Chapter 23
Distance Education and ICT–Supported Learning in Lesotho: Issues and Evidence

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ABSTRACT

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are regarded as a major contributor to the transforming of distance learning. The researcher assumed that education practitioners in developing countries like Lesotho, have limited, or no access at all to ICT for supporting instruction, since they still rely heavily on print and tutor/learner meetings as their distance mode of course delivery. The study assessed the feasibility of introducing ICT-mediated education for tutors and learners on a Distance Education Programme in Lesotho. The paper specifically focused on issues relating to the place of ICT in teaching and learning at a distance, ICT policy initiatives and challenges of infrastructure, human resource capacity, and cost as they affect provision of, and access to computer-mediated learning. Interventions critical to alleviating the situation are also discussed. Policy-makers and distance education practitioners require this type of feedback to be able to effect meaningful improvements in ODL programmes.

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INTRODUCTION

This College of Education which is located in Lesotho, originated from the government’s decision to amalgamate the three prominent denominational teacher education institutions owned by the Roman Catholic Church, the Lesotho Evangelical Church, and the Anglican Church of Lesotho. Since then, the college has been the only teacher training institution in the whole country. In 2002, it became an autonomous college. The institution offers diploma programmes to primary and secondary school teachers through full-and part-time (distance) modes of learning. Both forms of programme delivery are administered and monitored from within a conventional setting; by the college management team. Decision-making processes that is typical of a hierarchical decision-making structure. The distance education programme was introduced 2000 for unqualified and under-qualified primary school teachers who are already serving in Lesotho schools. Unqualified teachers neither have appropriate content nor teaching skills as many of them go into the classroom straight from the high school; while under-qualified teachers have long years of teaching experience but basically lack professional training to become academically qualified even for further education.

The distance education programme uses printed course materials (modules) that are backed-up by face-to-face learner meeting with their subject tutors, held twice every three months in a semester. Learners are allocated to a nearest tutorial centre comprising of a cluster of sites. Finances of the college come in the form of government subvention that is largely used for the payment of staff salaries. Other expenditures are met partly through payment of tuition fees and by donors.

SETTING THE STAGE

To date, the College of Education, which is the sole provider in Lesotho, of basic, pre-service teacher education to the diploma level, and the only provider of in-service, part-time distance teacher education to the diploma level too, still relies heavily on the use of print-based self-study materials; often backed-up by meetings with subject tutors in designated areas. Of course, this paper does not in any way, intend to discredit print as a mode of distance education delivery; but simply attempts to highlight the pace of technological advancement in the country. In essence, distance learners in Lesotho still have limited use of, and/or no access at all to ICT devices. The computer, not to mention internet, still remains a foreign machine for most learners. Of the varied ICT equipment available, internet is often regarded
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