MODERN DISTANCE EDUCATION VERSUS TRADITIONAL ORTHODOXY:
The Case of the University of Nairobi

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ABSTRACT
Kenyan Universities are going through very rapid changes in the delivery of their programmes arising mainly from the reduction of capitation from the central government. Evening classes, outreach programmes and distance education are all now accepted as ways of reducing the financial crunch as many eager Kenyans are willing to pay for what they thought they would never achieve.

This has not gone down well with those whole believe in the tradition of exclusion as a measure of quality. Many of the questions asked are: can universities trust people who are not under the immediate scrutiny of established faculty to deliver quality education? To what extent can universities trust part-time faculty, whose main agenda is to make an extra coin, to avoid the temptation of being generous with marks? Are the technologies being used able to deliver quality education at a distance? How can universities convince the world that they can take in those students who could not get direct entry to degree programmes, teach them under fluid situations and give them degrees that are equal value to residential programmes? In other words should universities compromise quality for money?

This paper looks at the whole scenario as a paradigmatic shift. The paper starts of with a development which took place at the University of Nairobi in 2000 relating to the operations of the University's Faculty of External Studies and the issues raised above. The paper then takes a comparative approach bringing out similar debates from the originators of modern distance education, that is Australia and Canada, Britain and the United States of America.

The presentation examines the issue of quality and quality assurance. It gives suggestions on the best ways of integrating the incoming electronic capacity into the learning and support milieu of the underfunded African universities and the importance of collaboration.

The paper poses the question; what is learning and what is the role of institutions providing learning? To answer this question the paper looks at the theories of learning as espoused by Plato, Rousseau and Dewey and which bring out the role of the 'hidden curriculum' in educational perception.

The paper then moves to presentation of research data derived from an examination of the University of Nairobi's Bachelor of Education (Arts) by distance mode and full-time study on-campus mode using teaching practice as a criterion measure. The results show

a parity in performance despite the two different modes, diametrical entry qualifications and support structures.

In the year 2000 the Faculty of External Studies (FES), now School of Continuing and Distance Education (SCDE) of the University of Nairobi (UON) prepared a curriculum for teaching a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) by the distance mode of study. But during its discussion in the University Senate, members expressed doubts as to whether there was enough evidence provided by the Faculty to show from its experience that distance education was indeed well developed at the University to handle such professional courses.

A subsequent committee set up by Senate came out with more questions than answers as they could not find research output from the Faculty to give the committee positive direction in making its report. This despite the fact that the University has been running the distance study bachelor of education (arts) since September 1986.

One would assume that after so many years of practice the issue would be taken for granted as in the mainstream. But the University of Nairobi is not the only institution asking this question. The Commonwealth of Learning, a Pan-Commonwealth organization created in 1987 to spearhead expansion of access to education through open and distance education mode notes in its 2007 issue of 'Knowledge Series':

> *Despite a long and successful track record, open and distance Learning(ODL) is still required to prove that the quality of student Learning is at least equivalent to face-to-face teaching* (COL, 2007:1).

Distance education continues to have its fair share of 'doubting Thomases' the world over. In Australia, where distance education should have developed to second nature due

to its roots there, academics found it difficult to admit distance education into the higher education domain when this was mooted in mid-1970s. Johnson(1999) has underscored the concerns of the academicians used to face-to-face teaching when faced with the requirement of teaching by distance mode. Her observation is reminiscent of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. (Tait & Mills, 1999:48).

Rigour in Knowledge Processing and Communication Skills Through Distance Education

A paramount issue among the traditional academicians is the capacity of distance education to give its students the requisite environment to develop a capacity for critical thinking which is deemed a cornerstone of higher education. The physical contact between professors and their students is deemed to be critical to this development.

. Scholars like Hall (1987) believe that distance education has shown a capacity to help students acquire knowledge and communication skills. But he argues that it has failed in developing the skills of analysis, synthesis, application, judgment and value that are the 'characteristic of a truly higher education'(Smith&Kelly, 1987:48). He also challenges users of telecommunications for educational purposes to give attention to 'stimulate behavior, encourage a posture and practice for learning that is active, alert and serious.' (Smith & Kelly, 1987) He is not alone in this distrust of technologically delivered form of education. Russell points at the critic who wanted nothing less than:-

> *solid empirical research that shows that undergraduates will learn how to think critically, interact rationally, and develop the cognitive and ethical perspectives that they acquire in a good residential program* (Russell,2001, :xvii).

Which led Russell to wonder whether people read research findings.

What is learning?

This is a classical question which has occupied educational though from the Greek times.

Plato (428-348 BC) tried to answer this question by illustrating the role of the teacher and that of the learner. He posits that it is the learner who is at the centre of the learning and what is to be learnt is latent in the learner just the same way that fire is latent in the ashes. The stoker does not create fire. He only helps to reveal the fire and expose its potency. (Bowen & Hobson,1975 : 27)

. He related the art of teaching to that of midwifery thus:

> *my concern is with the soul in travail of birth. And the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth.*(Bowen and Hobson, 1975 :32)

Thus, according to Plato, the woman must manage her own labour and the best outsiders can do is assist her delivery by the ancilliary art of midwifery. By the same token, the teacher is there to ask questions, to stimulate the learner so as to order his thoughts as to produce a sound result. (Bowen & Hobson : 27).

John Dewey (1859-1952) advocated for the self actualization of the individual through articulated but self-directed learning rather than the traditional approach to education which he dismissed as authoritarian based on the learner necessarily dependent upon the mind and the will of another.(Bowen & Hobson,1975:168)

Earlier, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) argued that education should be adapted to meet the needs of the child, not arranged according to the criterion of the subject matter it is thought it should learn. This was a radical shifting of emphasis in the educational process, because coupled with the dethroning of the subject matter as the basic element in the educational process, it also leads to the dethroning of the teacher as the central figure of authority whose function is to convey the subject matter to the learner.(Bowen & Hobson, 1975)

This last element is of importance in that it reinforces Plato's theory on the relationship between learning and the environment without the domineering presence of the teacher. The ownership of the experience lies squarely with the learner. The teacher becomes a variable whose presence can be dispensed with, in the physical sense, without compromising the quality of learning.

Keegan, an outstanding scholar of distance education states:

> *The quality of an educational experience is dependent upon encouraging students to critically analyse differing perspectives, thereby constructing personal meaning and validating that understanding by acting upon it through communicative acts* **(Keegan,1990:14-15) .**

It is therefore not enough for the learner to go through the learning experience. The learner must exhibit that learning through exposition. Once again the teacher can only be an animator. The physical distance is not discussed as an issue. The issue is the core function. It is through this kind of thinking that Sim (1977)could conclude that it is the outcome and not the methodologies that determine learning (Holmberg, 1985:2).

Distance education, quality assurance and generation of Synergies.

The presumed weaknesses of distance education are in-fact its strongest contribution to learning. Three areas, that is the use of pre-prepared self- instructional materials, the use of part-time faculty and the caliber of the learners will underscore this claim.

It is not possible nor desirable to look at what many institutions around the world are doing in the area of quality assurance. We elect to look at two institutions, and that is the Open University of the United Kingdom upon which the External Degree Programme of the University of Nairobi is modeled, and the African Virtual University which is likely, in its re-engineered form, to influence or impact on the future development of the programme.

The Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK), established in 1969 as the first open university in the world, was aware that its credibility could be eroded very easily. Its inception had been viewed with a lot of skepticism in many quarters by the traditional orthodoxy. In the early years the university was viewed with a lot of suspicion by politicians and other prominent figures, one of whom referred to the concept as "blithering nonsense" (Koul and Kanwar, 2006:145). The university was quite aware of the power of traditionalism. As Holmberg posits:

> *The general educational and social traditions and attitudes vary and are very powerful in official systems in shaping study regulations, probably even more so than tangible educational needs. One reason for this is that parallelism with conventional universities and schools is considered important and may even be vital for academic recognition and prestige* (Holmberg, 1985:6).

Therefore the university administrators 'insisted that the standard of first degrees should be comparable in every way to the degrees offered by the other universities' (Koul & Jenkins, 1990:20).

The university was aware that its materials would be available for public scrutiny and evaluation as the print course books were available with the students and in the public bookshops while the television and the radio programmes would be broadcast on public channels. Recorded audiocassettes and videocassettes were also available to students and the general public. The machinery set in motion was to be "bomb-proof". Here,course teams approve the work of individuals, which is then monitored by external assessors, who submit formal reports to the University. Similarly rigorous procedures are applied to aspects of course presentation, such as the marking of assignments, tutorial provision, and audio and television programmes (Holmberg,1985:20).

The African Virtual University (AVU), comprising of 12 universities working in consortium in 10 African countries has developed a participatory approach to stem possible disquiet. With its mission to work with African institutions for the development of intellectual capital and quality assurance mechanisms for OdeL methodologies and continually to shape the future of delivering higher education and training in African an affordable, equitable, scalable, flexible, cost-effective and sustainable manner by using different methodologies and quality assurance frameworks (Koul and Kanwar, 2006:61).

The AVU approach includes the selection of experts from the consortium to draw up a common curriculum that cuts across all the existing curriculum of the members and select subject matter specialists to author the teaching material from the faculty of the same members. Both the curriculum and study materials have to be processed through the quality assurance channels of each institution before signing an agreement with AVU to offer the courses. In order to handle the technological and delivery systems, the AVU has put in place a capacity enhancement program (ACEP) in which every

member of the consortium selects two faculty from each operational areas of material production, delivery and technology to undergo a one year training program. The AVU has come up with a documented Quality Assurance Framework which has been accepted by the members and which reads like a charter(AVU 2007)

Evidence shows that the preparation of distance education materials has certain effects on those chosen for the task. First is the training that the course writers have to undergo. This ensures that what has been produced is of the expected standard and quality. This has been mentioned above. The other issue related to quality is the learner support system. The OUUK has 8000 part-time tutors spread all over the country who constitute the human face of the university. These are carefully selected, trained and monitored so as to make sure that only the best are retained for consistency of quality and the level of teaching and assessment. Little wonder then that the OUUK is ranked fifth out of 117 universities in the United Kingdom behind Cambridge, Loughborough, York and the London School of Economics(Koul and Kanwar, 2006:138).Thirdly the writers know that their work will be in the public domain and therefore open to scrutiny by peers and anyone else. This is not so with the mainstream as:

> *The lecturer's words vanish into thin air within an instant, and are not available later for scrutiny and criticism. It is different with distance education. Every academic who turns to preparing materials for distance education students knows what difference it makes that the materials will be in the public domain* **(Smith & Kelly,1987:16).**

The University of Nairobi runs its distance education programmes using part-time lecturers from the rest of the University and elsewhere while the faculty concentrates its energy on the management function. This was interpreted by the Senate Committee as

acceptance of lack of competence in itself .But the committee was misleading itself

because this is how the programme was designed to work:

> *The mission of CEES through the synergy action of the dual mode approach was to commit the college to contribute towards national development through educational training and research. In essence, it wanted to commit itself to provide education and training through the combined approach of conventional and distance education. This was to strengthen its mission of expanding access as both a means of provision and uptake of opportunities for education* (Agalo, 2002:243).

It was thus hypocritical for the Committee to make the remark that:

> *Part time lecturers tend to be generous with marks to please students and they sometimes lack commitment*(149th Senate :15).

The Committee offered no evidence for these claims but its report was accepted by

Senate. The epithets seemed to rotate around the fact that the FES staff , unlike their other

colleagues in the University, were not meeting the criterion upon which merit is based

and consequently they could not be offering a standard degree. The fact is that the core

business of any successful DE unit is the management function while the

teaching/tutoring function is executed by part-time faculty:

> *Reaping the benefits of accessibility, quality, and cost-efficiency is contingent upon solid program management. In fact, distance learning programs generally require better management skills than traditional tertiary programs. With scattered students, dispersed part-time tutors, far-flung logistics, unreliable communication services, time-sensitive production and distribution of learning materials, detailed students records, successful distance education programs require a management team with above average skills in organization,* logistics*, and problem-solving. This management team need not be large, but it must be capable* (Saint, 2000:12).

The Senate Committee was instead proposing the contradiction posed by Agalo on

management structures in dual-mode institutions(Agalo, 2002:271)

The issue of part-time lecturers has not been viewed negatively elsewhere. We have noted above that the UON Committee did not give any evidence for their mistrust of use of part-time lecturers. Roger Mills gives a very positive appraisal of the use of part- time lecturers by the OUUK:-

> *the OUUK depends to a large extent on the staff of other institutions for its associate lecturers. This joint use of staff has considerable benefits for students to both institutions. The ideas and approaches developed by the OUUK are used by its associate lecturers in their main jobs, and the teaching materials supplied to associate lecturers are also resource for teaching in more conventional situations. On the other hand, OU students benefit from teaching resources which have been developed by associate lecturers in their primary occupation* (Tait &Mills,1999:82-83).

The study set out to find if there is a difference in performance between students exposed to two different modes of study in the same university and for the same degree. The five questions looked at the student learning methodologies, entry qualifications, home and societal factors and the medium of instruction.

The study

The research problem arose from three apriori contradictions which, in the absence of solid research evidence would leave protagonists poised on each side of their standpoints. These were different qualifications for entry, the different or diametrical learning environments on the one hand and maturity and the desire to succeed on the other end of the co-terminus continuum.

This study was set to lay the foundations for more research and it was therefore exploratory in design. The study was to look for integrative goals, areas of convergence and not polarization.

Sample Characteristics

Both the School of Continuing and Distance Education and the School of Education of the University of Nairobi offer a Bachelor of Education (Arts) degree preparing students for a teaching career in secondary schools. All students take all the education course units, two teaching subjects offered at secondary school level and also take a compulsory three month teaching practice towards their final year of study. The difference is the mode of study. The School of Education offers its course through fulltime on-campus mode. The School of Continuing and Distance Education offers its course through distance study mode with limited face-to-face sessions in April, August and December, when schools are closed for holidays. This difference on modes of teaching brings about the thinking that the performance of both groups cannot possibly be the same. The presumption is that the on-campus students have the advantages of residence in a university campus and have physical contact with their lecturers and peers. They enjoy a campus library and the other satellite libraries in other university campuses and also the public libraries such as Macmillan, British Council, the USA Cultural Centre and even the UN agencies in Nairobi. They have counselling and medical services.

On the other hand the distance study students lack all these services except for those who come from Nairobi and its environs. But they all lack campus residential facilities, use specially prepared self-instructional printed material for most part except the short face-to-face sessions and contact with peers is limited to the once a month meetings at regional centres. They depend on teacher training college resources, secondary school resources where they exist and the public Kenya National Library Services. Therefore,

this study set out to confirm whether these differences exist and to find out if there is a disparity in performance in teaching practice emanating from these differences.

The purpose of the Bachelor of Education (Arts) degree is to prepare graduates for a career as secondary school teachers. And teaching practice is therefore the criterion measure of achievement of the instructional intent (Mager, 1973).

> *You cannot find out if someone can ride a unicycle unless you or someone else watches him ride one. You cannot find out if the objective is achieved unless you use items that ask the student to perform what the objective is about* (Mager, 1973: 2-3).

Teaching practice is carried out simultaneously in the fifth semester of study for both on-campus and distance study students. The same supervisors are used to examine the performance of the candidates in both schools of the University of Nairobi. The students at this level have already covered most of the course work, making it plausible to analyse their progress in their studies through documents, analyse their knowledge-seeking behavior through self-administered questionnaires and observe them unobstrusively in class teaching.

Sample size

The number of students going on going on teaching practice in 2007 was 942 of which 401 were fulltime students while 541 were distance study students.

A sample (15%) of all students in third year on-campus and fifth semester distance study students on teaching practice in 2007 was taken using the teaching practice lists as the sampling frame. It was important that the sample of the distance education students reflects a national coverage to make sure that all their possible study environments

represented. The same was not done for on-campus students because their fulltime status makes the campus their study environment. The University of Nairobi has divided teaching practice management into zones and these were used as the basis for obtaining a representative sample to be able to answer objectives and research questions asked in this study.

Sampling Procedure

In this study where the learning environment of the research subjects was critical, it was possible to use the simple random sampling technique to select the on-campus subjects because their study environment is one, that is Kikuyu Campus of the University of Nairobi. But a simple random sample of distance study subjects might have omitted certain environments. For this study both simple random and stratified random sampling were used as explained above.

Summary of Findings

This section looks at what the various data indicate and the tentative directions which they point in terms of the research agenda. The questionnaire data gave the following results.

Entry qualifications

The on-campus students brought in 2% A, 41% B+, 56% B plain and 2% C+. This was in complete contrast with the distance study students who brought into the learning arena 2% A, 19% B, 8% C+, 36% C, 12% C- and 14%D+. So once again, the on- campus students reflected a positive skew on this score while the distance study students were negatively skewed.

Age, academic pursuits and extraneous responsibility

Majority of the on-campus students(87%) fall in the age bracket of 21-25 which is youthful while with the distance study students only 20% fall in this bracket. The rest are older. This implies that the distance study students are more in the age of responsibility extraneous their academic pursuits. This is further confirmed by the result that 98% of the distance study students are married as opposed to only 2% of the on-campus students who are married. Furthermore 98% of the distance study students are working against 11% of the on-campus students. These differences are normally taken to explain how difficult it might be for the two groups to be compared.

The Learning Environment

The research data shows that there is a very large gap between the two groups of student environments. The on-campus students claim that they use the college library very regularly with 41.3% stating that they use the library every day and another 24% stating that they use the facility once a week. This contrasts with the distance study students who only 10.2% have access to the college library during the short face-to-face residential sessions. The rest use secondary school libraries 32.2%, teacher training college libraries 22%, Kenya National Libraries 20.3% and others. Majority 42.4% use these services once a month while another 35.6% use these facilities between a week and a fortnight.

The on-campus students are able to access the main university library and the libraries of the other university campuses. These are facilities that are hardly available to the distance study students.

On the other hand the distance education students exploit every opportunity to gather knowledge. 84.7% attend all the lectures during the face-to-face residential sessions and when faced by a shortage of the study units which constitute their lectures during the

home-study periods they either borrow from their classmates, former students, photocopy and none said that they do not take positive action to remedy the situation.

Opportunity to share.

Whereas the on-campus students have many opportunities to share due to their conducive proximity, the distance students have problems because of distance from one another. 66% stated that they are able to meet during the monthly regional meetings while the others are not able to do so. It is during these meetings that they discuss work with friends. Discussion groups present the preferred mode in that 87% stated that they belong to one and that 49% meet between once a week to once a month.

pre-course training

In this area only 10% of the on-campus were trained primary school teachers against 78% of the distance study students.

Media use

The question sought to know what other sources students used to gather knowledge. Once again 80% of the on-campus and 89% distance study students indicated print sources. Only 5% and 11% respectively cited the internet. None cited other electronic media such as radio or television.

Observation Data

Having established that there were manifest differences in entry qualifications, access to study facilities, opportunity to share, the study moved on to find out if these differences affected the learning outcomes as measured against the objective of their course at the University of Nairobi. This was accomplished through structured observation of students

during teaching practice. Only some of the results are presented in this paper but they give a clear picture of what the research established.

Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyse and present the results. The programme chosen was the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

Use of instructional resources

mode of study * instructional resources

| | | | instructional resources | | | | | |
			Poor	Fairly Weak	Average	Very good	Excellent	Total
mode of study	on campus	Count	1	14	9	12	7	43
		% within mode of study	2.3%	32.6%	20.9%	27.9%	16.3%	100.0%
	distance study	Count	1	16	10	17	6	50
		% within mode of study	2.0%	32.0%	20.0%	34.0%	12.0%	100.0%

The scoring pattern was 4(9.3%) on-campus students 'excellent' to 1(2%) of the distance study students, 11(25.6%) to 3(6%) 'very good', 7(16.3%) to 15(30%) 'average', 11(25.6%) to 18(36%) 'fairly weak' and 10(23.3%) to 13(26%) 'poor' respectively. Looking at the performance continuum, there is parity in performance on all cells from 'excellent ' to 'poor'.

Mastery of content

mode of study * mastery of content

| | | | mastery of content | | | |
			Average	Very good	Excellent	Total
mode of study	on campus	Count	13	17	13	43
		% within mode of study	30.2%	39.5%	30.2%	100.0%
	distance study	Count	7	25	18	50
		% within mode of study	14.0%	50.0%	36.0%	100.0%

There was good performance on this score. Once again the distance study students led on the 'very good' 'excellent' categories put together at 46% to 39% respectively. 13(30.2%) of the on-campus students had 'excellent', 17(39.5%) scored in the 'very

good' category, and 13(30.2%) were in the 'average' category. This was in comparison with 18(36%) distance study students who were in the 'excellent' category, 25(50%) in 'very good' and 14(28%) in the 'average' category. There was no 'fairly weak' or 'poor' performance from any of the two groups, once again displaying a strong parity for two groups that had come through two different modes of learning.

Methods of Teaching

On this score 5(11.6%) on-campus students scored on the 'excellent' category to 5(10%) distance study students. Scores for the other categories for on-campus students were 10(23.3%) 'very good', 26(60.5%) 'average', and 2(4.6%) 'fairly weak' and 'poor' to 24(48%) 'very good', 19(38%) 'average', 2(4%) fairly weak' and 0'poor' for the distance study students. In this case the margins were once more reasonably high with distance students again scoring higher in most categories.

Communication in Class

Here the distance study students led at 92% on the 'very good' 'excellent' categories to 88% of the on-campus students. Note that there were no 'fairly weak' or 'poor' among the distance study students. The scores for the on-campus students were 34(81%) at the 'excellent' level, 3(7.1%) 'very good', 3(7.1%) 'average', 1(2.3%)'fairly weak' and 1(2.3%) 'poor'. The distance study students scores were 38(76%) 'excellent', 8(16%) 'very good' and 4(8%) 'average' as the table below illustrates. The two on-campus students on the 'fairly weak' and 'poor' categories cannot be said to create a disparity.

Table: Communication

mode of study * communication

			communication					
			Poor	Fairly Weak	Average	Very good	Excellent	Total
mode of study	on campus	Count	1	1	3	3	34	42
		% within mode of study	2.4%	2.4%	7.1%	7.1%	81.0%	100.0%
	distance study	Count			4	8	38	50
		% within mode of study			8.0%	16.0%	76.0%	100.0%

Conclusion

Observations and discussion

This study started with a problem of lack of research evidence to support the efficacy of distance education to deliver quality education using only the print medium supported by short face-to-face sessions as practiced in the University of Nairobi. The researcher then took this one up and set up three apriori questions which became the cornerstone of this study. These were; the difference in entry qualifications, choosing those with lower grades at the national high school exit examinations to study on their own, on a part-time basis, using only self-instructional materials and short face-to-face sessions while those with higher grades would learn under renown professors and have access to university libraries, lecture halls, tutorials, academic socialization and full-time study and the contribution of maturity to learning.

The first two representations and the Senate Committee report seem to draw from the 'negative model' (deficit model) of distance learning where:

> *Learners lack contact with teachers and peers; they experience difficulties gaining access to resources, they lack the opportunities of their face-to-face counterparts* **(Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999:23**

One could mistakenly interpret the data adduced by this study so far to confirm this model. But the inclusion of the observation data confounded that type of conclusion. The *observation data* leads to the conclusion that the two groups, that is the on-campus and the distance study groups do not differ in their performance in Teaching Practice; the critical course that tests their ability as teachers. This then introduces the 'opportunity model' which supports the third apriori proposition. This model posits that distance study students bring into the learning arena:

> *A wealth of experience, abilities, enterprise and resources to*
>
> *learning encounters*. (Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999:23

Age is usually taken as a factor in determining capacity in many societies. Age and experience become key in career progression. Age is core in decision-making. In this study age has come out as a corollary to high grades in youth in that the only factor we see in the outcome is age and experience producing the maturity that helps people who could not perform that well at the secondary school exit examinations perform at par and at times even better than the younger high achievers at the secondary school exit examinations.

The assumption that the lower entry qualifications of the distance study students would affect their capacity to perform at the university level is not supported by the findings of this study. The questionnaire data confirms that the majority distance study students are older, have lower entry qualifications and have family and societal responsibilities. The results of the observation data show that distance study students performs as well, and in some critical areas such as mastery of content and communication, they perform better than their on-campus counterparts.

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