

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Dr Gbolagade Adekanmbi  
Centre for Continuing Education  
University of Botswana  
E-mail:adekanmb@noka.ub.bw

## Introduction

One of the major developments in the field of education in Africa this century, apart from the taking over by Africans of the running of their education systems from departing colonialists, has been the relative growth of distance education. Emerging a century earlier in the circuitously pioneered offerings through colonial intervention, it has experienced some level of growth as to warrant an examination of its transformation. A quick appraisal of the nature of such transformation is the focus of this paper.

The acceptance of the system of instruction in Africa as an additional approach to teaching and learning has reasons that are not totally different from global ones. While geographical and socio-economic circumstances, problems of educational imbalance, the establishment of adult education units and departments in African universities were major factors, others such as improved communication systems and the introduction of the postal system in Africa were also noticeable. The diffusion of foreign educational practices from the colonies, and the growth of the entrepreneurial spirit in education were also major factors in the transformation of the system.

## The Concept of Transformation

Transformation, as a general concept refers to some degree of change, usually significant, observed in the quality of a situation, or in the nature and trend of a phenomenon. Lippit (1973) has observed that nothing could be measured that would not display 'some notable difference at least between two successive points in time where the time interval is long enough' (p.38)

In distance education, transformation would refer to dimensions or levels of change over a period that have become significant in practices in the field. For example, the use of more sophisticated media, or the noticeable change in the range of programmes represents issues that would fit within a period. In his search for a paradigm of transformation in distance education, Adekanmbi (1993) had identified the following parameters against which transformation in the field could be examined. These include such things as:

- the gradual move from less sophisticated media to more sophisticated ones
- the merger of ways between conventional and distance education
- the changes recorded in the number of clientele over a period of time
- the improvements in tutor learner interaction as to guarantee greater levels of quality
- greater levels of collaboration between practitioners and providers in the field
- the involvement of a wider variety of providers in the field.

To these, we may add:

- the use of new technologies both for support and actual teaching
- the emergence of mega, virtual and global universities on the continent
- the use of distance education for liberal motives
- the trend in research thrust in the field
- the degree to which distance education may be addressing development oriented issues
- the possibility of pecuniary motives and commercial tendencies
- the extent to which distance education focuses on development-oriented issues.

## **Programmes and Model Changes**

Most of the programmes at independence were either teacher-oriented or were aimed at civil service personnel development. According to Kabwasa and Kaunda (1973) these were programmes aimed at civil service training of personnel who were to take over from the departing colonialists. In central Africa, especially the French speaking areas of the Central African Republic and the then Peoples Republic of Congo, civil service development and programmes for secondary school graduates were common. Exact replications of university programmes followed later with the Ahmadu Bello University initially trying its hands on teacher-in service programmes in 1967. Other universities soon followed suit. With the coming of the University of Lagos Correspondence and Open Studies Institute in 1974, and later the coming of the Open University of Tanzania, the road seems to have been opened for the full teaching of science at a distance at the tertiary level. Also following on these heels is the adoption of an open model of distance education that used to be the preserve of the developed countries, and a few 'Asian tigers'. Experience in Zimbabwe shows that this is the road to follow. Notably, the University of South Africa had been a forerunner in this regard. Even now the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is putting in place plans for an Open University while Nigeria's potential for an open university, hidden within the confines of the University of Abuja's distance education system may still one day, become a reality.

On the whole, the numbers in terms of clients at independence were few, considering the populations, range of programmes and areas of focus. University involvement did raise the figures in a way and the creation of more universities, coupled with the need for some of them to identify new sources of funding led to an explosion later of clients. Government policies on teacher training, with the corresponding setting up of institutions to train teachers at a distance for the Universal Primary Education programmes raised the figures of clients further. This is true of Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya, among others. Perhaps also easily noticeable is the recognition by providers of the use of the term 'distance education' to describe their activities, institutions and practices as opposed to the use of the term correspondence institutions.

## **The Nature of Collaboration**

The nature of collaboration at the beginning of the system of instruction was between colonial departments of education providing space and some personnel for classes and examinations; advertising and publicising results of examinations and announcing dates for such. Some level of UNESCO involvement was noticeable as in the Algerian situation with the Centre national d'enseignement generalise (Kabwasa and Kaunda, 1973). UNESCO was also present in Zambia in 1966 providing newspaper support, with correspondence with radio and television backing given. Noticeably, this was a Ministry of Education run programme for industrial workers. Gradually, collaboration has now come to involve a wide variety of agencies including the Commonwealth of Learning; the British Council, USAID, the International Extension College (IEC) and others. It has come in form of the award of visiting scholarships with many African countries receiving assistance in the starting of distance education institutions. Collaboration at association level has been discussed by Kinyanjui (1996) as seen in the efforts of the regional bodies like the West African Distance Education Association (WADEA), the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) and the National Association of Distance Education Organisations in South Africa, (NADEOSA). These have been involved in training organising workshops and other collaborative ventures. Collaboration has included the sharing of resources and the co-planning of programmes and has tried to address such areas of need as staff shortages; lack of expertise, coping with student isolation; promoting material development and enhancing professional career structure and practice.

A major point to note in terms of transformation is the recognition that some growth has been recorded in the level of expertise available in Africa through regional collaboration. With institutions such as the Commonwealth of Learning getting more involved in collaborative efforts, the use of Africans to carry out distance education training in the African context is becoming commonplace. Opportunities for training hitherto existing outside are now being complimented by training programmes in African institutions. For example, The National Teachers Institute in Kaduna now appears to have built a niche for itself such that developments in Sierra Leone and the Gambia in distance education take a cue from its operations. Similar experiences are noticeable of some South African institutions.

## **The Use of New Media**

Transformation in the use of media may be seen in two distinct ways, First are changes reflected in the form of a veering away from the use of print, to the use of radio, cassettes and computers and the Internet, to get teaching and learning done. Second is transformation in the context of print now made better in terms of better prepared texts, high quality material development processes and enhanced desktop development capacities.

To what extent have the media of distance education in Africa become new or more sophisticated? A study carried out by Omolewa and Adekanmbi (1988) reflects a continuing general romance with print by many institutional providers. This is true of many developed nations as well. The continued use of print in Africa has been due to its cheapness and easy adaptability, among other factors. Challenges faced in the use of new media include the cost; inadequate personnel to monitor them; and the seeming inability to replace damaged equipment. Khan, (1994), in his identification of other limiting factors has identified educational conservatism, lack of manpower, the cargo cult mentality, educational imperialism and lack of adequate co-operation among those who have it.

There is however some success stories in Africa in terms of use of new media. These may have to be collaborated with and their success studied for use. Apart from UNISA, Technikon South Africa has made in-roads into new media use. Many distance education units are identifying plans to enhance their media capacities.

## **The Nature of Quality Control**

Quality control in distance education in Africa has undergone some transformation. The initial basis of quality early this century was the degree of excellence decided upon by colonial correspondence colleges, and the foreign examinations of the University of London and others. Thus, passing the Cambridge examinations served as a basis for determining how far African students may have been prepared. With the in-flow of distance education practices involving government agencies, universities and other local initiatives, the determination of quality has gradually shifted to being determined by models of distance education in practice. Specifically the following changes have been observed, namely:

- the actual putting in place by governments of measures that promote quality of practices
- the use of distance education models that allow senates of existing universities and other organs to determine regulations in line with existing conventional regulations
- use of local examinations to ascertain parities of esteem especially in junior and secondary school level examinations or courses/programmes
- gradual demarcation of course development processes, arising partly from the results of training programmes the personnel in various African universities have had with the likes of the IEC, the University of London and other foreign based institutions.

In terms of policies, some government ministries of education have education policy documents clearly identifying their expectations of distance education institutions in the country.

Generally, the demise in foreign correspondence colleges as a result of growing local initiatives has brought with it a growth in supervised correspondence colleges or study programmes. Distance education programmes with support service infrastructures, and more face to face teaching components have thus resulted in reduced learner isolation.

Course materials being used in many systems now benefit from a transition from the use of study guides to the development of well-prepared self-contained materials. In recent times many institutions across West and Southern Africa have experienced a remarkable growth in the number of self contained course materials developed for Certificate and Diploma programmes in Adult Education, or in degree-based teacher education programmes. The writers are getting more indigenous as the Botswana case indicates. The existing integrated systems may have fuelled the identification of writer-lecturers from within

institutions providing dual-mode activities. Thus a gradual transition from foreign-based materials for teaching to locally produced ones has been observed.

### **Research and Development**

The need to examine the research focus of distance education in Africa is based on the capacity building initiative which research offers for all fields of human endeavour. Generally, even in countries where distance education emerged, the research dimension and the perception of distance education as an academic discipline was not considered for a long time. Holmberg's (1982) survey shows the global nature of research in the field. These had covered issues like methodology, cognitive psychology and other sociological topics, mostly of the application of other disciplines. The African situation reflects a slow embrace with the research agenda. Most of the initial writings have focused on a romanticised view of the field, of a case being made for the use of the system of instruction, or reports on case studies of happenings in the field. However, the holding of the first seminar on correspondence education in Africa, reflected in Correspondence Education in Africa (Kabwasa and Kaunda, 1973) under the auspices of the Economic Commission for Africa marked a major movement forward in the dissemination of research initiatives in the field.

In Africa, the teaching of the discipline of distance education as a separate university subject become noticeable, as it is now being offered as a course in some university departments of adult education. From about 1987/88 session, the University of Ibadan in Nigeria had started offering it as an undergraduate course. Since 1988, a number of Ph.D.'s have been awarded with specialisation in distance education from the university. In Botswana, students in the Departments of Adult Education, Nursing Education and Sociology are examining research titles in the field. A lot of Africans benefit from distance education courses offered by foreign institutes like the IEC, University of London, the Open Learning Institute of the British Columbia and the South Australian College of Advanced Education. Regional associations, working with local universities and in some cases, NGO's are spearheading the development of formal distance education programmes. Further growth would however be needed here.

### **Development Orientation**

Adekanmbi (1997) has examined the development orientation of distance education in Africa. He noted that an examination of the use of distance education in Africa tends to show its wide application in the area of teacher preparation. He cited examples of projects embarked upon in Nigeria, Kenya, Botswana, Ghana, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe as reflecting this dimension. In Nigeria, the various universities of Ibadan, Lagos and Ahmadu Bello promote substantially teacher education in their distance education programmes.

Thus, in Adekanmbi's view (Adekanmbi, 1997), the growth of distance education in Africa does appear to have focused on Africa's basic problems of mass illiteracy, poverty, squalor, and a general low level of development, which are not usually addressed directly by conventional education. The new distance education initiative may indeed be attempting to re-enact old restrictive, educational pyramids in some ways. These are issues, which need be addressed by a resort to new models, the need for greater flexibility and a re-examination of goals and programmes by providers as part of a drive towards transformation.

### **Issues in the Next Millennium**

Among the issues which appear strong on the agenda in the next millennium for educationists world-wide, which also have relevance for distance education, are calls for egalitarianism, the democratisation of educational opportunities, and the use of participatory approaches in teaching and learning. There have also been calls for approaches that recognise the learners' individuality and needs. Also noticeable are calls for collaboration among distance education providers, global education, emphasis on work-oriented curriculum, and issues in the realm of self-directed learning. In South Africa, a greater demand for learner interactivity in the type of materials being produced is seen while in Botswana the Vision 2016 call is aimed at among others the provision of lifelong education for all. Distance education needs to address these.

Within the global education context in which African distance education is to find a berth, experiential learning and the place of interactive technologies have been constantly raised. Notions of the international curriculum and co-authorship are being discussed while the role of lecturers in the twenty-first century is being re-examined. The dimension of culture, which distance education, will reflect and the types of models of distance education to be used are being appraised. The emergence of the African Virtual University, a totally new phenomenon is gaining a lot of attention and action, much as it is creating scares around the continent. Even with the very low level of Africans subscription to the Internet, the African Virtual University already has friends, and clients, who are pushing practices reflective of the new millennium expectations.

Only one mega university exists in Africa, and this is the University of South Africa, with a 1995 student enrolment of 130,000. UNISA's reason for being in this elite club has a history that dates back to the apartheid days. Will African distance education systems, even where there are high populations and possible clients attempt to reach such high enrolment figures? Tanzania does have an Open University and Zimbabwe's dream in this respect are clear but their enrolment figures are still low. What would have been a major player in this regard, Nigeria's Open University got aborted, and it would appear that the 'conditions' which nailed the mega university ambitions are still within that national context. There are great possibilities that the enrolment figures in the next millennium in distance education in Africa would be significantly higher while the quest for bigger models are to be expected.

A gradual merger of ways is being experienced in institutions, which have distance education units. This is seen in the allowance by students in formal settings to use materials developed by the Distance Education Units; the involvement of a wider section of university and college staff in the writing, editing and general development of materials, and in the modularization of programmes in the conventional departments. The administrative sections of the universities and colleges are now getting more involved in the day to day running of aspects of distance education, and perhaps unlike before, learning to accept them and their demands.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Distance education in Africa has no doubt experienced a number of 'fundamental changes' in its practices. These reflected in the range of programmes and subjects offered and in the nature of collaborative ventures embarked upon do give some indications of some level of transformation. The introduction of new media of technology of delivery; the extent to which quality control is being considered; and indications of a merger of ways between distance education and conventional education also underscore this. Also observed is a gradual adoption of new distance education models such that greater numbers of clients can be served. A true development orientation of offerings still appears suspect while the research focus and the recognition of the field as a distinct discipline are becoming more evident. However, these developments represent a starting point in the nature of changes observed over a century of practice in the system under discourse.

As Africa moves into the next millennium, it would have to address the implications of global and virtual university offerings, self-directed learning, new media initiatives and attempt to try new models to ensure greater autonomy in its distance education practice. The context that would make this possible is gradually being developed. This is the viable option for sustaining the emerging transformation of distance education in Africa.

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