Towards Sustainable Open and Distance Learning in the Developmental State:
Policy, Ethics and Practice

Open and Distance Learning—The Importance of Self Learning Materials

Introduction

The socio-political environment of South Africa has been characterised by particularly intense political conflict and socio-cultural divisions along race and class lines. Country’s colonial history and the underlying conflict between British and Afrikaner nationalism had its impact on the higher education system in South Africa. African universities, though existing in various forms before European colonisation, are hybrids of colonial institutions.

Today, the post-apartheid transformation of South African society is fundamentally reshaping the system.
Present Education Scenario in Africa

While school enrolment has expanded dramatically over the past 40 years in most of the developing world, this has not been the case in many African countries. Unable to stem the steep downward enrolment trends that became manifest in the economic crisis years of the 1980s, these countries in the late 1990s have disturbing educational profiles: only half of their children are going to primary school, adult literacy rates are below 40 per cent, and over 50 per cent of women are illiterate. Such a profile has grave implications for Africa's development.

Among the myriad problems plaguing education in Africa is the low quality of schooling in much of the region, with overly large class sizes and the average number of students per teacher higher than in any other world region except South Asia. In most schools, teachers are often unqualified, teaching aids are few and textbook provision is desperately poor. As a result, learning achievement is low. Teacher recruitment, retention, and deployment are insufficient and inefficient. According to the World Bank simulations based on UNESCO statistics, Sub-Saharan Africa will need more than 1,361,000 new teachers between 2000 and 2015 to meet the demands of primary education (Schwille 2007).

There are unequal opportunities for rural children and the urban poor, and the gender gap yawns ever wider, with below 30 per cent female literacy rates in 19 sub-Saharan countries. Increasing numbers of students flowing from expanded primary education and the need to improve the educational levels of the labor force to benefit from a globalizing economy make it inevitable to expand the higher education sector.

Higher education—long neglected—is now the fastest growing segment of the education sector. Primary and secondary school access in Africa has been expanded following independence, providing Africa with a new generation of individuals ready to study at the university level. Unfortunately, the growth and
financing of higher education facilities does not seem to have expanded at the same rate as primary and secondary facilities.

Today, there is both a dearth of professionals and an excess of knowledge that need to be tapped. Africa, one of the poorest continents with poverty datum lines well below the standard, with high infant mortality rates, high prevalence of the HIV and AIDS, pandemic struggles to keep pace with the ever-changing face of the global village, has a mammoth task of providing relevant and sufficient education to its populace.

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**EDUCATION IN AFRICA — SOME BASIC FACTS**

According to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), UNESCO and World Bank:

- Although literacy rates have greatly improved in Africa over the last few decades, approximately 40% of Africans over the age of 15, and 50% of women above the age of 25 remain illiterate.
- Illiteracy among individuals over the age of 15 stands at 41 per cent;
- Gender disparity in education prevails in 75% of countries.
- Almost 50% of countries may not attain the goal of universal primary education by 2015; nearly 40 million children are not going to school.
- Liberia has the lowest primary student-teacher ratio of 19; in Mozambique the ratio is 67. Cape Verde has the highest gross enrolment rate in secondary education (80%); Niger has the lowest (11%).
- Enrolment in lower secondary school rose to 46% in 2003 from 28% in 1991. The gross secondary school enrolment rate exceeds 20% in half of the countries, yet remains below 8% in 10 countries.
- Higher education and other levels and forms of education are experiencing problems with respect to access, quality and even relevance.
- HIV/AIDS is likely to claim the lives of 10% of teachers within the coming five years, and 20% of school-age children will be AIDS orphans. A minimum of three million more teachers are needed in sub-Saharan Africa to achieve the goal of universal primary education by 2015.
Education in Africa is often considered as a global issue. Numerous studies conducted on the status of education in the African continent indicate that there are great socio-economic disparities between urban and rural areas of the continent. Regarding education, the available statistics present stark differences in attendance, availability of resources, and teacher quality. This makes it imperative to provide accessible education in Africa.

Education is critical to Africa's social and economic development. As has been said by Mr. Henri Lopes, UNESCO's Deputy Director-General for Africa,

*If you don't have educated people, you cannot develop. Basic education is necessary even to make progress in such areas as health and population.*

Thus, there is no doubt that education has a significant role to play in the development of African nations. There is a need to change education strategies for greater economic advancement. Africa's future development must be linked to a strategic education policy. To begin to understand the importance of education and development, one needs to understand the close link between education and economic development. Investments in basic education are essential for improving Africa's human capacity. That capacity is the foundation needed to realise increased productivity, improvements in health status and reductions in fertility, and the development of democracy.

By improving higher education facilities and promoting Open and Distance Education, Africa should aim to utilise education's ability to foster national development. In a changed scenario, Governments in Africa, with the help of

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**Solution**

- Africa loses an estimated 20,000 skilled personnel a year to developed countries, brain drain.
- There are more people connected to the Internet in New York City than on the entire African continent. In Liberia, almost no one has internet access (0.03 per 100).
their financial partners, are increasingly looking to make higher education more widely accessible, more relevant, and of higher quality.

And from here starts the crucial task of distance education.

**What is Distance Education?**

Distance education is a form of education that aims to teach students who are not physically present in the classrooms. It is the process of creating an educational experience of equal quality for the learner to best suit their needs outside the classroom. It is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology and instructional system designs that aim to deliver education to students who are not in class room or campus. The main advantage of distance education is that the students, instead of attending courses individually, can communicate with the teachers through internet at a convenient time and can discuss an issue or topic over the net.

Definition by Ian Mugridge, (1991)

"a form of education in which there is normally a separation between teacher and learner and thus one in which other means -- the printed and written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing, for example -- are used to bridge the physical gap."

In Distance Education, an individual can study from home or from a remote area without shifting his base. It is often termed as flexible learning as one can handle other commitments along with their studies. In Africa, Distance Education has a big role to play as its focus is on to capture that segment of African students who have been virtually deprived of higher education for many years. It makes education available and accessible even to the rural areas of Africa and is now fast growing.
How Distance Education Operates?

In recent years, Distance Education has successfully integrated new communication technologies. Audio and video broadcast technology capabilities especially helped to revolutionise the scope and capability of distance education programs. More recent advances in computer networking technologies have showed great promise for distance education. Computer-based instruction programs could be rapidly revised and disseminated and users could be given more freedom of time and location for their studies. In addition, more instructor-student interaction and feedback are being incorporated into the program materials. Coupled with the drastically reduced costs for both transmission and delivery and the increasing pervasiveness of globally-capable computer network connections, distance education has the potential for explosive growth and acceptance.

Need of Distance Education in Africa

In a World Bank research in 2000, it has been asserted that “the quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions and its availability is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness.” Thus, higher education becomes the pinnacle of development.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), established by the United Nations in 2000, emphasise the importance of human rights and achieving social and
economic development. One of the eight goals of the MDGs also made access to basic education imperative by the year 2015. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals' ‘Education for All’ (EFA) target is a daunting task that requires, among other initiatives, the use of open and distance learning (ODL).

African countries face tremendous challenges vis-à-vis other geographies and regions. Rapidly increasing demands for all levels and forms of education coupled with local and regional governments' limited capacity to expand provision of education through traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions leave ODL as a viable option to address and match the growing demand for education. It offers one way to increase the capacity of educational systems without incurring the cost of building facilities by allowing learners the flexibility to remain in their communities or at their duty post. In a changed scenario, Distance education is considered as one of the solutions to training and education and personnel who are working full-time and who are unable to attend and/or afford to register in full-time residential institutions. It is also seen as a solution to the depleting ranks of teachers and healthcare and other professionals, which have been decimated by HIV/AIDS, as distance education can provide effective pre-service and in-service training programs.

PROBLEMS FACED BY AFRICAN STUDENTS

- Institutions are overcrowded and underfunded.
- Very expensive textbooks which most students cannot afford
- Deteriorating physical facilities
- Insufficient/outdated library holdings
- Lack of adequate computing equipment/internet connectivity
- Restive and unhappy faculty
- Less time and support for research
- Loss of quality in teaching, learning and research activities
- Very high student/teacher ratio.
- Majority textbooks are foreign and written primarily for the western world making it difficult for the African student to understand.
Online courses and courses delivered by video-conferencing or through other technological mediums may be the rage in different developed and developing countries, but in Africa a full range of delivery options must be considered. There are problems relating to high-speed Internet infrastructures, access to computers, and human resources with the expertise to effectively implement and support hi-tech delivery methods in Africa. Thus, in Africa, distance education takes on a variety of forms including paper-based courses, lectures and instructions through audio-visual CDs, and e-books. The latter forms of media have a broad reach and are accessible to learners who lack tools and technical expertise.

In order to address inequalities in educational opportunities, social strata imbalances as well as the manpower needs and development of the continent, it is necessary to adopt a new trend of education. Open and Distance Education is a learner-centered type of education; with a wide range of choices to the learner; open access without restricted formal entry requirements and entrance examinations; and with flexible and distributed learning.

Open and Distance Education strengthens the human resource base without geographical relocations because of its flexibility and convenience. Through this mode we can remove the traditional barriers to attaining university education. Despite of their high levels of proficiency, Africans were mainly deprived of university education due to colonial ideology. Now, through ODL, they can reshape their future by influencing their social and personal development. Higher education has a formative character, for it instills both character and accountability in the beneficiaries. It also has a transformative element for the role of higher education is to assess, evaluate and help all systems at national levels and propose ways of developing and transforming them. In other words, ODL helps to develop individual thinking.

In the light of above, we can say that Open and Distance Education falls along the continuum of time and the continuum of place.
Self-learning Material

The advent of self learning material is a step towards the creation of innovative approaches to instruction. Distance education in the developing nations holds up a promise to bring those on the periphery of society within the net of opportunity through enhancement of talent and capacities. It emphasises on the objective of “Learning—Self-Learning”, which depends on the materials specially tailored for a target group. To compensate the loss of interacting with the teachers and peer groups as in the classroom situations, the self-learning material should be developed in order to stimulate independent learning.

What is an SLM?

Self-learning materials are tutorials in print form, written by subject experts. They are student-friendly and self-instructional materials that provide customised text to the students. The content is developed in a manner which helps the students to learn satisfactorily with less or no guidance from a tutor/faculty. The main characteristics of SLMs are as follows:

i) **Self-explanatory:** The SLMs are self-explanatory because the content is presented in such a manner that the student can understand the material without much external support. For this, the content is analysed logically before it is presented. This maintains the continuity and the consistency of the content.

ii) **Self-contained:** The SLMs are self-sufficient so that a learner does not look out for additional sources, or even a tutor. For this, the scope of the content of the unit is visualised in detail. While avoiding the non-essentials, only the essential details are presented to cover all information required by the students and keep away all that is not necessary.

iii) **Self-directed:** The SLMs aim at providing necessary guidance, hints and suggestions to the learners at each stage of learning. Therefore, it is presented in the form of easy explanations, sequential development,
illustrations, learning activities, etc. The material performs the role of a tutor who can guide, instruct, moderate and regulate the learning process in classroom situations.

iv) **Self-motivating:** In distance education systems, the students remain off the campus during most of their study-time. Thus, the instructional designer and subject expert prepare the SLMs in such style that they arouse curiosity, raise problems, relate knowledge to familiar situations and make the entire learning meaningful for the students.

v) **Self-evaluating:** As the learners remain separated from the institutions and the teachers, the study materials make provisions for feedback as well. Self-evaluation in the form of Self-analysis, Lesson-end Activities, Self-test, etc., provides the students with the much needed feedback about their progress and reinforces learning.

vi) **Self-learning:** Self-learning materials are based on the principles of self-learning. So a unit/topic/lesson, besides information, provides the learners an opportunity to facilitate their independent learning. To make the content comprehensible, it is supported by simple explanations, examples, illustrations, activities, references and so on.

- **Importance of SLMs**

In the conventional system of education, the students get most of their instruction through face-to-face interaction with a teacher and they attend classes regularly in peer groups. The students use the already existing textbooks. Self-learning, on the other hand, depends on the materials specially prepared or transformed for a target group. In self-study, the students get very little opportunity to interact with the teachers and peer-groups as in the classroom situations. SLM compensates this loss by providing a special kind of self-learning material specifically developed to stimulate independent learning. They are primarily developed in accordance with the curriculum. Since the material is written in very easy to understand language along with numerous examples after each heading, it
becomes easy for the distance learning students to understand and grasp the concepts. Also, since the text is interspersed with self checks and exercises, the student can assess himself after going through a few topics and can check whether he has understood the topics or not. The self learning material helps the student to save time since he gets material strictly as per the curriculum of his course of study, and therefore, does not have to sift through topics which are not present in the curriculum. All SLMs come with mandatory features to help the student in self/independent learning as follows:

- **Learning Objectives:** These tell the student what he will learn and understand after going through that particular lesson/unit.

- **Check yourself:** These MCQs or analytical small questions after every 2-3 pages help the student to continually assess if he has understood the previous 2-3 pages or not.

- **Easy language:** Easy language, smaller sentences, frequent examples, figures and tables make it easier for the student to understand various topics in the curriculum.

- **Summary:** The summary helps the student to know what the particular lesson was all about.

- **MCQs:** Multiple choice questions help the student in testing himself on what he has learnt after going through the lesson.

- **Analytical questions:** These help the student to apply the theory that he has read, to practical situations.

- **References:** These help the student in locating textbooks for further reading if he requires more information on any particular topic.

- **Weblinks:** These help the student become more aware of latest developments on particular topics.
The chapters of a textbook usually present information in a very compact form. They are closer to reference material than to learning materials. On the other hand, SLMs are the instrument for learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textbooks</th>
<th>Self-Learning Materials</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assume interest</td>
<td>Arouse interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written mainly for teachers</td>
<td>Written primarily for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not indicate study time</td>
<td>Give estimates of study time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designed for a wider market</td>
<td>Designed for a particular learner group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely state aims and objectives</td>
<td>Always gives aims and objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured for teachers and specialists</td>
<td>Structured according to the need of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or no self-assessment</td>
<td>Major emphasis on self-assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No focus on a particular syllabus</td>
<td>Focus on a particular syllabus and is written strictly as per the syllabus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primarily between 400-800 pages.</td>
<td>Primarily between 200-300 pages</td>
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SLM is a core learning material that derives all other learning activities. An SLM offers a blended learning environment.

![Figure 1 Core Learning Material](image)

**Conclusion**

Open and Distance Learning is effectively a new paradigm and strategy for development for Africa and indeed for global development. Open and Distance Education would prove to be a penetrating tool for social, economic and political liberation for Africa. Development can be measured by the levels of literacy in a country and the level of technological advancement. Development is a process—a continuous process with many far-reaching implications.
In a speech at the Namibian Conference on Open Learning, Sir John Daniel (August 2005) of COL had this to say, “human learning is the most effective mechanism for development. Education also improves the quality of our lives by helping us develop our abilities…education is liberating both individually and socially.”

According to Dr. Almaz Zewde of Howard University, “Education is actually an internal evolution of indigenous knowledge, language, and idioms that shape generations of a nation. Education is both the foundation and corner stone of development… provided it is the right kind of education.”

Emergence of new technologies, cultural shifts and changes in global trade pose great possibilities in front of the developing nations to explore new opportunities to rise. The need for knowledge and skills for economic relevance and earning power have become a necessity in this fast changing world. In order to obtain globally competitive education, that has regional and global significance, it is necessary on the part of the country to eradicate mass illiteracy not only in South Africa but other countries of Africa by promoting open and distance education.

![New opportunities to rise](image)

In an effort to initiate and expand e-learning and other technology-based ODL opportunities, progress is being made by Excel Learning. As educators it is our duty to envision a better future for our people and provide educational resources
from limited national and international development budgets, and to break away from ineffective instructional methods and embrace methods and technology that can address the real needs and aspirations of the learners/students.
All India Management Association, the apex Management institution in India through its Centre for Management Education used to run two flagship programs, Post Graduate Diploma in Management (MBA) and Post Graduate Diploma in Information technology and Management. Till seven years ago, AIMA used to provide study guides along with textbooks to its students. The study guides connected the topics in the syllabus to various chapters/page numbers of the textbook. The textbooks were bulky and expensive and it was difficult for the students to map the syllabus from the book as sometimes the books were not covering all the topics of the syllabus or the topics were randomly scattered in the book. This tiresome exercise resulted in huge dropouts in the student numbers as well as decrease in throughput rate. At this point of time, Excel Books discussed the concept of Self Leaning Materials with AIMA, strictly prepared according to the syllabus and as per the Open and Distance Learning pedagogy, written in easy language with lots of examples and cases, self check exercises and MCQs. AIMA agreed since this would have led to huge savings in expenditure as well as increase in student satisfaction. After a few years, AIMA found out that this helped the students to understand the subject better due to lesser time taken since they did not need to refer and match the syllabus with the textbook which led to the increased throughput rate and less dropouts.

In Africa also, some universities, having open and distance learning courses, adopt the same methodology of providing study guides and recommending textbooks for students to buy. Since textbooks are very expensive, most students end up not buying them, and are not able to study effectively due to the lack of textbooks. Also, as in the case of AIMA, the mapping of the syllabus with chapters in the textbook is a de-motivating exercise for the student as either he gets more than the syllabus or he gets much less content than the syllabus as well as wasting huge amount of time in connecting the various topics in the syllabus with the topics in the recommended textbook. Also, if some topics in the syllabus are not present in the recommended textbook, the student would need to refer to another textbook making it still more tedious and time consuming. This eventually leads to huge drop outs as is the case in most universities.
Bharatihar University is a Government University of India and along with full-time programs, also has a Department of Distance Education. Until 2007, it used to provide textbooks to its students in various programs. Some of the titles published by Excel Books were also being purchased by the University for its students. Since the programs were launched, the University was only able to get 2000-3000 students in its MBA program. In 2007, the University signed an agreement with Excel Books for developing SLMs for them. Within two years, after the University started giving SLMs to its students, the intake, just in the MBA program, went up to 15000 students per year. This clearly shows the importance of self learning materials for the open and distance education.

As a solution to the above, Excel Learning is able to provide affordable SLMs to various Universities, which will help ease the burden on the student as well as increase the throughput rate. Excel Learning along with its Joint-Venture partner Excel Books in India is developing/has developed SLMs for over 70 Universities and institutions providing open and distance learning programs for over 25 different courses and over 1000 subjects, since the past 13 years.
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