

Meeting Gambia's Human Resource Needs for Sustainable Development through Distance Education-Realities and Challenges

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Abstract

The Gambia with an illiteracy rate of about 60% will take a longer time to achieve its set goal of transforming into a financial centre, a trading export-oriented agricultural and manufacturing nation, which is sustained by a well-educated, skilled, healthy, self-reliant and enterprising population, if it is to solely rely on the conventional system of education, which has a low out-put since the demand for space in existing tertiary institutions outstrips the capacity that can be accommodated. The need for an alternative method of education which is different from the conventional method that can reach more people in both the urban and rural areas, or reach different people, workers and those at home, at a relatively lower cost is most ideal. Distance education offers some of these possibilities for the Gambia. Currently, distance education is mainly used in the training of teachers. It is yet to be adopted in training other disciplines that will provide the human resource that would help the country achieve its development needs. The Gambia has a vibrant printing service, which could provide the support/services needed in the production of educational materials, which could be distributed to learners in their different regions using the existing network of Regional Education Offices located in the various administrative divisions in the country. The advances in Information and Communication Technology avails learners the opportunity to use a variety of tools during their learning process. These include the use of radio, TV, internet and mobile phones. The Gambia has a nation wide coverage of each of these technologies. The aim of this case study was to look at the opportunities that already exist and which could be used to enable Gambia attain its set goal of transforming into a middle level income country through a well educated population using distance education.

Keywords: Human resource development, tertiary education, human development index, accessibility, distance education, education sector

Introduction

The Gambia is about 11,000 sq km and has a projected population of 1.5 million (2003 Census). The annual growth rate decades ago was 3.4% (1978-83) but this has now increased to 4.1% during the last decade. The population is young since 44% of this total is under 15 years; 40.9% of the population is literate and 67% is rural (1993 Census).

The population being young, imposes a burden on government and families for the provision of education and other essential services to an increasingly larger percentage of unproductive population. This situation is aggravated by high unemployment and underemployment rates particularly among urban youth, causing a potential threat to security and social stability.

The economy of The Gambia is agrarian with groundnut production forming the backbone. Agriculture, fishery and forestry sectors employing 80-90% of the active work force. The urban income is 4 - 5 times higher than the rural income. About 40% of the population lives below the food-poverty line, and out of these, approximately 22.7% of urban households are food-poor and 69.8% food efficient.

To change this scenario will involve empowering farmers with new and improved production techniques through highly trained and qualified agricultural and village extension workers (VEW) who are in direct contact with farmers to serve as change agents. The current setting in terms VEW farmer ratio stands at 1:6296 nation wide (IFAD, 2004) and they are mostly certificate or diploma holders. Distance education could be a noble tool in upgrading the skills and knowledge of these change agents and consequently change the livelihood of farmers and the national food security of the populace. To crown it all, these change agents will not be required to move from their place of posing with their families. They can study in their current locations, at their own pace and at a lower cost, to improve their academic standing, and as well acquire their academic ambition; thus, develop their own capacity.

Prevailing Situation

The Human Development Index (HDI) ranking of Gambia according to UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) has remained low and declined from 149 out of 161 countries in 2001 to 155 out of 177 in 2004 (The Gambia Donor Round Table Conference, 2007). The Government of Gambia (GOTG) considers the development of its human resource base as very important in shaping the future of the country, given that it has few natural resources and limited arable land.

There have been significant strides by the education sector in recent years, but

notwithstanding these achievements, the system has continued to encounter problems of access, quality education and quality service delivery. The demand for tertiary and university education far outstrips the supply, making access an issue of great concern. The Government of Gambia has identified priority investment programme areas in the education sector to enable the country realise a healthy and well developed human resource base with the ultimate aim of transforming Gambia into a finance centre, a trading export-oriented agricultural and manufacturing nation; sustained by a well-educated, skilled, healthy self-reliant and enterprising population (Vision 2020, GOTG, 1996).

Achieving this goal calls for substantial investment on the part of the government in higher education in all sectors, so as to produce a critical mass of scientists, educators, technicians and other professionals, to provide the needed productive skills and intellectual leadership to move the country forward.

The most critical issues facing the tertiary and higher education sub-sector relate to access to quality and relevant tertiary education; human resources capacity constraints, and availability of physical infrastructure and equipment (GOTG, 2006). Currently, tertiary education is provided by four institutions namely, Gambia College (GC), Gambia Technical Training Institute (GTTI), Management Development Institute (MDI) and The University of The Gambia (UTG). These institutions have a combined enrolment figure of 8,373 students (The Gambia Donor Round Table Conference, 2007).

Tablet: Students Application and Enrolment Figures for University of The Gambia (2005-2010)

Year	Number of applicants	Number admitted	Percent Not admitted
2005	594	336	43
2006	773	308	60
2007	603	354	41
2008	781	533	32
2009	1429	977	32

Source: Adapted from UTG Admissions“ Statistics, 2011

The number of students vying for places at UTG is on the increase as shown in Table 1. Except 2008 and 2009 the number of students not admitted has been above the 40% mark.

Table 2: Students’ Application and Admission Figures for Management Development Institute (2000-2004)

Year	Number of applicants	Number admitted	Percent Not admitted
2000	400	377	6
2001	500	404	19
2002	800	659	18
2003	1200	1019	15
2004	1500	1040	31

Source: Adapted from Taal, 2004

There has been close to a 300% increase in the students that applied for admission between 2000 and 2004. This demand has also seen a steady increase in the number of students not admitted (Table 2).

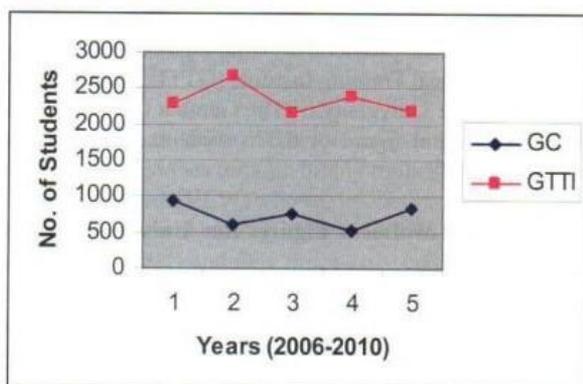


Fig. 1: Enrolment Figures for Gambia College and Gambia Technical Training Institute (2006-2010)

Source: Adapted from GC and GTTI Admission Statistics, 2011

The enrolment figures for GTTI hover around 2000 and a little over 2500 students while for GC, it is around 500-1000 students (Fig. 1). These figures will increase as the demand for places in these institutions continue to grow in the coming years.

Human Resources

The government of The Gambia is committed to train, by the year 2015, about 1,000 academic degree holders, over 600 B.Ed professional degree holders, 2,095 qualified Higher Teacher Certificate holders and 6.297 Primary Teacher Certificate

holders. This is an up-hill task in that quality academics are very scarce in the tertiary and higher education sub-sectors. As a result, there is high dependence on foreign lecturers and foreign tertiary education service providers from the sub-region. Consequently, sustainable planning becomes difficult as the needed human resource base is highly unpredictable and prone to fluctuation in the availability of teaching staff (The Gambia Donor Round Table Conference, 2007).

Challenges

Currently, all the tertiary and higher education institutions depend, to a large extent, on government subvention. As a result, the level of financial support given by government is determined by the performance of the economy. The current Education Sector Strategic Plan 2006-2015 is estimated to cost about \$195 million. Out of this amount, about \$4 million is set aside for tertiary education. There is, however, a funding gap of \$2 million and this will affect the realisation of the set target (Education Sector Strategic Plan, 2006-2015, DOSE).

Over the years, overseas institutions have been the key providers of tertiary education but a combination of high fees in these institutions and the large pool of students completing secondary school means that there are a considerable number of students who are unable to gain tertiary places overseas. They cannot study overseas for financial reasons, and they cannot attend tertiary institutions in The Gambia because of space limitations. Added to this group are those adults who are employed and for whom overseas or campus-based local study, therefore, is not possible. Such people continue to live in The Gambia but enroll in courses offered by overseas institutions that provide qualifications they anticipate will increase opportunities.

The University of The Gambia is the only degree-awarding institution in the country but it does not have a campus of its own, though plans are in high gear to construct one in Farababanta, which is 40 km from Banjul. The approximate students' enrolment is 1,500 and the University of Gambia is using the facilities in existing tertiary institutions, which are sparsely located in the Greater Banjul Area. This has resulted in students constantly moving from one location to the other for lectures and since the facilities are shared with other students, there is congestion and strain on the available space, furniture and equipment.

Embracing Distance Education for Human Resource Development

Distance education has become important policy option for educational planners in developing countries, since the early 1970s, and many of these countries have come to accept that this mode of educational provision can play a part in the national education system. This perception is anchored on the success of the Open University in Britain from its inception in 1969 and has resulted in

the establishment of distance education at university level in many developing countries. Similarly, many countries established distance education institutions to provide programmes at other levels, such as teacher training, secondary schooling, and adult basic education. The number of distance education institutions in the developing countries has, therefore, grown rapidly in the last 20 years (Dodds and Youngman, 1994).

Distance education offers the possibility of widening access to education at a number of different levels in a relatively cheap, or at least cost-effective, manner. It is currently being promoted by international organisations as an appropriate policy choice for developing countries. For Africa, the case was made in a major World Bank policy study published in 1988 entitled *Education in sub-Saharan Africa* (World Bank, 1988), which proposed a selective expansion of educational services in African countries and singled out distance education programmes to enable increases in secondary and tertiary education at lower unit costs than conventional education.

One of the outstanding merits of distance education is its ability to impart knowledge and skills without removing the learner from his/her station. White (1971), found it to be an effective tool in the training of untrained teachers, which constituted 47.9% of the primary school teacher in Botswana shortly after independence. The project, which lasted from 1967 to 1973, was funded by donor aid, and it involved the provision of physical facilities and a training programme based on correspondence courses, radio programmes, and short-term residential sessions. The training period was three years, and it covered about 600 teachers from all over the country.

The Gambia with an illiteracy rate of about 60% will take a longer time to achieve its set goal of transforming the country into a financial centre, a trading export-oriented agricultural and manufacturing nation which is sustained by a well-educated, skilled, healthy, self-reliant and enterprising population if it is to solely rely on the conventional system of education. This is largely due to the financial cost that is needed to start and sustain the programme. Currently, the demand for space in existing tertiary institutions outstrips the capacity that could be accommodated. There is therefore an overriding need to embrace distance education which can reach more clientele of different backgrounds-workers and house wives in both urban and rural areas.

To promote the idea of distance education, a policy framework that would entice middle and senior civil servants to pursue advanced training for their upgrading in the civil service through the distance mode will popularise the idea. Scholarships and bursaries could be provided to such would-be learners.

The Gambia has a vibrant Printing Press Service, which can provide the services

needed in the printing of distance education instructional materials. These materials could be sent to learners in their different regions of the country using existing networks of regional education offices located in the various administrative regions. The regional offices are headed by education officers who can be co-opted to serve as councilors for the distance learners. The offices could also serve as resource centres supported by a critical mass of education officers. Timed in distance education. The learners could converge at these centres for their face to face sessions. This same venue could be used to offer courses in other disciplines that are critical for national development. This approach will contribute substantially towards attaining the set target for teacher training and middle level human resource development as enshrined in the Vision 2020 blue print.

The advances in Information and Communication Technology avail learners the opportunity to use a variety of tools during their learning process. These include TV, Radio, Mobile phones and the Internet. There is a nation wide coverage for each of these technologies.

Conclusion

There is a lot to be achieved in The Gambia through distance education. The training of teachers, which has a pupil: teacher ratio of 45:1 at lower basic schools (Budget Speech, 2007) and which is compounded by a high attrition rate needs urgent attention. Similarly, there is an acute shortage of manpower in other industries that are key areas that needs to be addressed if The Gambia is to achieve its set goal of transforming into a financial centre, a trading export-oriented agricultural and manufacturing nation, which is sustained by a well-educated, skilled, healthy, self-reliant and enterprising population.

Meeting The Gambia's human resource needs through distance education has the overriding advantage of cutting on cost that would otherwise be met if the conventional approach is to be relied upon entirely. It has the added advantage of reaching a higher number of potential candidates.

University of The Gambia which is the highest tertiary institution should be transformed in to full-fledged dual mode university offering courses from diploma to degree levels, and establishing links with already existing DE/ODL universities in the sub-region and beyond. This will create room for knowledge and skills sharing and allow the University of The Gambia to adopt or adapt course manuals developed by those institutions, while it embarks on its own vigorous training programme to train the requisite cadre of staff that would be responsible for the production of learning materials. Success in the use of the dual mode is succinctly demonstrated in Zimbabwe shortly after independence in 1980, when over 8,000 teachers were trained between 1981 and 1984, (Treffgame, 1986).

Distance education at UTG could be further enhanced if it becomes a member of the African Council for distance education (ACDE). This will further avail staff with training opportunities, share resources and attend training workshops and conferences on distance education. The University of The Gambia also needs to explore possibilities of stronger ties, if any yet, with the Commonwealth of Learning, COL, in Vancouver, Canada. COL is noted for helping small States of the Commonwealth in developing distance education programmes. The UTG also could explore possibilities of collaboration with the National Open University of Nigeria, which is said to be helping Ghana as that country prepares to start an open university.

The inadequacies of the conventional system of education is amply demonstrated in the Hong Kong's University and Polytechnic Grants Committee (UPGC report (1989) which stated that in 1988 for the University of Hong Kong 18,000 candidates applied for 1,993 first year places; in the Chinese University of Hong Kong 28,000 students sat the entrance examination and 1,550 were admitted and the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong received 46,000 applications for 3,600 places (Kelly and Kember, 1992). The Gambia is in a similar demand-driven situation for tertiary education, which cannot be met through the conventional method of education. The Gambia thus needs to try distance education for a change.

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