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## **CHALLENGES IN INTRODUCING DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN ERITREA: Some Observations and Implications**

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**courses and programmes of study offered. Eritrea has launched distance education programmes but hampered due to various factors. The world map vividly shows that Eritrea is strategically located in the horn of Africa, sharing border with the Sudan to the north and west, Ethiopia to the south, Djibouti to the south east and the Red Sea to the east respectively. It has a human population of about 4 million. It covers an area of 124,320 sq kms, stretching from 18.22' to 12.42' degrees longitude. Eritrea's coastlines extend about 1200 kms, flanked by coral reefs and 354 islands, including the important Dahlak Archipelago (Killion, 1998:1; Rena, 2005<sup>a</sup>). The war devastated nation fought for thirty years (1961-1991) bravely to obtain its de facto independence on 24 may 1991 and its official independence on 24 May1993 after a UN supervised referendum in which 98.8% of the people voted in favour of independence (MoE, 1999; Rena, 2005<sup>b</sup>). Soon after the independence it has been working ceaselessly to develop the education in the counts 67710.02 0 0 10.02 152.61 5642 0 002 14602 i0 1tn**

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ERITREA**

The Ministry of education declared the policy that extended education opportunities to all Eritreans irrespective of their age, sex and geographical location in Eritrea.<sup>1</sup> Besides, Eritrea proposed that it be included as one of the "Fast track" EFA (Education for all) countries, to hasten its educational progress.

In line with this, it has made a lot of changes to assure the correct implementation of a standard system of education wholly put in practice in schools of different levels. The teachers in return were/ are given successive professional training in work shops, seminars, and short and long term refresher courses to up grade their professionalism and work esteem (Rena, 2006). Many schools were/are built equipped with modern mode of teaching learning mechanisms. Meanwhile the government is following required implementation of:

Significant expansion of integrated, low cost and community based early childhood programmes;  
Universal access and quality primary education for all to be by 2015  
Parallel to reducing male illiteracy to about 10 percent by 2010, achieve female literacy of at least 60 percent; and  
Expanding 'life long' learning to achieve a modern cultural transformation among disadvantaged groups in rural and urban areas through distance education mode of delivery(MoE, 2006).

Asmara University is given the authority to give immediate answer to the implementation to give "equal opportunity" at tertiary level education offering distance education. Indeed, no system of distance education can remain efficient if it remains static. It must be sensitive to trends and changing need in education, and must have the flexibility to modify its programme and practices, and to expand in response to the needs of the community it is serving. Ministry of Education has recognised the above issues and is working on the importance in improving the education system in Eritrea (Rena, 2005<sup>b</sup>). Its vision is ultimately to attain particularly a quality of education, access and relevance. Distance learning, a new mode of delivery, would undoubtedly promote educational quality and relevance in many ways, if we all work on the validating role of distance education (MoE, 1999; Rena, 2006). The Ministry of Education is embarking the strategies to resolve the problems mentioned above by supplementing proper distance education programmes in the schools that it aims to establish soon. Thus, the Institutions to be established require better managerial skills than conventional programmes. In the past one and half-decade, one of the government's main priorities was to rebuild, expand and improve the educational system by developing policies that would favour greater access, equity and quality of education(Rena, 2005<sup>a</sup>; MoE, 2003).

### **The Distance Education Programs for Elementary Teachers (DEPETE) in Eritrea**

Under the DEPETE program, the Ministry is striving to up-grade knowledge and skills of teachers qualitatively and quantitatively. The DEPETE programs are discussed hereunder: With a view to impart quality education and create a professional work force to cater to the nation's need, the state of Eritrea now has adopted a rapid transformation policy to bring about an effective change in the education sector in 2003. This lays out long term vision and strategy to lift Eritrea forward. Along side the

increase in the number of schools and students, there has been a marked increase in the number of teachers (Araya, 1998). In 1991, there were 4,504 teachers about half of these were Ethiopians who immediately left for Ethiopia of their own will there by creating an acute shortage of teachers. While there are many different factors that play a role in improving the quality of education, teachers academic and professional qualification is very crucial. Hence distance education will improve the quality of teacher education in particular and the quality of education in general (Taye, 1992; Rena, 2005<sup>b</sup>). The need to have effective and efficient teachers could promote the standard of education sooner or later as aimed by educators in the department of curriculum. The programme of teaching teacher was initiated with funding from the Italian government and technical assistance from UNESCO. Five hundred untrained teachers from three regions (zobas) – Debub, Gash Barka and Northern Red sea were involved in summer 1996 (Ministry of Education, UNESCO and the Government of Italy, 1996). It was phase-I, the pilot phase, which evolve trainees required to attend:

- Two–five week face-to-face workshop sessions at the main regional training centres during the 1996 and 1997 summer vacations;
- One mid year workshop for two weeks in February 1997 at the main regional training centres; and
- Monthly tutorial/workshops at the local teacher resource centres with trainees receiving self–instructional correspondence texts through the academic year.

There was a continuous assessment throughout the programme with assignments, tests, projects, work set as part of the work shop sessions. Assessments were also made on the classroom practiced of the trainees. Examination was given and the examinees who succeeded received a certificate equivalent to that awarded to graduate of the Asmara Teacher Training Institute (ATTI). The DEPETE (Distance, Education programmes for Elementary Teachers in Eritrea) programme was regarded as a vital element of the Ministry of Education which was embarked to improve the quality and quantity of qualified teachers at elementary level, while the pilot was in progress preparations were also going on to include 1,500 unqualified elementary teachers from all six zobas with special priority to the other remaining three zobas already excluded in the Phase-1 ( Maekel, Anseba and Southern Red Sea). There some funding problem initially, however the Ministry was anxious and determined to continue the program and tried its best to look for a reliable and sustainable source of funding not only to undertake phase-II but also to advance in the future years till all untrained/unqualified/teachers in the system are trained through distance learning along side the conventional (traditional) learning (Araya, 1998).

**The main objectives of DEPETE were t:**

1. Provide in–service – training programmes for approximately 2,000 untrained elementary school level teachers through a distance learning model of teaching.
2. Establish a capacity and lay a foundation for developing a distance learning organization for teachers and other educational staff in the national school system.
3. Through provision of a local based training programmes, encourage and enable more female trainees and also those from the ethnic groups to participate (marginalized groups)
4. Indirectly give feed back to the present initial teacher training programmes
5. Institute and promote the role that Teacher resource centres can in local and in service training.

6. Promote an effective system DE training programmes in Eritrea.
7. Continually upgrade and train teachers, school directors supervisors and other educational staff through a Distance Education model without separating them from their work.
8. Continue to the promotion of quality education in an equitable way.

### **Rationales for DEPETE**

The distance education programmes for elementary teachers in Eritrea (DEPETE) is an attempt to overcome some of the above problems from the limited experience of distance education known as DEPETE has the following rationale to bear in mind. Hence, it was emphasised that the Ministry of Education provisions in order to:

1. Increase access of learning and training opportunity
2. Reach target groups with limited access to conventional education
3. Support the quality of existing educational structures.
4. Improve cost effectiveness
5. Enhance and consolidate capacities
6. Increase greater flexibility in the design and delivery of curriculum content than is normally associated with class room teaching.

The quality of teaching defines the quality of education and the quality of education in turn facilitates the contribution that the next generation of teachers is able to offer to learners. While there are a number and different variables and factors in class room effectiveness, the most important component is the teacher. Moreover, the government's decision to extend the middle school cycle (programme) from two to three years in 2003/04 academic year has created a further pressure to the desperate demand for teachers in middle schools. The critical shortage of qualified teachers mainly at the primary level has been the key challenge for educational development. Therefore, redressing the huge demand for teachers and improving the quality of teaching and learning process still remains to be formidable task. The researcher felt resourceful in his studies after he deeply assessed all the researches made by the Ministry in its firm establishment of distance education programs right after independence, even if, some of the distance education program implementations failed due to certain constraints mentioned by the researcher.

### **CHALLENGES FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME**

#### **Why the Ex-distance Learning in Eritrea Ceased?**

The DEPETE programme launched to improve elementary teachers work esteem and professionalism. This improvement throughout distance learning was successful for which the staff authorities in the Ministry of Education, Italian government and UNESCO should be proud of. It will render more help for its continuity to updating and upgrading teachers who could possibly alleviate the standard education system along with the country's development. The discontinuity of the distance education sector before seven years is not amazing. It was because of lack of expertise, lack of experience, logistic, quality materials and student support services. Spending on educational provision has increased greatly. The government of Eritrea being new government that inherited destroyed infrastructure and low human power due to the wars that passed and the border dispute could not fulfill the demands of its people as it wishes.

### **Hindrances Suggested by Asmara University Committee**

The study project is not a through feasibility study of establishing whether a distance education is the right thing to do at this time. But it rather a study limited on designing and proposing structural framework, required facility and a time to start it (Araya, 1998). This limitation led the committee division in Asmara University to mark some basic assumptions that:

There is enough demand for distance education

There will be reasonable postal and communication services infrastructure in the country.

There will be enough resources to establish it.

The other limitation of the study is that the distance education programme be an integrated part of the current regular and extension programmes leading to a uniform undergraduate degree.

The admission requirements to the distance education programme are that same to that of the regular and extension programmes.

The content of the course and the standard of examination of distance education is the same to that of the other two programmes.

The academic staffs of the Asmara University are going to be flexibility in all of the three programmes.

### **Faculty Barriers in Distance Learning Programs in Eritrea**

1. The biggest problem for distance programs is the lack of support by the faculty. The endorsement by department faculty is viewed as a critical instruction element in any distance education program. Faculty roles must change the most in administering distance learning programs (Rena, 2005<sup>o</sup>). They may change teaching styles to that of a mentor, tutor and facilitator. They must meet the needs of distance students with face-to-face contact. Since the majority of distance learners are adults, teachers may need to change their teaching style. This may be a challenging for teachers who are used to teaching 18 to 22 years old. Faculty is responsible for changing their course content to accommodate diverse student needs and expectations. So long as college faculty feels there is a burden associated the distance education programme currently in place, there will be little support for expanding distance education opportunities.

2. Teachers may lack the basic skills or hardware to fully participate in distance education. It is interesting to note, however, that students respond to this changing environment more adeptly than teachers do. Obtaining proper equipment and training is critical in teacher acceptance of distance learning.

3. Another problem perceived by faculty is the threat to tenure and human resource staffing. Depending on the school and the academic department, courses taught as part of a distance program may not always count toward tenure considerations thus causing a disincentive for participation by some non-tenured faculty (Wood, 1996) if one professor can serve thousand of students there will be obviously be fewer professors and fewer departments and faculties. Schools must not underestimate this resistance and should be very aware of the possibility of overburdening faculty and staff.

4. Teachers also have problems respecting the academics of distance courses. One way of enhancing commitments is by forcing distance courses through the same approval process an on-campus course. The final barrier is the teacher's acceptance of distance learning programmes. Teachers with enthusiasm for thin non-traditional

course work are best suited to teach them. One way to mitigate these potentially serious problems is by selecting teachers who are relatively senior people, good teachers, like the idea of distance learning and want to participate in it. Interest and motivation are not success factors reserved only for the student. Faculties who want to teach distance courses are certainly more likely to be successful than faculty that are forced to teach these courses.

### **Organisational barriers in Eritrea**

Students and teacher concerns represent the human aspects of distance programmes. Organisational problems, especially infrastructure and technology problems, also present challenge. Faculties who teach distance education courses need organisational and administrative support from the Institution. Funding should be provided to create an administrative unit that is to be responsible for managing the programme. Institutional teachers must be committed to distance programmes. (Marrs 1995:21) agrees when he says, "without this support, distance education is at risk of significance to the Institution". A primary concern for both learning Institutions and students is available for both the student and the Institution. Institutions must consider the initial costs as well as the continuing costs of installing, maintaining, using and upgrading technology to support distance services. Institutions must also plan to have competent computer staff to support internet use. This staff must then be kept up-to-date on the newest, fastest, cheapest technology available; therefore, on going staff must be considered. The student must also incur technology costs, if the internet is used, then the student must have access to a computer, modern and associated software.

In addition to cost considerations, the technology itself presents many problems; one issue is in adequate telecommunications facilities. Harry (1992:190) mentions that "the existing telecommunications systems are unlikely to place too much reliance on them for teaching, support or information searching." That is the reason why some developing countries will use, print, cassettes, and radio delivery methods. Such circumstances prevent some instructors from producing or using advanced media and providing higher quality material for students. Distance education via simultaneous two-way-audio-visual interaction systems such as video teleconferencing, brings an additional set of issues to be considered by the instructor and effective models for this delivery system need to be identified (Sweet, 1986). Asmara university, given its unique socio potential environment and resource constraints is likely to be one of the "mixed – mode department model" of Institutions, to find a solution to the crucial points above believing that the development of national distance education capabilities being the stepping stone by which all nations will proceed into the future.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

1. Time constraints were another limiting factor that hinders the depth and width of the study.
2. The committee was not able to get in time relevant, up to date and enough literature to conduct the study.
3. With scattered students, dispersed part-time tutors, far-flung logistics, reliable communication services, time sensitive communication services, time sensitive production and distribution of learning materials, and detailed student records,

successful distance education programmes require management team with above average skills in organisation, logistics and problem solving. This management team need not be large, but it must be capable.

4. Students who enroll in distance learning courses do so for convenience. They are either time bound due to work or travel schedules or location-bound due to geographic or family responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> Distance learning is student-centred learning; thus knowing the characteristics and demographics of the distance learners helps us understand the potential barriers to learning.

5. Problems and barriers encountered by the student fall into several distinct categories; student support and services, alienation and isolation, lack of experience, and training. Distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning and these insecurities are founded in personal and school related issues such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These pressures often result in higher dropout rates than among traditional students (Sweet, 1986).

6. The concern for the distance student is the perceived lack of feedback or contact with the teacher. Because there is not daily or weekly face-to-face contact with teachers, students may have trouble in self-evaluation. Keegan (1996) believes that the separation of student and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital "link" of communication between these two parties. The link must be restored through overt Institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be "reintegrated" (Keegan, 1996:120). These barriers can be mitigated through technological method such as e-mail, computer conferencing and electronic mail can be integrated into the delivery of the course to provide the missing interaction. It is important that the student receive prompt feedback in any Institutional setting particularly in distance learning where the learner is impaired by the lack of causal contact with the teacher and other students. This is especially important for those students who live outside metropolitan areas. They may not have access to reliable telecommunication, computers and postal mail. The frustrations resulting from problems with communication between student academic Institution are factors of which distance education planners should be aware (Wood, 1996).

7. Area of concern distance students is the lack of support and services such as providing tutors, academic planners, schedulers, and technical assistance. The isolation that results from the distance learning process can complicate the learning process for adult students, support for distance learners should not be overlooked when planning distance programmes, students need tutors and academic planners to help them complete courses on time and to act as a support system when stress becomes a problem.

8. A problem area is the feeling of alienation and isolation reported by distance students. Students of all kinds want to be part of a larger school community, and simply of "a correspondence" course. The "distance" aspect of distance learning takes

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**careful consideration must be given to the special needs of students undertaking distance education for the first time. Of particular importance is the design of study materials for distance students.**

### **The Determinants for Effective Distance Learning**

**It is believed that open/distance learning could play a**

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**4) The central, regional and local office, should be given full responsibilities to perform logistical function to ensure the smooth running of DE institutions.**

**5) Quality materials must be bought to motivate the learner while pursuing their over-all studies.**

**6) The concerned offices should allocate a good budget to buy modern devices like e-net; computers based learning programs, CD-ROMs, print media, Audio/ video cassettes, video conferencing and the web.**

**7) Central, regional and local offices must strive to build institutions well equipped with quality material, libraries, and laboratories.**

### **Institution/Centre Selection**

**In order to select appropriate site for opening DE centres in different regions of Eritrea, it is advisable to take the following points into account.**

**1) The availability of organized post office telephone services and the availability of secondary school.**

**2) Easily accessible to students in the area and reasonable number of student recommended is not to be less than 60 students.**

**3) Institution must surely and extremely try to resolve problems that could arise in the courses of time.**

**4) Institution must encourage its departments and staff to undertake evaluation of different kinds. It must be committed to quality assurance and continually involving staff in assessment and self-evaluation.**

**5) Institution must make space available and study group use at times suitable and convenient for learners (i.e. study centres).**

**6) Institutions must employ the tutors who are committed and dedicated to help learners to overcome study difficulties.**

**7) Institution must include face-to-face individual support system both academic and personal that encourages learners' centeredness. Institution must contain quite a number of role players: a course coordinator, the regional or local tutors, administrative staff and the tutors.**

**8) Institution should embrace learners concerning activities based on the expressed needs of learners with their specific circumstances.**

### **CONCLUSION**

**It is challenging to study critically about any given model of distance education at the starting in the country. However, an attempt is made to study carefully all the distance education programmes ever tried by the government. The distance education is changing with an alarming speed, particularly as educational processes become increasingly glob**

of study offered. Eritrea has launched distance education programmes but hampered due to various factors. In distance learning students and teachers will find themselves playing different roles than is the norm in traditional education. More than any other teaching method distance learning which exercises new mode of delivery, requires a collaborative effort between student and teacher unbounded by traditional limits of time, space and single instructor effort. Distance education as a provision will undoubtedly help the learners to enhance the acquisition of new knowledge and skills to lead a better life. Hence, joint work of the government and private sectors is needed to lay a firm ground to the implementation of the correct programmes. Since Eritrea is a young nation with 15 years of age needs to establish the strategy for the development of its education through the distance education and thus achieve self-sufficiency in this sector.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Provisional Government of Eritrea (1991) Department of Education, Policy of Education, (October 2).

<sup>2</sup> Most of the students or the youngsters are working under national service just for the payment of Nacfa 145 (less than \$ 7 dollars) per month. It is obvious that the amount is not sufficient to meet the common expenses like taking tea and snacks; hence they have to work in many places in order to win the bread and survive in the society.

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