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Essay Assignment 2 – Institutional Comparisons

Introduction

There is a shortfall of adequate educational facilities in the developing country of Africa, and a history of educational injustice in the developed United Kingdom. Various methodologies are used to address the supply and demand for distance education in these countries. This essay compares the African Virtual University and the Open University to gain a perspective on how these disparities are addressed.

Mission/Population Served

The African Virtual University (AVU) is an inter-governmental organization headquartered in Nairobi. AVU facilitates access to high quality Open, Distance and eLearning (ODel) resources to a network of 53 institutions in 27 African countries. The vision of AVU is "To be the Leading Pan-African Open, Distance and eLearning Network" (The African Virtual University, 2013). The vision is administered through a partnership of member countries, partner institutions and partners, and is refined through research and evaluation activities on the African Continent.

The Open University (OU) is an academic institution headquartered in the United Kingdom. OU provides high quality distance education, academic research, and collaborative partnership. OU's mission is "to be open to people, places, methods and ideas" (The Open University, 2013). The focus is on delivering educational opportunity and social justice to students of all ages and backgrounds.

Distance education must answer the call of supply and demand. Both of these institutions place emphasis on accommodating economical and societal demands. AVU meets the demand of open learning by networking with universities to provide services. OU fulfills demand by

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promoting equality in the educational system. Although AVU is a developing nation and OU is developed, both institutions acknowledge the value in higher education to pursue market-oriented activities for the purpose of added revenue, increased enrollments, and visibility.

History/Reason for Existence

The African Virtual University was established by charter in 1997 as a World Bank project. Later, it was registered as a non-profit organization; and reassigned to Kenya. In 2003, AVU became a Pan African Intergovernmental Organization with fifteen African governments. Dzvimbo, & Kariuki describes it best as “not a university in the traditional sense of the word”. It is an educational institution that is a part of a network and works with and supports initiatives in African partner institutions to make use of open, distance, and electronic learning (ODEL) methodologies in teaching and learning at the tertiary level” (Dzvimbo, & Kariuki, n.d, p.)

The Open University had a more challenging route through political bureaucracy. In 1964, Harold Wilson, leader of the Labour Party, conceptualized “a new educational trust that brought together many institutions and organisations to produce television and other educational material” (The Open University, 2013). In 1966, the Labour Party general election manifesto committed to establishing the University of the Air. The Planning Committee began comprehensive planning for an open university in 1967. The organizational structure was instituted by charter in 1969. In 1971, the Open University enrolled students.

Although both AVU and OU provide ODeL’s, they were established for totally different reasons. AVU recognized the shortfall of adequate physical educational facilities in Africa. AVU exists to bridge the gap between the large numbers of students and training facilities. Conversely,

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the United Kingdom had deep divisions between the wealthy and poor. The OU was founded to make higher education available to the poor as well as the wealthy.

Values Espoused/Inherent to the Institution

One of the most distinguished accomplishments of the African Virtual University is its ability to embrace the cultural and language differences in Africa. Furthermore, AVU is the leading Pan African eLearning Network. The Teacher Education Program is another distinction inherent to AVU. This program uses the ICT's to improve the quantity and quality of teachers in math and science by providing access to ODeL methodologies in ten African countries. Juma, extends his supports of AVU's unique model by stating "Students, medical practitioners, lawyers professors, etc. can have access to high-quality and current information" (Juma, 2003).

The Open University is notably the world leader in design, and content supported open learning. The multi disciplinary course team model has helped to build the University's reputation for academic excellence. OU is famous for its open access policies, high quality courses, and team approach in course development. Another unique characteristic is undergraduate courses do not have a formal entry requirement. The OU mantra is "We believe that it is the qualifications with which our students leave, rather than those with which they enter, that count" (The Open University, 2013).

The two institutions utilize different marketing strategies. AVU's strategy is to bridge the language barriers within African countries. Building a network of many Africa countries allowing for a plethora of cultures to communicate, learn and improve the higher education teacher population. On the other hand, OU's marketing strategies are directed toward high

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quality course content and education access equality. The common thread between the institutions is open access to distance education.

Organization/Systems of Operation

The organizational structure of the African Virtual University consists of a Board of Trustees and a Board of Directors. The Board of Trustees has fiduciary responsibility and appoints the Board of Directors. The nine members Board of Directors include the vice-chancellors, rectors, partners and specially selected individuals for the purpose of policy-making and management oversight (Juma, 2003). Operating under a new service oriented framework, AVU focus is on organizational sustainability. The degree programs formerly brokered from “established European and North American institutions” have been replaced with African based open education resources geared toward economic development. (Dzvimbo, & Kariuki, n.d, p. 60) These programs are offered by the AVU or in collaboration with its Partner_Institutions.

The Open University is governed by three formal bodies: the Council, the Senate and General Assembly. The Council includes academic and research staff, non academic staff, students and external members concerned with finance, property and staff matters. The Senate is subject to the Council and is responsible for academics. Additionally, the General Assembly provides recommendations on University related matters; and consists of the nations elected representatives and Senate appointed representatives. Lastly, BBC and OU have been in a partnership for over 40 years providing television broadcasts of OU programs.

AVU and OU have dynamically opposing organizational structures. AVU is an intergovernmental organization consisting of 15 governments. As a nonprofit organization, AVU is concern with the advancement of Africa as a nation through economic development. The

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organizational structure depicts the governmental collaborations through its broad array of decision-makers. OU's organizational structure is directed to concentrate on internal matters not directly related to the country's development. Matters such as academics and the functionality of the university is the foundation of the institution's international recognition and is the focal point of the structure.

Model of Teaching and Learning

The African Virtual University offers online, blended mode and face-to-face courses. Juma, describes the pedagogical approach as a "flexible mixed-mode delivery approach" in which learner and teacher interact via email and chat with teaching assistants that facilitate questions from learners (Juma, 2003). Courses are managed by a main lecturer and may be supported by a tutor. Online courses are delivered entirely online through the AVU Virtual classrooms. However, courses requiring laboratories or practice are provided face-to-face with course material available online. AVU's teaching and learning activities can be categorized by Educational and Support Services and Not-for-profit development services.

The Open University takes a slightly different approach on open learning. Whereas AVU has a main lecturer, at OU, the course materials are the primary learning mode with extensive support from tutors. Both organizations use tutors or assistants to grade assignments, provide written feedback, and offer support through telephone, email or computer conferencing with opportunities for face-to-face or online tutorials. Study facilities are also available in various regions. Residential work is required for some MBA modules and language courses however; some residential work is offered as stand-alone modules.

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The main differentiation between the two institutions is in course development. OU courses are developed through a multi-disciplinary course team consisting of faculty from outside universities working in collaboration with OU colleagues to contribute pedagogic and technical expertise.

Technologies Used

Previously, the African Virtual University generated programs mainly through mass media (satellite television). Currently AVU is using Open Educational Resources (OER's) to disseminate their academic programs. During an UNESCO presentation, Dr. Bakary Diallo, CEO and Rector of AVU, stated that AVU's modules were released as OER's to make the material freely available to students. AVU successfully provides the necessary technology to its host university partners making AVU the leading African institution in producing and using OERs (UNESCO, 2013). The OER@AVU Repository portal facilitates academic programs, host text books available in English, French, and Portuguese, and also hosts videos available. Course videos can be found on YouTube as well.

The technology at the Open University is more advanced than what is used by AVU. In addition to custom written course materials, OU students receive virtual microscopes, interactive laboratories, DVD's and online videos. The University also provides free public access to a number of educational and research sources and materials. Open Research Online is an open access resource that can be searched and browsed freely by members of the public. CORE (Connecting Repository) aims to facilitate free access to scholarly publications. OpenLearn facilitate free OU course modules. As expected, the technological advances of OU as a

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developed nation outweigh AVU as a developing nation; irrespective, both are making notable
exploits in the advancement of distance education.

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