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Distance Education in Cameroon: Evolution and Challenges

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Abstract: The development of distance education in Cameron was motivated by the desire for access to quality education and training by Anglophones and by the need for continuous in-service training of teachers by the francophone administration. Subsequently the desire to expand access, improve quality and meet the international goals of education (the Millennium Development and Education for All goals) reinforced government consideration of the use of DE. However, a number of challenges including the absence of a national policy framework, inertia, the shortage of trained personnel and budgetary constraints are seriously hampering the flourishing of fledgling DE programmes as well as the initiation of worthwhile programmes. As a way forward it is recommended among others that government create DE departments in all ministerial departments dealing with education and mandate them to develop a national policy framework and develop plans that will be assessed budgeted and implemented according to available resources over time.
Keywords: distance, education, Cameron.

INTRODUCTION

Correspondence study started in the 1800s in Britain as an alternative form of providing education to the masses at an affordable cost. It opened the possibilities of learning while working, of paying for education at the pace of the learner, of obtaining education and training according to the capacity of the learner and opened the gates of education to the masses.

This was frowned upon by the wealthy class who had at the time the monopoly of campus based education that was very expensive and consequently reserved for the rich in society to the exclusion of the masses. This mode of learning moved education from the campuses to learners' homes and workplaces seeking to equalize educational and consequently economic opportunities in society, increase the human capital and to raise the social status of the hitherto down trodden citizens. In this connection Pitman [1], reports that correspondence education was branded as inferior by most educators and the educated class as it promised to remove the privileges and opportunities that were exclusive to them and to erode their social status.

Correspondence study was based on stand-alone, self-study materials as learners did not have to leave their homes to study in another place. It was print-based and communication was essentially through postal services with no physical interaction between the teacher and the student. The development of radio and subsequently, television in the 1950's, provided correspondence study with new tools for delivering instruction outside the traditional classroom. In this connection, Cambre [2] argues that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, television production technology was largely confined to studios and live broadcasts, in which master teachers conducted widely-broadcast classes. The major weakness of using radio and television for instruction was that these media did not offer the opportunity for interaction between the teacher and the learner during the course of study.

The advent of the British Open University in 1969 marked a turning point in the evolution of correspondence education in terms of its use of technology to deliver instruction. The Open University began the practice of using technology to systematically supplement well-designed and primarily print-based courses. Keegan [3] posits that as a direct consequence of the success recorded by the British Open University, many countries in both the developed and developing world adopted the course delivery model of the British Open University. Harry, Keegan, and Magnus [4] suggest that it is because of this leadership role that researchers in the United Kingdom have continued to lead in identifying problems and proposing solutions for practitioners in the field. Cameroon which has been experimenting with this mode since independence was among the countries that were influenced by this development to seek ways of taking advantage of the new developments in Distance Education to diversify educational delivery.

From Correspondence Study to Distance Education

The global scale of distance education today although rooted in the correspondence schools of the late 1800's, could be said to have started in the 1970's with the creation of the massive open universities like the Open Universities of the United Kingdom, West Germany, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Costa Rica, Columbia, Thailand, India, Indonesia, and Venezuela [5]. Most of these universities emerged from the national need to offer education on a large scale where existing systems were perceived as elitist and closed, or where educational infrastructure were not well developed. Some countries like Nigeria developed teacher's institutes while India developed open schools, which served the purpose of distance learning.

The change of name by the International Council for Correspondence Education in 1982, to the International Council for Distance Education, was also a reflection of the new direction towards which activities in the field were evolving. Recently, the rapid growth of new technologies and information and communications systems continue to provide distance education the means to foster its mission of providing access to quality education to millions of people world-wide. As to what distance education is, Keegan [6], associated it with the following six elements:

- separation of the teacher and learner,
- influence of an educational institution,
- use of media to link teacher and learner,
- two way exchange of communication,
- learner as individual rather than grouped and
- Educators as an industrialized form.

However, this traditional definition of distance education is giving way as the development of new technologies and interest in the limitless possibilities of the internet are forcing educators to rethink the whole idea of schooling and life-long learning. Today, distance education is characterized by highly structured, self-instructional, learner-friendly materials supported by audio and video programmes, and in many cases, elaborate learner support services including tutorials and counselling sessions, audio and video conferencing and computer mediated communication systems. This is therefore creating a major shift from the industrial model based on course design teams to the developmental model based on the conception of the learner as an active participant in the learning process.

Taylor [7] succinctly sums up this perspective when he suggests that distance education operations have evolved through the following four generations: the Correspondence, based on print technology; the Multi-Media, based on print, audio and video technologies; the Telelearning, based on applications of telecommunications technologies to provide opportunities for synchronous communication; and the Flexible learning Model based on online delivery via the Internet. A fifth generation model is already emerging based on further exploration of new technologies. This generation, he points out is essentially a derivation of the fourth generation which aims to capitalize on the features of the Internet and the web.

The adoption of the Millennium Development goals and the Education for All goals (EFA) by many African countries indicated their belief in education as crucial in the nation building process. In this regard, inter-governmental efforts such as the ALL-Africa Ministers' Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education held in Dakar, Senegal in 2004 demonstrated the willingness on the part of leaders to support the development of Distance Education programmes. This enabled them to begin exploring the opportunities that the Distance mode of education could offer in improving the knowledge and technological skills of the population and to provide life-long education that can lead to economic growth [8, 9], as Ekhaguere [10] noted that the over 250 institutions that provide campus education in Africa, are unable to offer admissions to meet the needs of potential students.

Many organizations worldwide have created initiatives to assist Africa in developing distance education programmes. These organisations include; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO),the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE),and the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (A.U.F). They provide physical infrastructure, funding, training of human resources, develop technology infrastructure and provide delivery technology among others.

The Evolution of Distance Education in Cameroon

In former West Cameroon, activity in the area of Correspondence Education started after independence in the 1960s as individuals seized the opportunities offered by correspondence study programmes in the United Kingdom to obtain certificates in academic and professional fields.

Correspondence study geared towards general education in Anglophone Cameroon was carried out by individuals and by institutions. Individuals registered for courses of their interest and studied by themselves toward obtaining the desired certificates. On the other hand government and private secondary schools adopted the curriculum of the University of London's General Certificate of Education programme at both ordinary and advanced levels. In this wise students admitted into secondary schools studied and wrote the London General Certificate of Education Examination (LGCE) at Ordinary level after five years (junior secondary) and the LGCE Advanced level two years after (senior secondary) respectively. At both the Ordinary and Advanced level exam, students chosed the

number of subjects to write, and with the assistance of the institution, registered and paid for each paper to the University of London.

The examinations were written at centres designated and supervised by staff of the University of London. All the examination scripts were then transported to the University of London, where they were marked. Results were sent to each candidate individually. Schools did not receive student results. Students interested in commercial education studied through the Royal Society of Arts, meanwhile technical and crafts students studied through the London City and Guilds programmes, leading to the acquisition of single subject certificates. This went on until 1976 when the government of Cameroon adopted the G.C.E programme.

The development of DE in former East Cameroon was formalized by Decree No. 67/187 of 03 August 1967 which brought into being L'Enseignement à Distance (EAD) or La Formation á Distance (FAD)) in former East Cameroon, through the creation of the Centre Pédagogique (Centre for Correspondence Learning). The Centre Pédagogique was located at the Secretariat d'Etat à L'Enseignement Primaire (Secretariat of State for Primary Education).

After unification in 1972, the Centre Pédagogique became the Service du Tele-Enseignement (STE) in 1974 and was placed in the "Direction de L'Enseignement Primaire et Maternel" (Directorate of Nursery and Primary Education). The STE had an autonomous budget and was charged with the responsibility of providing permanent in-service training for nursery and primary school teachers in both the public and private sectors through the production and broadcast of radio programmes for pupils and teaching personnel. The objectives of the STE were:

- To promote training and maintain a professional culture among teachers in order to raise the level of basic education in both Anglophone and Francophone sub systems;
- Create opportunities for teachers to improve their careers by writing the various professional competitive entrance examinations organized by the government.

Therefore, the main objectives targeted both qualified and unqualified teachers in order to upgrade the qualifications of professional teachers as well as provide non-professional teachers with basic professional training. Through the agency of the Service du Tele-enseignement (Tele-learning Service), the Ministry of Secondary Education, through distance education, trained 3,928 teachers of Nursery and Primary School in both public and private sectors between 1974 and 1975. Between 1992 and 1998 the Ministries of Basic, Secondary and Higher Education through a liaison between the "Service du tele-enseignment" and "la division de la formation et des stages de l'Ecole Normale Superieur (ENS)" trained 1500 French Language secondary school teachers, who had obtained the Baccalaureate, but had not received any professional training, through distance education. However, this programme came to an end due to the suspension of funding by the l'Agence de la Francophonie and the non-availability of appropriate learning materials. The Presidential decree No. 95/041 of 07 March 1995 reorganizing the Ministry of Secondary Education did not include any role for the STE.

The importance of the pursuit of in-service teacher training by distance education led to the creation of Le Centre Nationale d'Appui à l'Action Pedagogique (CNAAP) in the Ministry of Secondary Education, charged with the responsibility of conceiving programmes for teacher training by distance education. In this connection, the Ministry of Secondary Education enlisted the collaboration of the Commonwealth of learning (COL) in this project. A survey carried out on behalf of COL in 1998 showed that the government was interested in using distance education to increase access to education in various fields, especially in teacher training, legal studies, health personnel training and the training of engineers. The survey suggested that distance education could benefit from staff of the Institut Pedagogique à Vocation Rurale (IPAR), the staff of Teachers' Resource Centres in different regions and individuals with a background in distance education. In this light the report made the following recommendations:

- Opportunities should be created to offer requisite training to upgrade and update the competence of these individuals
- To achieve cost-effectiveness, in-country training should be organised by experienced consultants for course-writers, editors and the like; to train more people.
- Specialists in distance education should be trained outside the country, and
- Equipment needs to be upgraded and increased since very few equipment were available and functional.

It is on this basis that the Ministry of Secondary Education began in 2003 to pursue a project to integrate the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in teaching in general and in distance education in particular.

In the past two decades, higher education in Cameroon has undergone many changes in an effort to respond to a number of major challenges: limited access and insufficient diversity in provision of tertiary education, gender parity, reduced funding, quality assurance and good governance. These changes arose from increasing pressures to respond to market forces

and technological opportunities with limited resources and the competitive climate imposed by globalization, technological change, and the ever changing needs and demands of society. One of the major areas of reform has been the introduction and development of distance education initiatives.

The Ministry of Higher Education has contributed to the development of distance education in Cameroon through several initiatives which include: the initiation and promotion of the one teacher one computer policy, (aimed at developing the computing skills of lecturers and enabling each to own a computer), beginning of the pioneer Distance Education Programme in the University of Dschang in 1996, the creation of the CITI and electronic library in Yaounde, training of teachers of higher education in China in distance education, launching of a Master's of Distance Education programme for Public Universities (granted to the University of Douala for execution), Start of the Virtual University of central Africa and the initiation of several DE programmes in the Institute Universitaire de Technologie (IUT) Bandjoun, University of Yaounde I (UYI), University of Buea (UB) and the University of Douala (UDL). In the same vein, university students in Cameroon have each received a laptop in the 2017/2018 academic year, as a presidential grant to foster their acquisition and use of ICT skills and consequently, enhance their participation in distance education.

In its continues efforts to expand and improve distance education delivery in all sectors of education, the government in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) commissioned N.K. Peku, a consultant, to carry out a country "*Survey of the current status of distance education in Cameroon***"** to determine the conditions of assisting Cameroon in the implementation of a comprehensive distance education programme. The findings of the study which were published in 1998 recommended that planning for a national distance education programme needed to be started immediately and that,

A national Technical Committee should be constituted to draw up an Action Plan. The Plan should decide on subjects to be covered, cost the programme and budget for it, decide on equipment requirements and acquisition and draw-up an Implementation Programme. A national body to be given an acceptable name could be established to manage the proposed distance education programme (p. 2).

The recommendations of this report may have been instrumental to the holding of a projected national forum recommended by COL.

As a build up to this momentum, education stakeholders planned and organsed a national forum entitled: National Forum on Distance Education (Forum National sur l'Enseignement á Distance) was held in Yaoundé from the 16th to 19th of September 2003 on the theme: "Enseignement à Distance: une alternative pour accroître l'accès à la diversité et à la qualité dans l'enseignement" ("Distance Education: An alternative for increasing diversity, to access and to quality in education"). This forum was jointly organized by the Ministries of National, Technical and Vocational Training and Higher Education in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning. The main objective of the forum was to open dialogue among all stakeholders on the national needs, priorities and challenges in the design and implementation of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Cameroon and to propose to the Government elements of a national strategy or road map for the implementation of distance education.

Following this conference, state universities started initiating or engaging in collaborative ventures to gather experience to enable them eventually initiate and implement distance education programmes.

In this connection, the University of Douala participated in the "Projet Virtuel au Service de l'Afrique Francophone" from 2005 to 2008 and initiated its own programme in partnership with the Université de Paris et Marne la Villé and the "Ecole Nationale de Sciences Geographiques, Paris. It is a professional postgraduate programme with the main objective to train students who have received basic training in computer programming in the fundamental concepts of Geographic information systems. Graduates of this programme should be able to work in various capacities such as software producers, service providers, managers of environmental projects, research institutions etc.

The University of Yaoundé I started its own programme in Electrical Engineering and Telecomunications in partnership with the "Agence Universitaire de la Francophnie" (AUF) in the 2006/2007 academic year. The programme is housed by the Département de Génie Electrique et de Telecommunication (Department of Electrical and Telecommunications Engineering) of the l'Ecole Nationale Supérieure Polytechnique (ENSP). It is a postgraduate programme aimed at providing the students with skills and competences to conceive and install various telecommunications devices.

The University of Buea also started a distance education programme in the 2007/2008 academic year. The B.Ed. programme in Nursery and Primary Education seeks to upgrade the knowledge and skills of primary school teachers from Grade 1 teachers to Bachelor degree holders in Nursery and Primary Education. It is hoped that through this in-service training, practising teachers should acquire new skills for teaching and managing the ever increasing school enrolment.

The universities of Ngoundere and Yaounde II started in the 2009/2010 academic year, to work in partnership with l'Association Universitaire de la Francophonie (l'AUF) by providing prospective students in Cameroon pre-registration information, and hosting a study centre for registered students equipped with an internet connection, reading space and an electronic and paper library. This capacity building endeavours enabled the University of Yaounde II to start a distance learning programme in the 2013/1014 academic year. The postgraduate programme is aimed at training communication experts versed in the use of information and communications technologies in the conduct of their profession. Several private higher institutions of learning have also initiated distance learning programmes in various domains of education and training. Most of these programmes have been initiated in partnership with foreign distance learning universities and institutions.

Challenges of Distance Education in Cameroon

The development of DE in Cameroon is facing a number of challenges. There is a policy vacuum at all levels. There is no national policy to point the direction, provide orientations and create an enabling environment for the practice of DE. In all the universities running a DE programme there are no dual mode DE policy instruments (dual mode, copyright, quality assurance, and e-learning policies). Apart from the programme coordinators there are virtually no other trained and knowledgeable staff in the area of DE and there are no plans in place to pursue the training and promotion of staff in DE at the national level. The financial resources provided by the state as subventions to manage these programmes are largely insufficient to meet current expenditures. In addition to the above, Nji [12], argues that institutional inertia towards educational innovation, lack of infrastructure for DE, high cost of appropriate technology required for DE, limited energy supply to urban areas, and poor communication resulting in isolation of rural areas are hindering the progress of distance education in Cameroon.

Law No. 98/004 of 14thApril 1998 *to lay* down guidelines for education in Cameroon stated that distance education will be used to facilitate teaching and learning as need arises. However, plans to initiate distance learning programmes in Basic and Secondary education are yet to emerge in Cameroon.

Recommendations for the way forward

As can be gleaned from the foregoing, Cameroonians are ready to study using the distance learning mode and the government has shown enough interest in making this happen. To assist the government and other stakeholders to move from the level of intentions to actual implementation of pgrammes the following recommendations are offered.

Departments of distance education should be created in all the Ministerial Departments dealing with education. These departments should be charged with the joint responsibility of proposing a national framework for the practice of distance learning that will be made law in Cameroon. Each in its own sphere should determine the curriculum in consultation with institutions offering education and training. They will then workout an implementation calendar and determine the cost of equipment required, training of personnel, infrastructure needed and budget accordingly on a yearly basis. Once a pool of trained resources is available, organize training on a regular basis using the trained personnel. Technological resource scan also be pooled to reduce costs and enhance learning. Expertise can be pooled from Institutions like the University of Buea which has already developed key DE policy instruments (Dual mode, Copyright, Materials development and Quality Assurance) in collaboration with COL to assist other such institutions to develop theirs. Since the internet backbone is nearing completion in its installation nationwide, the National Telecommunications Regulatory Board should lower the price to enable consumers to be able to stay connected as long as they need to accomplish tasks online. The ministry of Post and Telecommunications should exponentially increase the number of Telecentres in rural areas of the country to facilitate internet access to the rural populations. The Electricity supply company should increase the quantity of power supply to ensure steady supply in the urban areas and the rural electrification project is intensified to ensure a steady power supply in rural areas.

CONCLUSION

Despite the promise of Distance education and the accompanying advantages it has and continues to provide to several societies who have embraced it, its development in Cameroon is still at the experimental level. It is hampared by the lack of a national policy and political inertia. Training of distance education personnel has been limited and involved only staff of specific DE projects with the objective of building their capacity to pilot the project. This suggests that factors such as resistance from academic staff, perception of DE and prevailing institutional culture [11], administrative structure, managerial competence, infrastructure, availability of technology, and funding may still be affecting the development of DE in Cameroon.

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