A Survey on the Provision of Distance Education in PHEIs: A Comparative Case Study

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the current provision of Distance Education (DE) in three PHEIs in Addis Ababa namely, St. Mary's College, Unity University College and Alpha Distance Education Institute. As a result of their situational and functional limitations, most of the government higher educations institutions are unable to accommodate many students beyond their already (existing and expanding) vast regular and extension programs. Accordingly, with regard to the provision of educational opportunity through distance learning at higher level, the better and potential option, at hand, are the well established PHEIs like St. Mary's College, Unity University College and Alpha Distance Education Institute. These PHEIs have already started Distance Education Programs that are becoming popular in the various Regions of Ethiopia.

Therefore, the major purposes of this study are the following:

1. To discuss and forward comparative analysis of the provision and organization of distance education in the three PHEIS in Addis Ababa.
2. To investigate the factors that positively and/or negatively affect the distance education programs in these institutes
3. Finally, based on the findings of this study, to forward viable conclusions and recommendations pertaining to the provision and organization of distance education

Questionnaire survey was conducted with staff of distance education institutions and interview was made with some officials of the institutions to collect data. The data were analysed through descriptive statistics and presented in tabulations. The major finding in this study revealed that staff of the institutions believe that distance education provision has some merits over conventional education, but distance education provision in PHEIs is facing some constraints that require some actions.

1. Background
1.1 Introduction

The need of educational provision through distance means of the delivery system which is based on the rational that distance education can reach a great majority of youth and adult learners at a distance within a relatively shorter period of time. As observed by Manjulinka (1996:15) and Bishope (1989:154) in developing countries (like Ethiopia) distance education is seen as the best alternative model of delivery system due to its flexibility and its relatively reduced cost as well as its capacity to address hundreds and thousands of adults missed out by the conventional education system. Hence the need for such study becomes very important to improve its improved provision.

1.2 Methodology of the Study

Two methods of data collection techniques were employed in this study. These were questionnaire survey and interview with concerned officials of the studied institutions. The method of data analysis technique employed in the study was by and large descriptive. More specifically, frequency count, mean score, simple percentage and rank order were utilized. However, the study didn't take into account the views of students that participate in distance education programs which could limit the validity of the information gathered from the staff of the institutions. Hence, the study could only serve as an eye opener and requires further indepth study. For the questionnaire survey, 12 staff each from St. Mary's and Unity University Colleges and 15 from Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies were considered

2. The Concept, Context and Development of Distance Education in Ethiopia
2.1. The Concept of Distance Education

Unlike the conventional classroom approach, distance education refers to the "practice of providing education and training through selective use of instructional means both traditional and innovative which can promote self teaching and learning to achieve specific educational objectives with greater geographical coverage than the traditional face to face systems of education" (ME.UR 1990:1). This does not mean, however, that distance education completely avoids other approaches. Thanks to modern information technology, distance education is now being disseminated to various regions and nations of the world by the mass media (radio, television) and the internet through face to face tutorial and e-mailing of printed materials respectively.

On the other hand, Kegan (1996:4) tends to focus on what D.E does rather than what D.E is and hence, forward the following defining elements of distance learning.

a. The separation of teacher and learner as opposed to the traditional face-to face instruction;

b. Its focus on self-directed learning and private study that liberated it from the influence of highly structured educational organization;

c. The use of technical media including printed materials and instructional devices to unit teachers and learners;

d. The provision of two-way communication at a distance through the internet and through tele-lecture , discussion and dialogue; and

e. The possibility of occasional meetings for both dialectic and socialization progress

2.2. The Development of Distance Education in Ethiopia

As compared to the conventional educational system, distance education is a recent phenomenon which dates back to 1840 (Rmuble 1992. 14). At its early age, it was known as

correspondence education whose delivery system entirely depends on the printed materials that are distributed to the learner through mail and now e-mail through. According to Manjulilka (1996:16) since 1970 the name distance education has become popular. However, along with the development of distance education, other related mode of delivery like Telmatic teaching, 'Correspondence education', 'Home study', 'independent learning', 'off campus study' and 'external system' have come to the educational scene. Today, distance education is seen as one of the dynamic educational provision systems that guarantees remarkable change of quality, quantity, status and credibility to the current education system.

In the Ethiopian context, distance education was started in the early 1940s. At that time, this mode of delivery was introduced (under the name of correspondence education) to upgrade the level of primary school teachers without taking them out of their work place.

According to MOE (1997), the distance education program started its operation under the name "directed study for teachers" through a bilateral agreement of the Ethio-U.S.A cooperative education program. After the pioneering activity of the 'directed study for teachers' the then Haileselassie I University (now Addis Ababa University) in collaboration with the MOE established a distance education program in the extension division of Addis Ababa University and made educational provision in such a mode of delivery from 1960 to 1964 E.C. However, this venture became very weak and remained idle and paralyzed from 1965-1967 (for two years).

Later on, being cognizant of the value of distance education, the MOE exerted greater effort after 1967 for the reestablishment of distance education program. Then in 1967, The MOE took over the full responsibility of the provision and organization of distance education programs and started distance teaching in twenty six courses in Addis Ababa and its suburb. When this pilot project was found to be successful, D.E. was started in 1973 in the various regions of the country.

According to Mehreteab (2003:26), since 1967 E.C., the MOE established the Educational Media Agency (EMA) which was responsible for a distance education unit. Since 1967 to date, EMA has made educational provision to more than 21,000 primary and secondary school teachers through the radio, television and correspondence. Similarly, since 1986 to date, the Addis Ababa University, Alemaya University, Dila Teachers College and Bahr Dar University are giving distance education programs for four pedagogical courses, namely: a) Introduction

to Educational Psychology; b) Educational Research c) Introduction to Curriculum; and d) Introduction to Educational Organization and Management. In its unpublished leaflet entitled African Virtual University (AVU) of AAU, the Arat kilo AVU center has introduced internet-based education programs as well as its future vision and plans for the expansion of distance education programs through the use of interactive instructional telecommunication network (AVU leaflet 1997:2). In its recent undergraduate programs of October 2002, it has already started training in the following courses:

- Computer Engineering
- Computer Science
- Electrical Engineering

Another, recently established government higher education institute that plays significant roles in distance education is the Ethiopian Civil Service College (ECSC). The leaflet entitled "Center for Distance Learning" States :

> The learning technology and media at the Global Development Learning Network is equipped with both send and receive distance learning programs, activities and events through synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication. i.e. learning with one or two ways video integrated with print, audio and computer.

According to this bulletin, the ECSC center for distance learning is currently providing courses (organized by WBI from Washington D.C) in the following major area:
- Economic Policy and Poverty Reduction
- Governance, Regulation and Finance
- Human Development
- Environment and Natural Resources
- Non- Thematic Courses

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) are also currently actively involved in distance education programs in various fields of study. Among these PHEIs, Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies, St. Mary's College and Unity University College are the selected very popular sample institutions that provide distance education in 5 areas of study and over 15 field of specialization. These are in Business Management and Social Sciences; such as Languages, Education Management, Law, Natural Science, Technology, Library Science, Sociology, Political Science. For detailed information, please refer to the attached annex for each PHEIs regarding the course areas of study and the statistical data (no. of students in each department).

3. Results and Discussions

In the introductory part and literature review, the study has attempted to describe the context and trends of development of distance education in Ethiopia. This section deals with the presentation and analysis of data. For the analysis of the merits of distance education as perceived by distance education staff, four points scale was prepared for interview. The scale was developed as follows:

4= Very Strongly Agree

3= Strongly Agree

2= Satisfactorily Agree

1= Partially Agree

Then, for the total samples, each item is rated out of four and summarized in percentage and mean scores values. The results of the analysis are presented below.

3.1 Advantages of Distance Education

Table 1: Merits of Distance Education program: Views of Distance Education Institutions

Merits	St. Mary's College Total Score (12x4=48=100)			Unity University College Total Score (12x4=48=100%)			Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies Total Score (15x4=60=100)			*Grand Score (156=100%)*		
Distance education is less expensive	48	32	66.7	48	41	85.5	60	50	83.4	156	123	*78.8*
Distance education saves time	48	31	64.6	48	39	81.3	60	52	86.7	156	122	*78.2*
Distance education reaches learners where they are	48	43	89.4	48	38	79.1	60	51	85,2	156	132	*84.6*
Students can learn at their own Pace in Distance Education	48	46	95.7	48	39	81.2	60	54	90.2	156	139	*89.1*
It gives better educational opportunity	*48*	*45*	*93.6*	*48*	*45*	*93.6*	*60*	*50*	*83.4*	*156*	*140*	*89.7*

As shown in Table 1 above, the respondents from the three PHEIs express the different advantages of provision of various courses in distance education program with high percentage score ranging from 81-93%. The weighted average percentage scores of all the three PHEIs indicate again the merits of distance education provision with percentage score ranging from 78-89%.

3.2. Perception of Distance Education Institutions Staff on the Factors Affecting Distance Education Provision

Respondents were also asked to rate the factors that affect their distance learning on a four point scale. A rank order is given to the weighted average of each item ranging from 1 to 4. As indicated in Table 2, below, the average score of the three colleges ranked "Delay of feedback ..." and "Teaching materials don't reach on time' as 1st and 2nd respectively. 'Lack of modules', however,

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was ranked last with weighted Av. Score of 1.02. The same item (mentioned above) is also scored very low by each of the three college respondents with average score of 0.92, 0.75 and 1.33 respectively This indicates that this item is the least constraining factor that affects the provision of distance education in PHEIs.

Table 2: Factors Affecting Distance Education Provision: Views of Distance Education Institutions

Rank Order	Grand Total Score and Average (Maximum Score =156)		Factors Affecting Distance Education	Scoring for Each Private Higher Education Institute					
				St. Mary's College (Maximum Score 12x4=48)		Unity University (Maximum Score 12x4=48)		Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies (Maximum Sore 15x4=60)	
	Grand Total	Mean		Score	Mean	Score	Mean	Score	Mean
2	87	2.23	Teaching Materials don't Reach on Time	36	3	35	2.92	16	1.33
3	75	1.92	Problem of Tutorial Services both in Breadth and in Quality	18	1.5	27	2.25	30	2
1	102	2.61	Delay of Feedback for Appraising Exercises and Activities	27	2.25	29	2.42	46	3.07
4	70	1.79	Poorly Prepared Teaching Material	21	1.75	14	1.17	35	2.33
5	40	1.02	Lack of Modules Specifically Prepared for Distance	11	0.69	9	0.75	20	1.33

Remark: *Rank order is made from the grand total on four point scale. Rank order for each PHEIs could be deduced from the table if needed*

Average Score= Total Score earned x 4

Maximum Score

Table 3: Distance Education Delivery System.

Rank Order	Grand Total and Average Values		Items	Scoring for Each Private Higher Education Institute					
				St. Mary's College (Maximum Score is 12x4=48)		Unity University College (Maximum Score is 12x4=48)		Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies (Maximum Sore is 15x5=60)	
	Grand Total	Mean		Score	Mean	Score	Mean	Score	Mean
1	120	3.08	Correspondence	24	2	44	3.67	52	3.47
3	72	1.85	Mass Media	5	0.41	12	1	55	3.67
4	65	1.67	Internet	2	0.17	9	0.75	54	3.6
2	73	1.87	Computer	3	1.25	18	1.5	52	3.47
5	59	1.51	Tele-lecture	2	0.17	12	1	45	3

Remark: Rank order is made from the grand total of the four point scale score

Maximum score for each item=156

Average Score= <u>Total Score earned x4</u>

Maximum Score

3.3. Distance Education Delivery System

As shown in Table 3,   the overall picture of the responses from the three PHEIs reveals that distance education mode of delivery through correspondence, mass media and computer ranked 1st, 2nd, and 3rd with weighted average score of 3.08, 1.87 and 1.85 respectively. In all cases, distance learning through the internet and Tele-lecture are the least scored and practiced by the three colleges wholly and independently.

Table 4: Supplementary Educational Provision Approaches Employed

Education Provision Approaches	St. Mary's (Total Score 12x4=48=100)			Unity (Total Score 12x4=48=100%)			Alpha (Total Score 15x4=60=100)			Grand Total and Average (156=100%)		
	Total	Score	%	Total	Score	%	Total	Score	%	Total	Score	%
Tutorial Centre and Libraries	48	4	29.2	48	24	50	60	45	75	156	83	*53.2*
Additional Face-to-Face courses during Vacation	48	8	15.7	48	17	35.4	60	37	61.7	156	62	*39.8*
Study kits with Exercise and Activities	48	23	47.9	48	32	66.7	60	38	63.3	156	93	59.6

Regarding the complementary and/or supplementary distance education provision approaches, the responses from the three PHEIs reveal that distance education at Tutorial Center and with study kits stem out to be popular with weighted average score of 53% and 59% respectively. The face-to-face mode of course delivery during long vacation seems to be the least practiced by all the three PHEIs.

Table 5: Degree of Link and Collaboration among PHEIs in Distance Education

No.	Areas of Collaborations	St. Mary's College (Total Score is 12x4=48=100)			Unity University College (Total Score is 12x4=48=100%)			Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies (Total Score is 15x4=60=100)			Grand Total and Average Value (156=100%)		
		Total	*Score*	*%*	*Total*	*Score*	*%*	*Total*	*Score*	*%*	*Total*	*Score*	*%*
1	Discussion on Quality of Distance Education	16	10	62.5	16	11	68.8	40	39	97.5	72	60	*83.3*
2	Discussion on Admission criteria	16	5	31.2	16	12	75	40	38	95	72	57	*79.2*
3	Exchange of Experience on Accreditation	16	6	37.5	16	7	43.8	40	35	87.5	72	48	*66.7*
4	Discussion on Credit Load	16	6	37.5	16	10	62.5	40	31	77.5	72	47	65.3

Finally, asked about the degree of their link and collaborations, only 33% of the respondents from each of St. Mary's and Unity University College and 66% of the respondents from Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies recognized the importance of their coordinated efforts out right. And this group who favoured this issue were asked about the areas and degrees of their collaborative efforts. As shown in Table 5 above, respondents from all the three PHEIs expressed their strong support for collaborative discussion on "Quality of Distance Education", "Admission Criteria"; "Exchange of Experiences on Accreditation" with average percentage score of 83%, 79% 66% and 65% respectively.

3.4. Interview Report of Distance Education Dean and Coordinators

To make the result more concrete, reliable and comprehensive, the researcher has interviewed the Dean and coordinators of the three PHEIs regarding the provision of distance education in the institutions. The responses of the Assistant Dean for Distance Education of Unity University College, and Dean of the Distance Education Division of St. Mary's College and the Dean of Alpha Distance Education Institute are summarized and presented in the following schematic chart.

From the interview results of the three examined institutions, the following points are deduced.

A. Strengths and/or advantages

- D.E provides greater educational opportunity for the learners at distant place who are denied access to the regular system;

- D.E serves as complementary and supplementary to the regular system; and

- D.E is more appropriate to use modern educational technology like TV and the Internet for disseminating education nationally and globally.

B. Major Problems of DE provision

- Lack of awareness and commitment to the significance of D.E problems on the part of most of the educational officers and policymakers as well as the participants themselves;

- Lack of well developed infrastructure, technological media as well as lack of well prepared modules and study kits; and

- Lack of qualified and trained instructors and tutors.

C. Possible Solution

- Developing awareness and better skills in D.E. among instructors through training and seminar;

- Developing infrastructure and using modern educational technology like TV, internet for distance learning; and

- Offering special training for distance educators in the preparation of modules, study kits and the use of modern educational technology for DE.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The overall findings of this study reveal that distance education is the most flexible and significant mode of delivery that offer educational opportunity to those participants located at distance, and who have their own learning pace and convenient time. Most of the current government higher education institutions do not have the capacity and facilities to address this issue, especially with regard to using modern media. The interview report also revealed the major problems of D.E.

Most of the PHEIs like St. Mary's college, Unity University College as well Alpha Higher Institute of Distance Studies have witnessed their capacity and capability in the dissemination and provision of educational opportunity through distance mode of delivery.

Following the findings of the study, the following recommendations are forwarded:

1. From the interview result, it was made clear that distance education in the institutions is constrained by shortage of well trained teachers in the different fields of studies. Hence, to guarantee quality D.E provision, PHEIs need to involve qualified teachers in their distance education programs. To do this, provision of special pedagogical and professional training for distance education program teachers becomes important.

2. As revealed in the finding, the dominant mode of delivery practiced in all the three PHEIs is educational provision through correspondence with relatively minimum use of the mass media. Accordingly, there is the need to use and promote current mode of delivery of distance education through Tele-lecture, computer and the Internet. These aspiring and promising PHEIs can learn from the experiences of other universities and colleges of distance education programs like the AVU of Addis Ababa University and Centre of Distance Education of the ECSC.

3. They solve distance education administrative and situational problems by creating smooth link and negotiating tactics with both concerned government and non-government organizations.

4. PHEIs should dilute their differences and need to promote their collaboration and link to promote the provision of quality standard and accreditations of distance education in their

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respective colleges and institutes. Such endeavour can be promoted in a number of ways such as through establishing distance education association and through organizing seminars and conferences.

5. Finally, PHEIs need to give extended, consistent and unreserved pedagogical and professional training to their academic staff in various areas of study such as:

   o Preparation of modules and study kits;

   o Techniques of tutoring, tele-lecturing, etc;

   o Computer literacy training;

   o The use of the Internet for education;

   o Educational technology;

   o Information Technology and Communication; and

   o Curriculum development and design for self-directed learning and programmed instruction

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