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UNIVERSITY DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE POTENTIAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN HUMANA RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

A review of education since Independence in 1980 reveals unnprecedented quantitatice expansion at primary and secondary school levels which is now creating severe demographic pressure for university education in Zimbabwe. Further demand for university places comes from working aand non-working adults who seek lifelong access to university education and training or were excluded from higher education for various reasons. The situation is worsened by the inability of conventional tertiary institutions to increase access to education and training at lower unit costs, while Government lacks the financial means to expand or establilsh more conventional universities. In this scontext, university distance education has becone am important polity option for Zimbabawe because of its potential to widen access and satisfy vrious kinds of human resources development needs in a more cost-effective mananer. The setting up of the University (of Zimbabwe) College of Distanace Education (UCDE) highlights Government concern for increased access to university education and training. An examination of the potential of UCDE in the provision of education aand training in Zimbabwe. contained in this paper, reveals several competitive advantages over conventional approaches. However, the paper argues that Government haas the responsibility to ensure that UCDE gets a prominent plalce in public policy and that this commitmnent should translate into appropriate resource allocation in terms of setting up modern communications infrastructure, equipping regionaal study centres, and district resource centres in order to ensure the viability of university distance education.

INTRODUCTION

The history of distance education reveals that correspondence education has provided it with a most solid foundation from which it has developed into the modern-day multi-media education system. Correspondence education, on its part, developed as an alternative instructional method following the invention of printing and when asynchronous communication with learners was made possible through the introduction of universal postal services. These two technological developments overcame the constraints imposed by traditional face-to-face classroom instruction which required students to come together with their teacher for learning to take place.

The invention of the printing press and the introduction of universal postal services gave impetus to the growth of correspondence education by enabling learners to receive printed learning materials in their homes and workplaces. This enduring

characteristic, in turn, has helped shape the definition of correspondence education as a special method of study which is essentially based on the printed word alone. As a result, the essence of correspondence education lies in asynchronous relationship between the teaching institution and an individual student. The student receives learning materials through the mail, together with homework assignments which he/she, likewise, returns to the correspondence institution for marking and comments.

Unlike correspondence education, distance education goes further to offer additional learning opportunities which are made available through extensive use of communication technologies and infrequent one-to-one and/or face-to-face instruction, to offer several advantages over traditional face-to-face classroom instruction. Distance education is, therefore, a multi-media delivery system in which the learner and the teacher are wholly or partially separated from each other in time and/or space during the learning process. This instructional delivery structure provides distance education with much of its competitive strength, which includes its capacity to remove barriers of time, space, previous educational experience and increases access to education and training at lower unit cost.

Advantages of distance education

Many countries that introduce distance education normally do so because of its acknowledged effect of increasing access to education at lower dollar-per-student compared to similar conventional face-to-face classroom instruction. Others turn to distance education because of its ability to reach learners in remote areas. For example, in Australia, the Queensland Primary Correspondence School was established in 1922 to meet educational needs of isolated children, while in Zimbabwe distance education was first introduced by the then Southern Rhodesia government in 1930 when the Government Correspondence Primary School was, likewise, established to meet the educational needs of children of white settlers living on isolated farms.

These perspectives reflect a few of distance education's many acknowledged advantages which include increasing access to education especially for the disadvantaged sections of society. However, the question of access in distance learning is closely linked to that of equity because distance education has the capacity to reach out to those sections of society which were previously denied educational opportunities or ignored by traditional education systems. The enrolment patterns of most distance teaching universities demonstrate this special capacity. For example, a 1990 Unesco/ICDE report cites the case of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) of Thailand which started in 1980 with an enrolment of 82 000 which dramatically doubled to 150 000 students by 1990, while Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) of India increased its enrolment from an initial figure of 4 500 in 1987 to 30 000 within two years. The University (of Zimbabwe's) College of Distance Education (UCDE) followed a similar development pattern when its initial enrolment of 668 in 1993 increased to over 5 000 by 1997 (Nhundu, 1996).

Distance education has also demonstrated a special capacity to open its doors to those sections of society who have previously been excluded or ignored by conventional universities. Such groups may have been disadvantaged due to a number of factors such as location, financial circumstances, previous educational background, sex, age, or because their respective work and social commitments prevent them from attending a conventional university on regular basis. As a result, the average age of distance learners is significantly higher than for their colleagues in conventional institutions. For example, the average for STOU students is 28 years, for Universitas Terbuka (UT) of Indonesia is 30 years, of which 75% were above 25 years of age (Unesco/ICDE, 1990), while Nhundu (1996) reports that the youngest student on UCDE's 1993 Intake One students was 23 years and the oldest 64 years. The University of South Africa (UNISA) where 73.6% of students in 1993 were above 25 years of age (SAIDE, 1995) compares well with that for Universitas Terbuka and other distance teaching universities. Gender-wise, women participation has increased in most distance education universities with the proportion of women students at UNISA in 1993 reaching 50.9% (SAIDE, 1995), while the two sexes were equally represented at STOU (Unesco/ICDE, 1990). These figure are comparable with a 54% female enrolment reported by Nhundu (1996) for UCDE's Fourth Intake students. Meanwhile, 70% of students enrolled at STOU and IGNOU came from rural and outlying areas (Unesco/ICDE, 1990), while those coming from predominantly rural areas (outside the major cities of Harare and Bulawayo) constituted 78% on UCDE's enrolment (Nhundu, 1996).

The Potential of Distance Education

International experience of the past two decades has demonstrated that distance education is set to become a dominant paradigm in the delivery of higher education and training within the next century. Zimbabwe's own brief experience with university distance education also attests to this great potential. This potential reflects university distance education's competitive advantages which derive from a number of factors, including the attractiveness of the education and training sector where demand for education and training remains buoyant. The relative inelasticity of conventional face-to-face institutions, which makes them insensitive to prevailing demographic pressure for university education and training, further strengthens this competitive advantage.

It is within this context of a very attractive education and training industry that university distance education systems find themselves commanding a strong relative position for various reasons;

- they have superior capacity for high volume intakes,

- their cost-effectiveness; they have the ability to dramatically increase student numbers and, at the same time, sharply lower unit costs,

- they provide flexible delivery systems which appeal to a wide range of learners,

- they are technology driven, a quality which assures them of the benefits of modern communications technologies.

- the curriculum is driven by market demands, and, finally,

- they are best positioned to establish strategic linkages with industry and commerce.

The Zimbabwe Context

In Zimbabwe, developments of the last four years provide clear evidence of the potential of university distance education in the provision of higher education and training. In this connection, at least five factors will increase and strengthen university distance education's share of the education and training market in Zimbabwe. First, growth in demand for university places has now reached unprecedented levels due to a number of reasons; notably, successive colonial education policies and attendant post-independence initiatives have combined to impose severe demographic pressure for university places. Unfortunately, the current demand for university education and training is beyond the capacity of conventional residential universities which are notorious for low student intake and high unit costs. Thus, over 13 000 applications received in response to an advertisement for 200 places on UCDE's inaugural distance education degree programme in 1993 reflect the prevailing demand for university places in Zimbabwe. Subsequent UCDE programmes have been equally oversubscribed, while enquiries on new programmes by anxious prospective students keep pouring in.

University distance education offers important social and economic benefits to governments, especially when they are under severe financial constraints as currently obtains in Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe government is caught in a severe squeeze between increasing unit costs of education and IMF/World Bank-imposed budget cutbacks and ceilings. This position is further aggravated by current world economic instability which continues to adversely affect the local economy. These forces have combined to impose intense pressure on the Government which has now been forced to liberalize the economy and cut back funding for social services through the introduction of cost sharing measures in education and health.

Third, the average age of university students in Zimbabwe is set to continue rising over the next decade, reflecting an increase in the proportion of mature students taking university education. More working students will seek university education for various reasons. Many of them were excluded from participating in formal university education for reasons beyond their control, while many more will require further education and training in order to cope with technological changes at work. University distance education, and not on-campus education, is best positioned to meet the needs and interests of this new generation of students who have work and family commitments.

Fourth, the influence of the information age is rapidly transforming societies in ways unthought of a few decades ago, and Zimbabwe is no exception. In this connection, alternative systems of education are, therefore, required to address the combined needs of these rapidly changing societies and those of the new breed of learners. The dawn of the information age in Zimbabwe has brought with it new demands. The emerging society requires a system of education which provides lifelong access to education and training while, on the other hand, the new generation of learners seeks flexible, learner-friendly and cost effective systems which are readily available at home and on the job. These combined needs are best met through distance and open learning systems which provide high volume, lifelong access to flexible and learner-friendly quality programmes at lower unit cost. These new requirements further strengthen the future role of UCDE in the provision of university education and training in Zimbabwe.

Finally, strategic alliances will develop between distance education and industry and commerce. Distance education is attractive to commerce and industry because of minimal opportunity costs associated with worker participation in distance learning. The employer enjoys the benefits of improved productivity through simultaneous application of newly acquired knowledge and skills because students do not leave their jobs to pursue further studies and training.

Further scope for increased participation by industry and commerce arises from market opportunities available within distance education. Being a technology-driven form of industrialized education, distance education provides attractive opportunities for the private sector to invest. On its part, distance education remains sensitive to the needs of commerce, industry and other consumers because it acknowledges that one of its key competitive advantages depends on the economies of scale that flow from teaching large numbers of students. In this regard, UCDE, like other distance teaching universities, remains active in subject areas of relevance and high demand to both the public and private sectors, while its curriculum will gradually take on a more vocational focus. This is in keeping with Daniel's (1995) observations that distance education universities are most active in subject areas of high demand and that their curricula are characterized by a strong vocational thrust. Hence, in order to retain and enhance this competitive advantage, UCDE should routinely undertake market surveys whose findings will be used to inform programme selection and development.

Role of Market Research in the Development of Distance Education Programmes

A key competitive advantage of distance education is its cost-effectiveness in comparison with conventional universities. Cost-effectiveness is a function of economies of scale which distance education is well acknowledged for because of its capacity to teach large numbers of students. The high volume nature of distance education sharply lowers the unit cost and makes distance education affordable to the learner. For example, Loing (1993) reports that the cost of distance education at France's Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (CNED) is half that of conventional education, while Ding Xingfu (1993) calculated that the unit cost at

China TV University (CTVU) was between 25% and 40% of those for conventional universities for humanities and science and engineering, respectively.

While no cost-effectiveness analyses have been carried out to determine the relative cost of UCDE programmes, a quick analysis of the costs of one of UCDE's programmes which is also available conventionally illustrates the cost-effectiveness of distance learning. For example, the cost of a BEd (Educational Administration, Planning, and Policy Studies) degree programme by distance education is Z\$ 4 338.00 per academic year, compared to Z\$ 19 513.00 for a fulltime student on the conventional programme (University of Zimbabwe Fees Ordinance 37, 1995). Although distance learners may incur additional costs in terms of transport to regional study centres, food, and overnight accommodation, distance education still remains the most cost-effective option. In fact, the actual unit cost of the UCDE programme may be significantly lower because of additional benefits from economics of scale which derive from teaching large numbers of students. Thus, in the current situation, the BEd distance education programme has an enrolment of 5 860 students compared with about 20 students registered on the conventional programme.

However, if university distance education is to maintain and consolidate this competitive advantage, then it is critical that programmes should be developed on the basis of perceived market needs. Programmes which are developed without reference to current and future needs of both the productive and non-productive sectors of the economy lack relevance. Such programmes will, undoubtedly, be difficult to sell or attract students in large enough numbers to bring down the unit cost and make distance education affordable and self supporting. Distance education programmes are generally very expensive to set up mainly because of relatively high costs of producing learning materials. Accordingly, UCDE cannot afford to develop programmes that subsequently become unmarketable given the huge set up costs associated with the development and production of learning materials. For example, Daniel (1995) estimates that one-third of UKOU's 1991 budget for primary activities which comprise research, materials development, logistics, marketing and educational services went towards materials development.

In addition, it may take up to two years of preparatory work before a distance education programme is available to learners. During this period distance learning institutions invest heavily in money, time and other resources. For instance, the University College of Distance Education (UCDE) which depends on consultant writers for course development and writing, initially recruits a permanent full time programme coordinator, nearly 18 months in advance. The programme coordinator is responsible for production processes which lead from programme and course design to the distribution of learning materials. He/she has the mandate to put together a programme development committee comprising subject experts, recruiting and training consultant course writers, monitoring the writing process to ensure everything is on target, and administering the programme. These processes bring together the pedagogical, scientific, technical and logistical components of distance learning involving subject specialists, instructional designers, educational

technologists and, finally, technical services which create the learning materials, including typesetters and printers.

In monetary terms, the cost of introducing a distance education programme at UCDE runs into several hundred thousand dollars. This cost is unavoidable because distance learners use specially prepared and packaged learning materials which are unavailable in bookstores, unlike text-books used on conventional programmes. In turn, distance education institutions expect to recover this huge expenditure from student fees. This is only possible if the programme is going to attract large numbers of students, thereby sharply lowering the unit cost and making distance education affordable due to favourable economics of scale. This is especially important in Zimbabwe where UCDE students meet the full cost of distance learning without the benefit of government loans and grants which are available to students on conventional programmes.

To ensure programme viability, UCDE has a policy of investing in market research prior to the development and introduction of its programmes. Only programmes which are based on sound market research have the capacity to attain self sustenance because they are developed in response to consumer and market demands. In addition, programmes that are developed following thorough market research have relevance to human resources development needs of the economy Hence, UCDE routinely carries out environmental analysis to assess the needs of both the private and public sectors and translate these into appropriate educational and training programmes.

From a human resources development perspective, market surveys reduce the mismatch between the supply of skills and the demand requirements for these by both private and public sectors. In addition, market surveys provide UCDE with the flexibility to respond to rapid changes in workplace processes and employment patterns. This, in turn, contributes to the functional flexibility of the workforce so that workers can easily adjust to changing work demands. The emerging cooperation between UCDE and employers, notably the private sector, reflects the College's continued commitment to treat market surveys as an integral part of its programme development process. As a result, programmes that are developed this way address perceived needs of the economy and will continue to be responsive and relevant to current and future human resources requirements of commerce, industry and the public sector. The needs of both the public and private sectors are constantly monitored to ensure continued programme relevance and sustained functional flexibility of a workforce which operates under a rapidly changing global information economy which places huge demands on human resources development.

Access to Distance Education Human Resources Training Programmes

Access refers to participation. It is a concept concerned with how far an educational system allows the target population to participate in the educational and training processes. The greater the proportion of the target population participating in education, the more accessible the education system. This is

manifest in Zimbabwe where post-independence attempts to universalize access to education led to massive expansion at primary and secondary levels at a scale without parallel in Africa. However, at tertiary level, where there are serious implications for human resources development, access has remained severely limited because traditional forms of education and training lack the capacity for high volume student intakes. In addition, structural limitations of these institutions continue to prevent the development and provision of flexible, learner-friendly and affordable programmes which empower, in particular, the socially disadvantaged groups which include women, youths, working and non-working adults, former refugees, and ex-combatants. Similarly, conventional institutions find it difficult to adapt to human resources needs of small-to-medium scale enterprises (SMEs) and the informal sector.

Although the number of universities has increased from one to four in the last few years following the opening of the public funded National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and two private universities, their combined capacities (including those of several others yet to be established) to cope with the demographic pressure for university places and the demands for high level manpower requirements is severely limited due to extreme resource constraints and structural limitations of residential universities which are characterized by low student intakes and high unit costs. Similarly, although vocational and technical training institutions increased from two colleges at Independence to eight, while enrolment increased from 3 469 in 1980 to 9 385 in 1989 (Kanyenze, 1997), the full capacity of these institutions is hard to reach because of the usual constraints associated with conventional institutions. According to Nhundu (1992), the combined enrolment capacity for Zimbabwe's technical, agricultural and teachers' colleges which stood at 41 688 students in 1988 was inadequate to meet the training needs of 146 181 'O' level school leavers who were unable to proceed to 'A' level in that year.

Meanwhile, opportunities for apprenticeship training were even more severely limited. According to King (1990), out of over 110 000 applicants who applied for apprenticeship training in 1986, only 1 146 could be absorbed, further indicating the limited capacity to increase access to education and training through conventional tertiary institutions. As a result, the decision to introduce university distance education in August 1993 should be appraised against this background. This decision further attests government's acceptance of the potential of distance education in increasing access to education and training at lower unit costs and, moreso, alleviate manpower needs of the country as well as meet the social demand for university education.

Concern for access and equity through distance education is very evident in the mission statement and aims of the University College of Distance Education. Part of the mission statement reads:

> The University College of Distance Education is a multi-disciplinary College of the University of Zimbabwe offering degree and non-degree courses through distance education. The College aims to

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> provide quality education to meet the needs of all who seek to improve and develop their skills and knowledge (UCDE Strategic Plan 1995-2000, p7)

Furthermore, the College is committed, inter alia, to 'developing the human resource base to full potential in congruence with manpower and other community needs" and to "increasing access to university education".

Concern for increasing access to higher education and training which gave impetus to the introduction of the first university distance education project in 1993 was evident right from the start, when the first intake of 668 students were enrolled onto the pioneer Bachelor of Education degree programme in Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies [BEd (EAPPS)] in August 1993. Four months later, in January 1994, over 2 000 students registered on Intake 2 of the same programme. By 1995, a second distance learning programme was introduced in collaboration with the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Zimbabwe (iCAZ). The collaborative initiative arose out a concern for strengthening the quality of Zimbabwean accountants and enhance their international competitiveness. This resulted in the introduction of a post-graduate Diploma in Applied Accountancy (DAA) which started with an initial intake of 250 students. It is, indeed, through such strategic alliances that UCDE programmes retain their competitive advantage and continue to be relevant to current needs. Above all, working with professional organisations and large employers within public and private sectors allows UCDE to provide work-related and specialized training programmes which can be built into specific career development paths in these organizations. In turn, employees on such programmes can receive appropriate incentives in recognition of the benefits which participation in distance learning brings to their organizations.

Over the last two years, UCDE programmes have rapidly diversified with the introduction of three new programmes; an under graduate Diploma in Classroom Text and Discourse (DCTD), Bachelor of Arts (English and Communication Studies) and Bachelor of Science (Agriculture). Programme diversification is set to intensify in 1999 when at least six new programmes will be introduced between January and September. Thereafter, the College will be introducing at least five new programmes per calender year in addition to several short-term courses targeted at the informal sector. Each calendar year, in turn, is divided into two academic years commencing each January and July. The structure of the academic year further increases access to education and training programmes in UCDE.

The net effect of the structure of the UCDE academic year is that two cohorts of students can register on any one programme in a given calendar year. This quickly raises enrolments to levels where the benefits of economies of scale, which derive from teaching large numbers of students, are realized. The B.Ed (Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies) degree programme which currently has a total of five active intakes, with a combined enrolment in excess of 5 586 students, illustrates how the structure of the academic year increases opportunities for human resources development to meet the skills of the economy. The impact of UCDE in this respect is evident from the 500 and 1 460 graduates already produced

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from Intakes I and II, respectively. To this figure, additional diploma graduates of over 500 and 120 have been produced by the Diploma in Applied Accountancy and Diploma in Classroom Text and Discourse programmes, respectively.

Meanwhile, UCDE has projected that by September 1999 the combined enrolment will be in excess of 20 000 students from well over ten degree, non-degree programmes and short courses. Further dramatic increases in enrolment are anticipated with the introduction of more new programmes that will attract school leavers and the informal sector because of an anticipated curricula shift towards vocational subjects. Virtually all current programmes and many of those planned for 1999 are directed at upgrading working adults. Accordingly, these programmes, together with those meant for school-leavers are very flexible, learner-friendly and, above all, very suitable for high volume manpower training requirements.

Finally, since entry qualifications on programmes run by distance and open learning institutions are generally lower than those for similar programmes offered conventionally. UCDE has, likewise, liberalized entry qualifications to all its programmes. This practice has enabled many people, especially adults who do not possess inflated entry requirements demanded by conventional universities, to access university education and training. For example, minimum entry qualifications on currenty UCDE programmes are five 'O' level passes (including English Language), while the conventional system demands 'A' levels. Useful insight can be found in the comparative requirements of the BSc Agriculture programme which requires five 'O' levels (including English and a science subject), while the conventional programme demands, in addition, 8 and 9 'A' level points in approved subjects for girls and boys, respectively.

Advantages of Human Resources Development Through UCDE

Any attempts to explore the advantages of utilizing distance education for human resource development should initially be informed by some of the conclusions which follow from Porter's (1985) analysis of the competitive advantages of organisations. According to Porter, a successful organization depends as much on the attractiveness of its industry as on its own merits.

Following from Porter's (1985) observation, the competitive advantage of UCDE in human resource development in Zimbabwe derives from both the attractiveness of the labour market and its own merits as a distance teaching institution. UCDE occupies a strong relative position in a very attractive labour market in which unemployment rates in excess of 44% combine with a high output education system which produces academic-oriented job-seekers (and not job-creators) to create great potential for high volume human resource development programmes. This market is made even more attractive because the combined capacities of Zimbabwe's conventional tertiary institutions remain severely limited for several reasons. For example, conventional institutions face structural limitations which inhibit increasing student numbers without raising the cost of education and training

beyond the reach of many people. Furthermore, curricular and scheduling rigidities of face-to-face teaching exclude many potential learners who find them in conflict with work, family and social commitments.

On its part, UCDE has important competitive advantages which derive from the merits inherent in distance teaching institutions. The cost-effectiveness of distance education makes
distance learning programmes affordable to many people. Several studies have demonstrated superior cost-effectiveness of distance education programmes (Department of Education and Science and Open University, 1991; Ding Xingfu, 1993 and Loing, 1993) which derives from economies of scale which result from teaching large numbers of students. In addition, people also choose distance education for other reasons which give it further advantages over conventional face-to-face instruction. For example, some people choose university distance education because:

- they feel psychologically and geographically distant from conventional institutions,
- they were excluded from conventional universities because of limited access to these institutions, and
- their social and civic commitments are in conflict with the demands of conventional institutions.

However, many workers choose distance education because they often find conventional systems in conflict with their work commitments which may not allow them to be away for long periods of time. The opportunity costs associated with such long periods of absence from work make these systems unattractive to both the employer and employee. Hence, UCDE programmes make it possible for employers to benefit from the flexibility of distance education systems and programmes because these allow employees to remain in employment while studying part-time. During their period of study, employees acquire relevant competencies, knowledge and skills which increase their functional flexibility through multi-skilling and/or multi-tasking; enhance productivity and, at the same time, save employers the cost of replacement labour. Meanwhile, the employee continues to receive a full salary and attend to family and other social commitments while acquiring new competencies, knowledge and skills.

Furthermore, distance education programmes are specially designed to address the needs of part-time adult working and non-working learners who are often faced by several conflicting demands. For instance, distance education programmes generally have no rigid time frame for completion. This allows learners to progress at their own pace depending on their abilities, social and full-time work commitments. For UCDE, a programme which, on average may take four years to complete may be completed in less time or possibly take longer, depending on the learner's other commitments. In addition, a learner may decide to suspend his/her studies in cases of financial and other hardships without losing credit for courses or part of the programme completed and, on rejoining, the learner proceeds from

where he/she left on the programme. Similarly, a student can postpone taking an exam if he/she is not ready.

On the contrary, such provisions are not readily available within Zimbabwe's conventional university system where existing academic regulations are generally inflexible. For example, the General Academic Regulations of the University of Zimbabwe (University of Zimbabwe Calendar, 1996/97) stipulate that a student who fails in either two programmes or fails in any one Part of a programme will be required to withdraw from the University, unlike under UCDE where such penalties do not exist.

Depending on their capacity to cope with the course demands, distance education students are allowed to take as many courses as they are able to pay for. In addition, the fact that each distance education programme has several intakes across each calendar year enables the learner to take courses of their choice with students in intakes other than theirs. Besides, if a learner fails a course, he/she can take the same course when it is next offered and, given the multiplicity of intakes, the student will not wait for very long before registering for the same course on another intake. Finally, consideration is made for possible financial hardships that students may face when paying fees. In this respect, students are allowed to pay in advance as well as by instalments.

Potential Limitations of UCDE in Provision of Human Resources Development

The competitive advantages of UCDE in the provision of education and training programmes for human resources development may be undermined by several potential weaknesses. Of primary concern is the development of a sound national policy framework on which distance education initiatives should be anchored. It is important that distance education is given prominence in public policy formulation in order to enhance its status which has been adversely affected from its association with correspondence education. The misconception that distance education is an inferior system is an enduring one which has been sustained by the notoriety of some commercial correspondence colleges whose primary motive is to make profit. Hence, given great economic, political, and social contributions of distance education, the Government has the responsibility to ensure that distance education gets a prominent place in public policy.

Government commitment to distance education should not be reflected in policy formulation alone, but more important, in its resource allocation priorities. The public will not take seriously government commitment to distance education unless it demonstrates support for its policies by allocating enough resources to improve and strengthen the quality of distance education programmes so that they achieve parity of esteem with conventional programmes. If UCDE remains under-funded and does not receive an independent budget, its competitive advantages will gradually be eroded and, eventually, the acceptability of its qualifications within the national and international systems of educational credentials will be undermined. Distance education, by nature, calls for initial heavy resource commitment in terms of physical infrastructure, materials development and production, staff training,

student support services, management capability and, above all, expensive communications infrastructure for effective delivery of instruction.

In order to improve the effectiveness of self-instructional methods in distance learning, it is important for UCDE to go beyond the current print materials and radio broadcasts, to use other distance learning strategies including personal media. Personal media such as audio-cassette players, video-cassette recorders (VCRs) and personal computers (PCs) bring greater flexibility and autonomy to distance learners who are empowered to gain control of the learning process. However, while the benefits of personal media are well acknowledged (Bates, 1982 and Jones, Kirkup and Kirkwood, 1992), the high cost of these technologies puts them out of the reach of many UCDE learners. Similarly, a combination of poor infrastructure, such as unreliable national electricity and telephone networks, the high cost of televisions, and poor reception will continue to deny many UCDE students the benefits of telecourse instruction unless measures to redress the situation are put in place. Hence, it is in consideration of this context that high initial capital injection is required to equip regional study centres and district resource centres with personal media and other communications technologies which enhance human resource development through distance learning. In this connection, support should be given to these remote learning centres in terms of setting up computer labs, internet services, libraries, video and audio facilities, and satellite-based communications.

Finally, the acquisition of certain specialist competencies and skills is best done through interaction with teachers, other learners, and expensive equipment that may not be readily available in regional and district resource centres. Such specialized training, though expensive, may be made available in a few selected centres where learners will converge for practicals and face-to-face interaction. However, to ensure efficient utilization of these resources other organizations, both within government and the private sector, can access them for training and career development of their staff.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has explored the potential of university distance education in meeting high level human resources development needs in Zimbabwe. An examination of the nature and practice of distance education has revealed that it is the system best positioned to provide for these needs to large numbers of learners at lower unit costs. Furthermore, the flexibility of distance education makes it the most appropriate system for addressing education and training needs of working adult learners who are unable to leave their work and families to register on fulltime programmes. In this respect, the strength of university distance education in providing human resources training requirements have been demonstrated by UCDE's brief experience since its inception five years ago.

In the provision of human resources training requirements of workers, the paper has demonstrated that UCDE has virtually no opportunity costs on the part of the

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employer who enjoys increased productivity as workers are challenged to apply the newly acquired competencies, knowledge and skills to their work situations while they continue with their studies. By working closely with professional organizations and large employers, UCDE can develop specialized programmes which bring functional flexibility to the workforce. These programmes also enhance the career structure of those already in post, and lead to greater staff retention. In turn, employers become more prepared to provide a wide range of incentives to employees who are engaged in part-time study and training through UCDE than those engaged in fulltime study.

On the other hand, UCDE allows students to pursue further education and training on part-time basis, while they continue with full-time employment. This enables the student to advance his/her career and/or to explore new career directions. Furthermore, the enduring qualities of flexibility and learner-friendliness allow learners to progress at their own individual paces and at the convenience of work, family and other social commitments and demands.

Since distance education programmes are developed following thorough market research conducted to determine perceived training needs, distance learners can be confident of securing employment because they hold qualifications that are on demand on the market. Above all, university distance education curricula have a vocational orientation, and programmes can be developed to meet the demands of the informal sector. This quality is particularly important in Zimbabwe where unemployment rates of over 44% are not uncommon, and where academic-oriented school curriculum produces job-seekers and not job-creators.

This paper has also highlighted the role of government in the provision of university distance education in Zimbabwe. In this respect, the future viability of UCDE and university distance education will partly depend on the development of a sound education policy framework which underscores the Government's commitment to university distance education. However, UCDE can easily lose its competitive advantages in human resources development unless government support for this policy translates into high resource commitment towards the development of physical infrastructure, staff training, materials production, student support services, and modern communications technologies, which all combine to make distance education truly multi-media. The idea that distance education may be inferior can be reinforced if UCDE remains under-funded and, hence, unable to take full advantage of the benefits of a wide range of modern communication media that enhance distance learning. In conclusion, the competitive advantages of distance education in the field of human resources development can only be fully exploited within a context where an enabling public policy framework is sustained by high initial capital expenditure in support of distance learning.

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