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The Need for Policy Framework in Maintaining Quality in Open and Distance Education Programmes in Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

The ideals of education for all as proposed by UNESCO (2000) cannot be achieved without tapping into all the existing educational delivery systems. Open and distance education system has caught the attention of a number of Southern African Universities as a viable and 'Siamese' twin of the conventional education in achieving flexibility, open and greater access for the heterogeneous clientele of the region. Despite the glowing virtues of distance education, this mode is still looked down upon by some people as inferior to the conventional teaching and learning processes. Paradoxically, learning through the distance education mode has a greater potential to provide education for more learners than the conventional education system.

In a dynamic society such as the Southern African region, development has made education a phenomenon that transcends the four walls of the formal classrooms. Thus, a policy framework is needed to ensure that quality education is provided for learners of diverse cultures, including economic background and geographical regions. Such a framework is not only a basic requirement for positive development of the newly emerging distance education institutions but also an essential instrument for the continued success of the long established institutions, both single and dual mode.

The proposed policy framework addresses some of the following (i) academic (e.g. course integrity, transferability and accreditation); (ii) governance, (e.g. tuition, fiscal regulation); (iii) faculty (e.g. training, workload, support and evaluation); (iv) legal (e.g. intellectual property, students and institutional liability); (v) technical (e.g. physical delivery networks, systems reliability, setup and infrastructural support); (vi) culture and (vii) economics, (e.g. direct and indirect costs of distance education). All these aspects can deter or stimulate certain group of people to develop interest and consequently enrol for learning through the distance education mode.

In this paper, our aim is to stimulate dialogue on the significance, scope of coverage and the processes of formulating a policy framework for maintaining academic excellence as opposed to mediocrity. We are, however, mindful of the fact that practices are diverse in the region, but regardless of this diversity, a regional policy framework is possible to regulate the planning, development and implementation of quality distance education programmes across all levels of education, with particular focus on higher institutions of learning.

Keywords: Academic excellence, transferability and accreditation, UNESCO, virtues of distance education, open and distance education system, and implementation of quality distance education programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is not a new delivery phenomenon in the Southern African region. It has and continues to be acclaimed by many as an independent mode and as a complimentary delivery strategy to the provision of the formal educational system. Of late, it has become a viable education and training tool in different organizations such as government departments, non-government organizations, community-based organizations, private institutions, and so on. However, at the regional level, and some national levels, distance education practices remain uncoordinated because no bold step has been taken to develop a regional policy on open and distance learning (ODL). Generally, national organizations and institutions operate in isolation, resulting in operational problems such as lack of support for each other and unnecessary duplication of activities. There must be clear and well-defined policy to permit effective networking and exchange of information. Effective networking can lead to the provision of distance education activities that are responsive to the needs of the diverse clientele of Southern African region. It is also a way of promoting cross-national planning and the sharing of the meagre resources available in the region. We believe that the type of uncoordinated activities that currently exist in the Southern African region do not augur well for the type of unity that is called upon by the global organizations such as the 2000 UN Millennium Development Goals, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). There is need for a greater networking and sharing in the region. It is only through collective endeavors and a sense of unity that the barriers to the effective use of distance education mode can be reduced.

Educational systems are dynamic and ever changing. The Southern African region, for example, is experiencing vast transformation as a result of many factors which include:

- explosive demand for higher education as the formal tertiary institutions cannot cope with the growth and demands of the society
- technological development and globalizations issues are yet other driving forces and
- the persistent dwindling governmental financial support for educational activities, especially the higher education.

All these challenges, if not properly addressed through a well-defined policy framework, can curtail the ability of the tertiary institutions to grow in quantity and quality so as to become more relevant and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the diverse populations of the region.

Conventional universities are looked at as "ivory towers" (that is, organizations on which all great lives are built) and yet access to these 'towers' are very restricted. Restrictions come in different forms such as low per capita income which makes it impossible for either the government or some individuals to afford to pay for higher education. At this time, most of the Southern African region is witnessing a trend in which the elites as well as capitalists, who have the means, almost exclusively enjoy the right to higher education leading to 'great' life styles thus widening the gap between the rich and the poor in our societies. However, with recent technological developments such as on-line computing and the World Wide Web (www) this trend can be reversed, especially through well defined policies and intentional moves to open and free access. The move calls for changes in the institutional culture and in the operating policies so as to challenge the status quo of our higher institutions of learning and also to ensure the provision of quality programmes and to stimulate professional development among staff, through training and rewarding incentives.

TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES AND THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Change is an inevitable process of human development. However, there may some wave of resistance to change in favour of the maintenance of the status quo. Causes of such resistance are many. They include long held belief systems and some anticipated consequences of change. Likely, transformation requires a major cultural shift in any organization's nomenclature. The basic bedrock of such a shift is trust among members (Simsek & Louis, 1994, Rowley, et. al 1997). Trust, according to Simsek and Louis (1994), can be demonstrated through open, participative and objective communication systems between and among individuals and groups in higher education. Decision-making processes which also reflect and communicate a clear understanding of the institutional culture and internal politics are instrumental in building trust. Through these processes, trust can be enhanced such that it leads to general acceptability of any proposed change. Braimoh (2004) opines that two identical institutions operating within the same geographic boundary may similarly defy a transformation, because of their historical backgrounds, institutional leadership styles, cultural beliefs, strategic operations, values, mission and organisational roles and expectations.

Literature is replete on the meanings, purposes and processes of transformation. Each organization however focuses on different aspects of the transformation. For instance, the on-going transformation processes in South African higher education focuses essentially on the redress of the past gender and racial inequalities including relevance of the institutions in responding more positively to new realities and opportunities (Reddy, 1992, Fehnel, 1993, & Higgs, 2002) and this might not be the case in other universities in the sub-region. Using the UNESCO's (2000) assessment of the performance of African tertiary institutions , our focus is drawn to the following;

- Quality assurance and relevance
- Access and equity
- Capacity building and partnership
- Management and financing.

These are aspects that can be addressed through well-defined national and regional educational policies. On the other hand, the factors behind the reshaping of higher education in the Southern African region can be summarized aptly under the following headings:

- Shrinking national resource allocation
- Technology and globalization
- Survival Strategy
- Economies of scale
- Innovative Delivery Technique
- Change in organizational culture
- Market trend
- Brain drain syndrome
- Institutional collaboration
- Student composition.

A well-defined policy framework can address these issues in a more appropriate and responsive manner. It must be noted that while different internal and external factors may drive some universities to transform, it is not ideal for institutions to spontaneously embark on transformation for the sake of it. Rather, it is realistic to look critically at the unique situation affecting the institution, taking into account its organizational culture, and thereby

adapting, where necessary, from the experiences of other successfully transformed institutions.

ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY TO EDUCATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Just as much as we accept that we have moved from traditional location-bound communities to a 'global village' (McLuhan, 1964), distance education too has moved from the first generation innovation to the fourth generation because of technological advancements. The computers and the World Wide Web have given it a well esteemed and superior status. Thus, distance education can no longer be viewed as an inferior mode of extending the university to some audiences. Rather, it has become an indispensable learning mode in the present information age. It is an integral element of the whole spectrum of instructional options in higher education. Thus, it is necessary to drop the artificial distinctions that separate the campus resident students from the distant learners. Institutional, national, regional and global policies should focus on quality provision, that is, offering knowledge as a product to all its learners, whether on a face-to-face or distance.

While the virtues of distance education as a potential mode for widening access to and providing flexibility of learning styles cannot be overemphasized, we should nevertheless guard against the mushrooming of distance education institutions with very doubtful academic performance record. Many institutions in the Southern African region are now engaged in providing different educational programmes at a distance. This mushrooming comes with some consequences. For example, there is growing concern over what is referred as commodification and commercialization of education and training. For some of these institutions, the quality of programmes is not a concern but exploitative tendency, especially financial gains, is the drive behind their activities. Furthermore, cultural infiltration comes along with the now acclaimed globalization and the internationalization of education. The problems that we are witnessing in regard to distance education might have been created by the lack of policy framework to guide the modus operandi of achieving higher quality in the programmes offered and to safeguard against some exploitative practices.

THE NEED FOR DEVELOPING A REGIONAL (SOUTHERN AFRICAN) POLICY FRAMEWORK ON DISTANCE EDUCATION

Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1997) indicated that the presence of policies can provide a framework for operation, an agreed-upon set of rules that explain all participants' roles and responsibilities, otherwise, its absence can compromise the quality of programme and the entire practice can adversely be affected. Dodds and Youngman (1994) explain that since the early 1970s, distance education has been an important policy option for educational planners in developing countries. This option has not been pushed further for us to be having some well-established distance education policies by now.

However, the Southern African countries have come to accept this mode as an indispensable ingredient of the growth of national education systems, hence, there is need to re-visit the issue of developing policy framework and ensure that it becomes a reality.

The presence of a policy framework can strengthen the already positive effects of distance education. Distance education, for instance, is known for its potential to wide access to education at a number of different levels in a relatively cheap or at least, cost-effective manner.

This mode is becoming popular and is promoted by international organizations including UNESCO and the World Bank as an appropriate policy choice for developing countries in their

bid to widen accessibility. It has been found to be more appropriate for individuals who are in full-time employment and have challenges and responsibilities, that demand them to stay with their families. Other people, due to some social responsibilities, continue to earn a living through employment while they study to improve their competencies. The growing popularity of distance education in the Southern African region is also demonstrated by the speed at which many tertiary institutions are adopting a bi-modal educational delivery strategy.

The demand for tertiary education is so high that it cannot be met through the conventional mode alone. Thus, distance education should rightly be appreciated as a viable mode of delivery that needs strong policies to ensure its quality and impact.

The growing interest in distance education has led many countries to think about policy frameworks. For example, some practitioners in the Center for Continuing Education of the University of Botswana have worked out a concept paper (unpublished) on the development of ODL policy. This paper touches on some critical goals that are worth mentioning here because they can be adopted for regional use. They are:

- **To control and maintain quality of services provided;**
- **To protect the innocent distance education clientele from wilful exploitation by profit seeking organizations through exorbitant fee for an unaccredited programme.**
- **To harmonize the use of physical, human and material resources through partnership and collaboration in order to achieve economies of scale and to operate an efficient distance education programme while at the same time avoiding unnecessary duplication of activities;**
- **To forge linkages with international bodies to achieve exchange of expertise and facilitate staff training programmes in ODL;**
- **To guarantee credit transfer to other institutions through national, regional and international accreditation process;**
- **To create enabling learning environment through the provision of adequate learners support services, such as libraries, access to appropriate technologies, availability of skilled manpower and so on;**
- **To ensure parity of products by mainstreaming ODL programmes with the conventional system for the purpose of recognition and respectability;**
- **To guarantee legal copyrights for authors;**
- **To ascertain the relevance of educational programme to the needs of the country;**
- **To improve the quality of programme through the supply of quality staff including the adequacy and appropriateness of infrastructures available before embarking on distance education programmes.**

As can be noted, the above goals cover a number of critical issues regarding the quality, relevance and smooth running of distance education programmes. Together, they give a picture of a policy that addresses pertinent issues such as quality programmes and staff, appropriateness of infrastructure, learners' security and support services, promotion of networking and other aspects of creating an enabling environment.

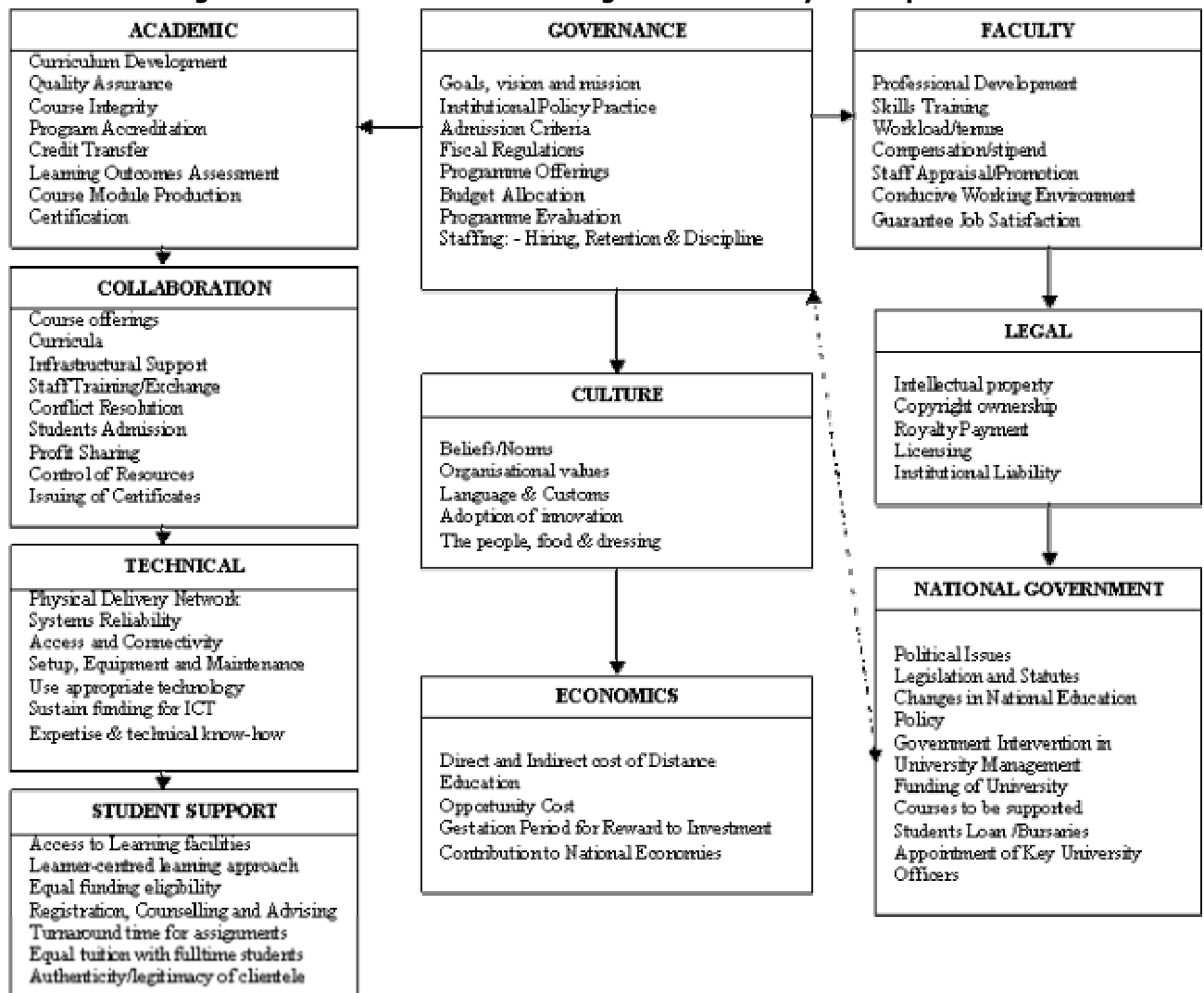
A policy which takes these aspects into consideration is ideal for guiding the practice of distance education movement in a country, within a region or even internationally. Unfortunately, experiences and the literature indicate that some universities in both the developed and developing countries do not have policy frameworks on distance education at all. For those universities which may have, such policies are just pocket issues and not all-

embracing policy guidelines (Berger, 1998, Epper, 1999, King, et al, 2000, Simonson et al, 2000). Thus, in many conferences and other professional gatherings, issues of distance education policy frameworks are discussed.

In the recent workshop (September 18-19, 2004) organized in Lesotho by Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) there was a mention of a policy framework and a lot is being done by this association and specific countries to develop strong policies to regulate the practice of distance education.

What follows in a theoretical framework for the paradigm we suggest can be used to inform the distance education policies. It borrows from the literature and especially from Gellman-Danley & Fetzner (1998) and on which Berge (1998) added two more dimensions. Based on the practical circumstances in the Southern African region, we have modified the two perspectives and came up with ten variables aimed at improving the efficiency of the use of distance education with particular reference to Southern African region.

Figure: 1
Pragmatic Model Of Distance Learning Areas For Policy Development



This framework is intended to be adopted for use in the region by the SADC countries as an enabling instrument aimed at standardizing the practice of open and distance learning within the Southern African region. The framework is to be seen as general statements of intent (goals or objectives) to guide the professional activities, competences, and attitudes of an institution and its staff. Such policies need to be in accord with the mission, vision and the value orientation of the institution and these are expected to be consistent with the governing regional or national legislations. We are however, not oblivious of the fact that in some countries, an educational institution's policies must meet regional or national accrediting agency standards that provide guidelines for programme structure, student recruitment, teaching staff qualifications and teaching methodologies. A case in point is the recent event in South Africa where the Council for Higher Education (CHE) which is charged with the responsibility of accreditation of University Programmes withdrew the right from many South African Universities to offer MBA programme. This is a necessity, if students' academic credits have to be transferred from one institution to another within national and among regional tertiary institutions. As noticed, the framework presents ten important aspects. A brief synopsis of each aspect is presented below.

Governance

Issues that fall under this category relate essentially to the translation of the institutional policy, goals, vision and mission into practical reality. Thus, policy framework is needed to see to the standardization of University programmes, admission criteria, training, retaining and the discipline of staff. The presence of a framework can regulate activities of different cadres in higher institutions such as the University's Governing Board –The Council– including the University Management and other pertinent committees or bodies, such as the Academic Staff Appointment Committee (ASAC) and the University Senate. These bodies comprise what we referred to here as Governance. Not only should this body link up vertically and horizontally with other sectors of the university, the also constitute the major areas of policy formulation. Governance is a driving force for the tertiary institutions to achieve overall institutional objectives. It should also act as the major link between tertiary institutions.

Academic

Academic can be described broadly as the total educational experiences of an institution of higher education. It looks into issues of professional preparation, accreditation guidelines, quality curricula, quality assurance mechanism, course integrity as well as the assessment modes for learning outcomes. All these add up to critical issues of career marketability, professional identity and sound ethical standards. The products of the institution are likely to be seen as credible by the public and this will also guarantee acceptability of students' credits to be transferred intra-nationally and inter-regionally.

Faculty

To have a well-acclaimed distance education programmes require the right quality and quantity of staff. Distance education institutions must promote tenure as an attractive incentive to make faculty participate and be committed to their professional activities. Policies can be formulated to provide an intrinsic motivation for faculty to be innovative. Incentives such as financial rewards should not form the core of professional growth but provision of quality programmes should. A well-thought off policy can ensure that unfair and exploitative measures such as overload and unfair working environments are taken care of. Exploitative measures which can serve as a great disincentive to faculty may lead to staff turnover, a regular feature of brain drain from one institution to the other. Training and retraining programmes must consistently be organized for faculty as a process of professional development.

Collaboration

In order to avoid unnecessary duplication and to achieve cost reduction, collaboration among institutions is necessary. This can guarantee programme credibility. It is desirable for tertiary institutions both single and bi-modal to collaborate at many levels, especially for financial resources sharing. Collaboration may be done on areas of curricular, course offerings, staff exchange, infrastructural support, adaptation or adoption of course modules, control of resources as well as sharing of profit or liability.

Culture

There are many changes that are inevitable both in academic and administrative systems. When these changes are to be effected, there is need for a change in traditional beliefs, norms, organizational values and orientations. We know of institutions that are now adopting innovative methods such as participatory management styles as against authoritarian systems used by some traditional organizations. There may be, for example, the need to change rigid admission criteria or courses that are archaic to give way to currently market driven programmes. Furthermore, in order for distance education to become highly democratized, the target population should be given a chance to play a significant role especially during the introduction of relevant academic and professional programmes.

Legal

It is necessary that respective institutions and their faculty members be protected from exploitative practices. The presence of well-developed policy can give faculty members legitimate rights of ownership of their intellectual property, or copyright, royalty payment and of course security from wilful violation, in any form, of their personal rights. There may be need for institutions to organize some non-formal training sessions in form of workshops and seminars to sensitize their members of legal aspects of their profession. This becomes necessary in this era because of the emerging use of complex technological devices that deliver knowledge product across boundaries.

Technical

The use of appropriate technology cannot be overemphasized. We are aware that in most developing countries of the Southern African region, unlike in developed world, such as Europe, Canada, Asia or America, there is still the problem of power supply. This situation should be taken into consideration when one thinks of effective means of delivering education through the distance education mode.

Other aspects to be considered include the low per capita income, high illiteracy rate and unemployment. Therefore, the adoption of ICT for educational delivery must take into account the aforementioned aspects. In other words, we believe that the socio-economic viability of the end users, government policies and the national resources available for development programmes play a significant role in deciding on the appropriate means of delivery rather than acting impulsively.

Economics

The direct and indirect cost of distance education will have to be calculated in relation to the reward the learners gain from distance education programmes. Work should thus instill in workers motivation for continued learning hence the saying learning and earning go on *pari-passu*. Experiences show that many people like to improve their qualities through professional development as well as their competencies at work. Policies then can be formulated to ensure that distance learners' and practitioners' contribution through direct and indirect taxes from the salaries they earn are fair.

National Government

Education is too important to be left in the hands of the private sector and market forces. In many countries, education is the responsibility of the governments as it is a potent weapon to achieve national development and integration. It is also looked upon as a unique tool to break the backdrop of oppression, victimization and dependency. Used rightly and properly understood, open learning and distance education may provide greater opportunities for education and training, particularly for the excluded and underserved populations of the region.

On a different note, we believe that government may have to limit its political intervention in the University management structures and allow greater autonomy to the higher institutions of learning. Partnership between public and private initiatives, central and local government authorities, social and economic regional blocks, such as SADC and ECOWAS should be encouraged.

It is inconceivable therefore, to think of government entirely relinquishing the power of formulating legislative and educational statutes. Through these supports, the governments exercise a subtle control mechanism of the University governance through the appointment, by the government, of University Council Chairperson and even the Chancellor.

Student Support

Gellman-Danley & Fetzner (1997) opine that the area of student support services is as critical and crucial to the success of any distance learning programme. Student support issues directly impact prospective and current distance learning students and these include the provision of libraries, materials delivery, counselling and relevant teaching and learning approaches.

Also, the government funding eligibility must not discriminate the beneficiaries. That is, equal financial support (loans and bursaries) should be created through appropriate policies for both the full-time and the distant learners. Another important consideration is time and this is a global problem thus it becomes a critical aspect to be considered for policy formulation if quality assurance must be achieved.

CONCLUSION

The frequent changes that characterize distance education practice, especially in this 21st century required to be managed through strong policies. In order to be effective, policies must be realistic, measurable and achievable. Although we have not dealt with the different processes of developing a policy document, it is pertinent for institution's policy makers to take note that distance education policy is influenced and partly shaped by state and/or national policies and technological innovations.

Thus, for distance education to be used as one of the contributors to national development, it has to be accompanied by policies that are couched on the ideals and principles of national development. It is our belief that we have stimulated academic discourse through the information contained in this paper. The challenges posed in the framework provided should serve as guideline principles in the formulation of national and regional policies.

There is enough evidence indicating that many countries in the Southern African region are reviewing their programmes and pulling resources together in order to develop comprehensive distance learning policy frameworks. The guidelines provided in this paper are intended to be used by institutions and organizations both in the respective countries in Southern Africa and in the region as a whole.

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