



Association for the Development of Education in Africa

**Biennale on Education in Africa
(Libreville, Gabon, March 27-31, 2006)**

Plenary Session 5

**Round table discussion:
Challenges and opportunities**

**Distance Education, Information and Communication
Technologies – Policy Challenges**

*by the ADEA Working Group on Distance Education and Open
Learning*

**Working Document
DRAFT**

PLEASE DO NOT DISSEMINATE

PL-5.2

• Original version in English •

This document was prepared by ADEA for its Biennial Meeting (Libreville, Gabon, March 27-31, 2006). The views and opinions expressed in this volume are those of the authors and should not be attributed to ADEA, to its members or affiliated organizations or to any individual acting on behalf of ADEA.

The document is a working document still in the stages of production. It has been prepared to serve as a basis for discussions at the ADEA Biennial Meeting and should not be disseminated for other purposes at this stage.

© Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) – 2006

Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)

International Institute for Educational Planning

7-9 rue Eugène Delacroix

75116 Paris, France

Tel.: +33(0)1 45 03 77 57

Fax: +33(0)1 45 03 39 65

adea@iiep.unesco.org

web site: www.ADEAnet.org

Distance Education and ICTs: Policy challenges

Introduction

As most developing countries become knowledge based economies, there is a corresponding pressure on formal education systems to deliver relevant, state of the art, employment-focused education and workforce training. As in many other parts of the world, this problem is compounded in Africa given the simultaneous pressures to meet Education for All (EFA) goals and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as satisfy Higher Education requirements. While Distance Education (DE) cannot be a panacea, used as a vehicle for progress, it can offer sustainable short term and long-term solutions to the educational dilemma/s in Africa.

Aligned with democratic principles, DE aims to meaningfully unfold the potentialities and creativities of individuals and nations; we must learn to give effective meaning to its winning arguments of cost-effectiveness, access and quality. DE should be seen as actively supporting democratic ideals by opening up access to education; being increasingly non-discriminate and inclusive in its approach; mainstreaming marginalized audiences and stretching the established confines of traditional education. Special consideration must also be given to the technology-inspired drive behind it.

This is the mission of the Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (WGDEOL), which attempts to provide target-stratified and meaningful solutions to groups and countries in the sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). However much of the research carried out by the WGDEOL concludes that policy issues represent a bottleneck regarding the effective use of DE as a development tool in given countries.

The WGDEOL is concerned by the fact that the uneven integration and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in DE slows down its potential contributions towards achieving EFA goals and MDGs. This paper is premised on the view that policies regarding the integration of ICTs in DE need to be systematically reviewed to enable the achievement of development goals in the SSA and outlines the WGDEOL's commitment in that respect.

The relevance of ICTs in SSA

The potential of ICTs in fostering educational development in Africa is unambiguously clear when one looks at the educational challenges facing the continent. The increasing population is generating pressure on the educational system to meet EFA goals. The resulting increase in demands for primary enrolment will mean a corresponding increase in the demand for secondary and tertiary education. Higher enrolments in traditional face-to-face education systems imply considerable developmental expenditure in school infrastructure and human resources. In fact, the World Bank has estimated the additional cost of providing EFA for African children in 33 countries at around 31 billion dollars in the next 15 years. In light of the above, providing quality secondary and tertiary education to an increasing number of individuals will continue to be formidable task.

This potential, combined with the winning arguments of DE i.e. quality, access and cost-effectiveness, heighten its appeal but requires careful thought and investment for actual implementation. As we move into integrating ICT in DE for development, we need to keep in mind equity issues regarding gender, rural/urban, language ability and able/disabled divides. All determining factors on whether all population segments and geographical areas within a country benefit from ICT need to be carefully

analysed. We understand that by merely being present, ICTs will not create miracles. But we need to use it as a powerful instrument of planned changes. Our focus on using ICTs should be on identifying how ICTs might be used to facilitate and support education in such a way that access to good quality education might eventually become available for all. The WGDEOL has guided its activities in that sense.

Confusing ICT and DE: Integrating ICT in DE

At the very outset of the debate on ICTs and DE, it is essential to understand that ICT is not DE and vice versa; that one supports and promotes the other's development, but that these terms cannot be used interchangeably. It is our view that this confusion of terms and decontextualised definitions can compound policy challenges regarding achieving development goals. Daniel (2005a, p.3) flags the various and possibly erroneous attempts to define DE and its related concept Open and Distance Learning (ODL) "in terms of technology. This is a genuine trend. I noticed in my recent trip to eight countries in southern Africa that ministers of education and others wanted to talk about ICTs as much as about Open and Distance Learning. What are we to make of this?" To us within the WGDEOL, this is a clear signal that our practice must steer clear of such definitional confusion and give due importance to the contextual relevance of different types of technological applications in DE.

When integrated into DE, ICTs become crucial in bridging distances and increasing outreach capacity. Evolving from a humble print-based origin to online synchronous or asynchronous learning transactions, distances can become simply a matter of Greenwich Meridian Time (GMT). Amidst the ongoing debates over the terms used to define the teaching/learning transaction over distances – what is essentially known as distance education, there is an imaginary continuum between two poles of educational transaction: face to face and World Wide Web-based. Between these two poles there are at least four "generations" of distance education, ranging from correspondence education, through radio and television broadcast and synchronous audio/video teleconferencing to multimedia and computer conferencing distance education systems (Rumble, 2003, p.703). Each of these generations has important roles to play in advancing development agendas through education.

Research carried out by the WGDEOL points to the fact that in spite of a long history of using ICT (mainly radio and television) to provide DE, Africa has not fully benefited from their potential. In higher education, for instance, apart from South Africa, Mauritius, Madagascar and Tanzania, DE represents less than 10% of the Gross Enrolment Rate at the tertiary education level. Our research points to the fact that although SSA countries are conscious of the potential of the integration of technology in DE in meeting the needs of the masses and in reducing costs, in most African countries, the concept of DE and educational technology is still emerging. Their resistance to this development can be explained by the slow growth of internet connection taking place over the continent. As at 2003, print constituted the most significant learning tool in DE with 131 out of the 143 institutions surveyed (91.6%) still relying on this type of media. Satellite as a means of communication was used by only 9.1% of the institutions surveyed. The Internet and CD-ROMs were more widely used in Francophone institutions (34%) than in either Anglophone (5%) or Lusophone institutions (0%). Other reasons for this slow movement towards incorporating ICTs are notably poverty, an unstable global economic environment, and the scarcity of resources in poor countries that can hardly be channelled towards ICT development.

As we are faced with new versions of ICTs and have demonstrable evidence of how successful is their integration into DE, we need to revisit our policies regarding ICT and DE in the light of the ICT-driven new phenomenon: the digital divide. The rapid developments in the respective fields have given rise to a tension between an ideal situation (a thoroughly connected world) and the real (characterised by the digital divide). Against this background, it is clear that the potential of DE for fostering lifelong learning opportunities including personal and professional development for national development needs to be thoroughly tapped into for optimal and effective implementation. This should be premised on democratic traditions entrenched in equity and inclusiveness. Indeed this was the focus of the ICT Conference the WGDEOL helped organize in Nigeria in 2004¹ where discussions were grounded in the lived experiences of participants who were essentially policymakers.

The state of technological infrastructure and policy

To gain further insight into the status of technological infrastructure in SSA with a view to support DE interventions, the WGDEOL carried out a survey, which confirmed that while financial issues are critical, a major obstacle to adopting educational technology successfully remains the establishing of the political and institutional framework necessary to sustain initiatives (WGDEOL, 2003b). This policy framework should enable systematic planning during the introduction of new technologies. For example, if the end result of educational application of technologies is achieving cost-effectiveness, plans need to indicate whether there will be real savings and how these savings will be made, rather than simply transferring costs to students (most of whom are unlikely to be able to afford them, particularly in the sub-Saharan context). Based on research evidence (WGDEOL, 2002), the WGDEOL advocates that policy-makers and planners in African countries could do the following to ensure a greater return on investments in ICTs:

With educational reform in mind, develop national strategies and build capacity for using technology within the overall framework of the country education system.

Build on what has worked, including support for teacher development, improving quality in primary education, and increasing access to tertiary education.

Invest in innovation, particularly to improve the quality of mathematics, science, and technology education at secondary and tertiary levels.

Analyse costs carefully and devise budget allocations and cost sharing mechanisms.

Technologies should be viable, relevant to individual and country needs and contextualized to become sustainable solutions that could support achieving EFA goals and MDGs. They should not be incorporated in educational plans for their own

¹ Promoting the Integration of ICT into the Education Sector - Sub-regional Ministerial Conference on the Integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) into Education in West Africa: Issues and Challenges. From 26 to 30 July 2004 in Abuja, Nigeria

sake. Importantly, the choice of the technology should not cause imbalances in fixed and variable costs and thus impact on the cost-effective argument of using ODL and DE. Indeed, integration of ICTs should “make educational and financial sense to direct significantly larger proportions of total expenditure to the design and development of high quality resources” (WGDEOL, 2003b).

The crying need for sound policy frameworks: experiences of the WGDEOL

To sustain its initiatives, the WGDEOL carried out a number of surveys. Our research validates our assumption regarding the lack of:

- sound policy initiatives;
- adequate indigenous expertise and infrastructure;
- the negative past experiences in the design and;
- implementation of programs and projects using these technologies.

Amongst other things our surveys revealed that there was much resistance and lack of collaborative efforts regarding the effectiveness of DE approach to the use of production facilities, which means that if an institution considered introducing a fourth generation mode of DE provision, it would probably have to do so in isolation. For most institutions the cost of setting up the necessary infrastructure is prohibitive. This challenge is further exacerbated by the lack of appropriately skilled technical support staff and critical mass of technology-savvy users (WGDEOL, 2002). Indeed, technological constraints remain a major challenge to effective DE provision in SSA. State control over telecommunication operations in SSA has stifled private sector investment in this crucial area of economic development and is the primary cause of the disastrous state of telecommunications in SSA countries.

The WGDEOL research does identify the need for government commitment to and support for the potential of ODL through the establishment of an enabling policy framework as well as the need to maximize the use of limited resources through a variety of collaborative relationships. The need for a clear policy framework, and clearly defined roles, responsibilities and lines of communication for DE managers is highlighted as being of fundamental importance for quality provision of distance education. This provides the basis of future WGDEOL operations especially in terms of policy formulation.

To enable the seamless integration of ICTs in DE, we align ourselves with the view that there is need for strong leadership and for improving the systems of African DE organizations or institutions through collaborative efforts to evolve quality assurance mechanisms. To achieve that objective we need to advocate reprioritising the use of ICTs in DE in our development agendas. The WGDEOL is currently engaged in some related initiatives.

Within the EFA framework, in collaboration with the RESAFAD (Réseau Francophone de Formation à Distance), for instance, the WGDEOL is engaged in a project with a view to encourage policymakers to adopt national strategies to integrate ICTs in the academic and professional development of teachers and trainers through DE. This project is being conducted in collaboration with major international and francophone organizations. It incorporates a research activity designed to map out good practices within francophone countries in East Africa with a view to uncover existing mechanisms and obstacles encountered by trainers and teachers.

In line with its objective to train policy-makers on how to effectively integrate ICTs in DE, the WGDEOL plans to organize a workshop with the support of the

Commonwealth of Learning (COL) on the issue of training SSA policy makers. This is an online course supported by an optional week of face-to-face interaction and it aims at supporting distance education through policy development. By exposing policymakers to ways in which national educational policies can support distance education practices, it is expected to provide them an in-depth introduction to distance education concepts –as well as the related concept of open learning. Within a context of national policy-making, the course is meant help participants understand better the relationship between good quality distance education practices and national development through enabling national policy frameworks and mechanisms. By making it accessible through the WGDEOL, it is expected that a maximum number of SSA-based policy makers can be reached to enable them gain a working knowledge of the Internet and its potential application to distance education. The course also provides a conceptual platform to policy makers that should foster a greater understanding of the implications of different policy choices as well as their creation and implementation of appropriate policies for DE.

The WGDEOL endeavours to consolidate its systematic and synergetic approach to integrating ICTs into DE. This is evidenced by the simultaneously bottom-up and top-down approach of its projects. This should enable it to synthesize initiatives of all stakeholders operating at SSA level – including DE associations, research and teaching institutions, as well as networking with policymakers to work comprehensively towards achieving EFA goals and MDGs within the spirit of inclusiveness that characterizes DE.

Conclusion

In order to further enhance the promotion of distance education, the WGDEOL members and partners, recognize the need for government commitment to and support for the potential of DE through the establishment of an enabling policy framework; the need to maximize the use of limited resources through a variety of collaborative relationships and; the need to decentralize the management of learner support services and to maximize their effectiveness and responsiveness. It aims at supporting development goals of SSA countries through initiatives as above discussed and through enhanced collaborations with organizations like the DEASA (Distance Education Association for Southern Africa), COL (the Commonwealth of Learning), RETRIDOL (Research and Training Institute in Distance and Open Learning), SARDEC (Southern African Regional Distance Education Centre), SAIDE (South African Institute for Distance Education) and the AVU (African Virtual University). It is hoped that this concerted effort will move political will in the right direction.

References

Anderson, T. & Elloumi, F. (2004) (Eds.). Theory and practice of online learning.

Athabasca University: Canada. Available:

http://cde.athabasca.ca/online_book/intro.html

COL. (2005). Connections – Open and Distance Learning for Development. October 2005. Vol.10.No. 3

- Daniel, J. (2005 a). What's in a name? Keynote address for the 11th Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning, 20-23 September, 2005. Cambridge: UK
- Daniel, J. (2005b). Open and Distance Learning in Africa. 15CCEM Mid-Term Review for Africa and Europe, 14 November 2005. Freetown: Sierra Leone. Available: http://www.col.org/speeches/JD_0511SierraLeoneCOLTx.htm
- Daniel, J. (2006). Official Meeting at the Tertiary Education Commission. Public Talk entitled "Open and Distance Learning in Small States- Which Models?", 1st Floor, Cyber Tower, Ebène, Mauritius, 11.01.06
- Rumble, G. (2003). Modeling the costs and economics of distance education. In Moore, M. G. & Anderson, W.G. (Eds.) Handbook of Distance Education. pp. 703-713. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- WGDEOL. (2002). Open and Distance Learning in sub-Saharan Africa – A literature survey on policy and practice. Komane, J., Mays, T., Naidoo, V., Dhanarajan, G., Glennie, J. for WGDEOL. ADEA/WGEOL: Paris
- WGDEOL. (2003a). Enseignement à distance et apprentissage libre en Afrique subsaharienne : Etat des lieux dans les pays francophones. Valérien, J., Guidon, J. Wallet, J. & Brunswic, E. Pour le compte du GTEDAL. ADEA/GTEDAL : Paris
- WGDEOL. (2003b). Technological infrastructure and use of ICT in education in Africa: an overview. Butcher, N. for WGDEOL. ADEA/WGDEOL: Paris