distance Education Programs For Specific Audiences	Central Africa Correspondence College (CACC)

Firstly, there is the university whose programs are available only through distance education. A notable example is the University of South Africa (UNISA), which has never been anything else but a distance education institution. Founded in 1946, UNISA offers, through distance education, virtually all the programs that you would find in a conventional university. With more than 150,000 distance education students all over Africa (University of South Africa, 2003), UNISA is perhaps the largest correspondence school in Africa. Secondly, there is the distance education unit that is an extension of a conventional university. The task of this unit is to externalize the conventional university's programs. In other words, the unit offers, through distance education, programs that are already available on a face-to-face basis. Notable examples include the Center for Continuing Education at the University of Botswana and the Center for External Studies at the University of Namibia. These two units offer, through distance education, some of the programs that are offered on a full-time basis by their respective universities. The contents of a particular degree program are the same irrespective of the mode of delivery. For example, the Department of Adult and Non-formal Education (DANFE) at the University of Namibia offers a full-time Diploma in Adult Education and Community Development with a current enrolment of 330 students (University of Namibia, 2003). In addition, DANFE offers, through the Center for External Studies (CES), the same Diploma to about 500 students, through distance education. The teachers of the full-time program are the same "teachers" for the distance education program. For the majority of courses, the full-time tutors are the ones who wrote the modules that are used by the distance education students. They are the ones who meet with the distance education students twice a year for a week in each case for face-to-face "instruction". And, of course, they are also the same tutors who set and mark assignments, tests, and examinations.

In terms of student numbers, the distance education units of conventional universities are just as big as the conventional universities they are appended to. For example, the University of Namibia has a current enrolment of about 8000 students, about half of whom are enrolled through the CES. The third category of distance education institutions consists of public correspondence schools whose major purpose is to enable formal school dropouts to complete high school. The Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) and the Botswana College of Distance and Open Leaning (BOCODOL) are notable examples of government initiatives that offer "failures" of the school

system an opportunity to complete high school through distance education. With an enrollment of over 20,000[1] students nationwide, these initiatives serve to keep alive the dreams of many school dropouts who would otherwise be condemned to a life of poverty.

Lastly, the fourth category of distance education institutions is made up of private colleges that offer distance education programs at any level of study to whoever is interested. The Central Africa Correspondence College (CACC), the International Correspondence Schools (ICS) and the Damelin Group of Colleges are notable examples in this regard.

Together with UNISA, this fourth category of distance education institutions have been providing correspondence education for several decades. As such, they cannot be seen in the same light as the newcomers, the Category 2 institutions, which have come into being in recent years in direct response to the public demand for learning spaces. The way these latter day correspondence colleges, particularly universities, have jumped onto the distance education bandwagon has led to extreme frustration for both students and tutors. Most of these programs have been implemented without adequate preparation. And, many are destined to collapse before long due to the fact that they came into being for the wrong reasons such as financial pressure.

A Creative Use of Distance Education to Meet Contemporary Problems of Southern Africa

A recent study conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Health and Social Services in Namibia suggests that in some regions the majority of schools may grind to a halt due to the loss of teachers to HIV/AIDS (National Aids Coordination Program, 2002). The Ministry is considering several strategies that could ensure that this does not happen. One such strategy will involve shortening the period of teacher training so that teachers can be deployed sooner than is the case now. Alternatively, teachers can be trained through distance education.

One of the schemes under consideration is similar to what occurred in Zimbabwe in the early eighties. At that time Zimbabwe adopted a distance education teacher-training scheme. The scheme was entitled Zimbabwe Integrated Teacher Education College (ZINTEC) and recruited school leavers for teacher training. Recruits spent the first term, 3 months, of their three-year training program at a teacher college. After that they were immediately deployed as trainee teachers in various parts of the country. While working as trainee teachers they continued their studies with their respective teacher college through distance education. They did assignments and tests at their places of work, and their progress was monitored by their tutors who visited them at their respective schools. They came back to the college for the last 3-month term.

The ZINTEC scheme was designed to address the shortage of teachers that occurred immediately after independence due to the expansion of the education system. The ZINTEC colleges have now been converted into conventional teacher training colleges, because the teacher shortage no longer exists. However, the effects of HIV/AIDS may see the return of the ZINTEC scheme. A scheme like this allows for the placement of trainee teachers in actual classroom settings where they are able to provide service while, at the same time, they are working toward the development of further competencies. The ZINTEC distance education program ensured that schools were

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[1] This figure has been estimated from the reports presented by NAMCOL and BOCODOL to the DEASA meeting held at UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa on October 5, 2003.

adequately staffed at all times.

Something like the ZINTEC scheme could go a long way in mitigating the teacher shortages due to HIV/AIDS in schools in Southern Africa where the effects of the epidemic have reached alarming proportions. The technology used by the ZINTEC scheme was very simple. Printed material and occasional visits by tutors were very effective in preparing teachers for their profession.

The Dilemma of Distance Education

Distance education has become the buzzword in educational circles in Southern Africa. However, the rhetoric has **not** been accompanied by the allocation of the necessary resources. Distance education has become a way of increasing enrollment at conventional institutions that simply do not have space to accommodate everyone who would like or need a university education.

In a number of instances distance education came into being due to the need to increase enrollment in higher education. Most universities, for example, need to enroll a certain number of students per year to qualify for government grants. Without the distance education units, most universities would simply not be able to qualify for the grants. Distance education has become a way of meeting that requirement. However, there has been very little preparation for distance education. Distance education continues to be an appendage at most conventional universities. Despite the even split in student enrollment between the conventional and the distance education sections, the latter plays a secondary role to the former in respect to resource allocation. Distance education programs do not receive an appropriate percentage of the available funds.

The push toward distance education in Southern Africa has been guided by a philosophy of "enroll them now, and teach them later."   It has been too easy to enroll students at a distance since there is not an immediate need for classrooms, tutors or reading materials. As such, hundreds of students have been enrolled without the necessary resources to support an appropriate learning experience. The attitude seems to be, "We will cross that bridge when the students come for face-to-face instruction, later in the semester." This approach has been disastrous. Lecture rooms are not big enough to accommodate the large numbers that eventually come to campus for distance education programs. Lecturers, most of whom are part-timers, are not always available to tutor during the university vacation - the primary times during which distance education students are invited for face-to-face instruction. Course modules are simply not available when the students report for the "vacation school", as it is referred to.

On average, it takes 18 months to produce a single distance education instructional module. Three instructional modules are required for each course. The academic year for distance education programs is 18 months long. This means that distance education students who are enrolled for a course before a writer has been engaged for that course, and there are many such instances, can finish the course before the first of three modules is produced. This has indeed been the case for a number of courses at the University of Namibia (UNAM) (Center for External Studies, 2003). This immediately brings forward the question, "How then does teaching occur in distance education?" Tutors are forced by circumstance to teach distance education students, in two weeks, what they teach conventional students in a year.

At UNAM the vacation school happens during the April and August short vacations when full-time students are on holiday. These meetings are meant to enable the tutor to clarify issues that students do not understand in the distance education instructional module. However, in practice,

the tutor is often required to teach as much content as possible since the distance education module, in most cases, was not available. Even in cases where the module exists, the tutor is expected to go through the module if he/she can. Anything else is considered unsatisfactory. Students have often complained about those tutors who do not use their allotted time slots to teach.

In cases where the module is non-existent, the teacher is forced to make available to distance education students, in one way or another, the notes that are available to the conventional students. The result is the wholesale photocopying of large amounts of material from books. In some cases the students are also given recorded lectures from the tutors. In this way distance education students get on tape or CD what the conventional students get face-to-face.

Distance Education Techniques

To make up for the obvious shortfall in face-to-face instruction, several techniques have been put in place for distance education students. These techniques include the study group, telephone and video conferencing.

Techniques to Help Support
Distance Education Students

Study Group	Face-to-face student meetings on a regional basis – facilitated by a local tutor
Telephone Conferencing	Group meetings at local university center connected to main campus via speaker phone – facilitated by tutor on main campus
Video Conferencing	Two way interactive video links at satellite campuses – facilitated by tutor on main campus

The study group is a very important feature of distance education in Southern Africa. Students who live in one region or district are encouraged to meet occasionally at a central place. The study group meeting is normally facilitated by a local tutor who has been hired for that purpose. This could be a local school teacher or some other local professional who holds a college degree. Naturally, it is not always easy to match the expertise of the tutor with the subject at hand. In most cases there is a single tutor for all courses. Due to the mismatch between the expertise of the tutor and the subject matter, the study group phenomenon can be a source of frustration for both tutors and students. Several study groups have dissolved when students, who view them as a waste of time and resources, stop attending.

Telephone conferencing is a useful distance education delivery tool in the Southern African region. Occasionally, learners who reside in a particular district are asked to assemble at a local university center, operated by a major university, to participate via speakerphone.   The tutor, located at the main campus, interacts with them on the speakerphone. Though the purpose of telephone conferencing is usually to answer students' questions, in practice, the students usually agree on a topic and then ask the tutor to explain that topic.

Video conferencing is slowly becoming a major feature of distance education in the region. Universities operate satellite campuses/stations at a number of distant locations.   For example, UNAM has a satellite campus nearly 800 kilometers away. The student, instead of automatically coming to the main campus for the vacation school, reports to whichever campus is nearer to where he/she lives - the main campus or a satellite campus. The tutor then teaches the students in front of him/her at the main campus and at the same time, through the use of video conferencing also teaches those at the other campuses. Of course, this arrangement is not as smooth as it sounds. Since most students have not had access to any reading material prior to the video conference, it is difficult to get consensus on what to talk about in the given two hour period. The current trend seems to be to separate the two groups – those on campus and those at the satellite center – and to meet separately with each group.

The Paradox of Technology in Distance Education

Although advanced technology is slowly becoming an important feature of distance education in Africa, it remains the single most significant handicap of distance education in the continent. Today's distance education thrives on high technology. However, a number of things mitigate against the use of high technology in the provision of distance education in Africa. First, developing nations, which includes all African countries, are significantly lacking in "high technology". That seems most logical since the historic view of the difference between nations of the "first world" and "third world" is based on technology. Developing countries were called third world countries because they were using old or backward technology. And, of course, most still do.

A second block to the use of advanced technology in Southern Africa is that most "high technology" runs on electrical power - a rare commodity among the people who need distance education the most. Thirdly, computer technology, which is undoubtedly the key to the future provision of distance education worldwide, is still in its infancy in the developing world. It goes without saying that there is a gross shortage of personal computers for students at most African universities. For example, the last time I counted there were about 20 personal computers in the UNAM Library for the 8000 students, and half of them were not working. In order for a student to use a computer it must be booked in advance and often a student may have to wait a week or more to use one. The majority, simply do not bother booking them. If they have to use a computer they seek the services of people who work with computers, such as secretaries, and pay a fee for the service. If this is the situation for full-time students at a modern university in the capital city, you can imagine the situation for distance education students, the majority of whom reside in the rural areas.

And finally, high technology is still a novelty to many. For this reason, most high-tech media devices are likely to be distractions to teaching and learning. The technology is so powerful that it, not the content of the instruction, demands the attention of the student. As Marshal McLuhan (1967) so aptly put it, "the medium is the message". It will be some time before the technology is taken for granted as a necessary means for teaching and learning in distance education. When the technology is the object of appreciation it ceases to become the means to an end. Instead, it becomes the end itself. For example, video conferencing is relatively new in Africa. And, for most it is the object of appreciation and hence a distraction to teaching and learning. At UNAM we use video conferencing to link on-campus students with distance education students at the Northern campus. It takes many weeks before the medium of instruction becomes a normal part

of the class and the perplexity which is written all over the faces of the students in front of us and those on the screen begin to relax.

The Challenge of Distance Education in Southern Africa – Balancing the Use of High and Low Technology

Given the importance of technology in distance education, what then is the way forward for the provision of distance education in African institutions of higher learning? It would be folly to suggest that African countries must continue with or revert to basic technology. It would be equally wrong to suggest that they must discard the old technology, which has stood the test of time, and substitute it with new gadgets that they are not quite ready for widespread use. Developing nations must use what they have available and at the same time begin to appropriately invest in suitable high technology. Where basic technology such as the printed word and the audiotape apply, they must move ahead and use it to its full worth. And where high technology such as computer networking is called for they must invest heavily in it.

Most developing nations find themselves in a cleft in respect to technology. They have discarded "third world" technology before fully understanding how the "first world" technology works. Most do not have the means to acquire first world technology. And those who have the means to acquire it lack the capabilities to maintain and thus sustain it. Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, once remarked, "we should not get rid of the little corner store, before we build the supermarket". In respect of technology, most African countries destroyed the little corner store before they were prepared to even start building the supermarket. In short, "third world" countries have tried to run before they can walk. In most cases, it is too late to go back to "third world" technology that worked perfectly well and was sustainable.

Earlier this year, I needed a typewriter and was told there was none on campus. When the word processor came into being, typewriters were discarded. The campus is full of broken down computers. And, due to the frequency of breakdowns in the computer system, secretaries spend many days twiddling their thumbs because they have nothing to do. The simple solution is that there should be a match between the adoption of new gadgets and the training of people who will maintain them. Otherwise, the old basic technology that is easy to maintain should not be discarded.

The contention that computers are not suitable for developing nations is a fallacy. To say computers are unsuitable for Africa, for example, is tantamount to suggesting that all these gadgets such as motorcars, guns, and airplanes, all of which seem to be doing very well, are unsuitable for Africa. The computer can do well if there is adequate political will to invest in it. Like the many other gadgets that did not originate from Africa, the computer has been adapted for particular environments. The breakdowns of computer systems and networks have nothing to do with their suitability for Africa. They have more to do with the lack of knowledge and relevant skills on the part of the users and those who have to maintain them. Plus, the shortage of parts and the necessary software is largely due to the lack of the political will on the part of governments to invest in computer technology just as much as they have invested in other things such as military ware.

The major reason why developing societies lack the necessary technology is that they have not become dependent enough on certain technologies to invest in them. In other words, computers are rare commodities in Africa because we have not become dependent enough on computers to

invest in them. When we reach that stage we will make sure that there are enough computers and they run perfectly. Until then computers are just a novelty. Without any doubt, simple computer applications like email and PowerPoint, will eventually bring computers to the center of African life. Of course, many of these technologies are addictive. Email makes corresponding so easy. Once you become hooked, it is very difficult to stay away from it. PowerPoint is slowly becoming a necessity to most of us. Few academics would now use an overhead projector for a presentation at an international conference. PowerPoint has become the "in" thing when it comes to presenting at such important gatherings. Anything else looks very shabby. The pressure is on for every one to use PowerPoint. Even those who have yet to adopt the use of computers in their professional life find themselves under pressure to use PowerPoint for their presentations. The need for survival in the academic world has forced many to invest in laptops and other such niceties. Africa will get there, slowly.

Would the availability of computers alleviate problems of distance education arising from the scarcity of high technology? I do not think that technology alone would be a solution without a certain level of sustainability. In places where computers have become a way of life the sudden availability of computers would certainly be a welcome addition to the sustainability of distance education programs. It would, without any doubt, solve some immediate problems. For example, if all the staff members at UNAM would have personal computers in their offices, something that is still a dream here, there would be much greater opportunity for tutors to produce quality modules for distance education.

When I joined the University of Botswana in 1995, there was one common area in the entire university with six personal computers for the use of all University staff. When I left in 1999, my own department had a room set up with computers available for staff use. It is hard to imagine that only four years ago personal computers were not available to all staff members in their offices at the University of Botswana. Today, the University of Botswana has installed a computer in each staff member's office.

Giving personal computers to staff members does not in itself guarantee utilization. Computer phobia is still very much in place in Africa. The gadget is still new to many. The Faculty of Education at UNAM has a policy that gives preference to senior academics when it comes to the distribution of equipment. Accordingly, professors have computers in their offices while junior lecturers have to make the long walk to the Computer Center. Meanwhile, many professors do not know how to use the computers that they have in their offices. They come from the old school where computers did not exist. They simply keep them in their offices as status symbols. And, the juniors who were trained recently in institutions where the computer is a way of life are sitting idle without computers in their offices.

Since computer technology is relatively new in Africa, it will take several decades before distance education can benefit from it. Sophisticated media such as the web and electronic mail are still many generations away in most parts of Africa. For the foreseeable future, distance education in Africa will be dominated by basic technology. However, this is no reason to despair. Distance education must go on with whatever is at our disposal. Computers will eventually become commonplace in Africa, and this will certainly foster a new way of life in Africa. Governments will be forced to invest in them just as they have invested in the other necessities such as the motorcar. Meanwhile, A*luta Continua*[2] in distance education with printed material, audio tape recorders, and the telephone.

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[2] *Aluta Continua* is Swahili for "the struggle continues".

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