

THE DISTANCE EDUCATION PROJECT AT THE UNIVESITY OF DSCHANG, CAMEROON: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Introduction

The Distance Education project at the University of Dschang was started in 1991 against a backdrop of restricted access to higher education in agriculture in Cameroon. The University of Dschang is the only institution of higher learning offering tertiary agricultural education at or above the Bachelor's level.

The Agricultural Programme at the University of Dschang is for five years. It is open to holders of the GCE Advanced level and Baccalaureate in the sciences (12-14 years of formal elementary and secondary school education). Admission was, and still is by an entrance examination.

This situation limits access to agricultural education and creates a scarcity of trained human resources in the agricultural sector. At the time the project was designed, students paid no fees. On the contrary, government largesse paid students substantial stipends for their keep. Students also benefited from several privileges (e.g. free transit bus services between the campuses, heavily subsidized meals and single room student housing). These privileges were enjoyed by students attending the so-called *Grandes Ecoles* (Professional Schools) in Cameroon.

Funds for the project came from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the government of Cameroon. The University of Guelph collaborated jointly with the University of Dschang in implementing the project.

Broad Objectives of the Project

The project sought out to design, develop and deliver a programme of independent study in both English and French leading to the award of Certificates and Diplomas in Tropical Agriculture in three interrelated tracks or options: Animal Science, Crop Science and Agricultural Management Science.

Specific Objectives

The specific goals planned in the project include institution and capacity building at the University of Dschang in the following areas:

- a) faculty training in the preparation, delivery and management of a distance education/independent study programme in Dschang;
- b) development of necessary infrastructure in Dschang to include physical facilities and cost recovery methods;
- c) technology transfer through programme delivery and capacity building.

Project Assumptions

At the time of project formulation, a number of key assumptions were made. Principal among them were that:

1. A significant proportion of the faculty at the University of Dschang had a basic notion of distance education and the advantages it presented for Cameroon.
2. The faculty and University administration will support the project whole-heartedly;
3. The University Centre of Dschang will maintain structural stability;
4. The Cameroon society and its institutions would remain stable throughout the life of the project and for much longer beyond the project;
5. There would be a low turnover of leadership at the University of Dschang.

Rationale

The Project was conceived on the belief that Cameroon needs well trained and efficient middle-level staff in its task to move out of the present traditional system of peasant agriculture into a dynamic, viable, market-oriented and sustainable agriculture. One of the ways by which this process of change can take place is to popularize the learning process by setting up distance education programmes in the country. The choice of the distance education mode of delivery was influenced by a number of factors:

1. The importance of agriculture for Cameroon's development coupled with the increasing demands on the government of Cameroon to offer agricultural training and education to its citizens;
2. The presence of a critical group of agricultural technicians who have had two or three years of training in agriculture either at Dschang or in one of the Regional Colleges of Agriculture. But they have no other access to higher education beyond their present level.
3. The present system of on-campus education does not provide opportunities for persons who desire further training in agriculture but cannot leave their work or families for long periods of time. The project concept assumed that there will be many women in this group of potential students.
4. The need to cope with the increasing scarcity of resources worldwide and the opportunities created by science and technology particularly in the area of educational technology, (Distance Education Project, 1996:1-2).

Teaching Strategy

Distance educators use five types of technologies: print-based, audio-based, video-based, computer-based and multi-media (Spronk and Sanders, 1992). The programme at the University of Dschang essentially depends on print-based technologies. Each course consists of a course Manual written by Cameroonian faculty, tailored to the needs of, and targeted specific audiences that were identified during the Needs Assessment Study (Njwe and Fonteh, 1994). Students are required to practice agriculture on their fields. One final practical session and final examinations are conducted on the campus of the University of Dschang. As resources and circumstances permit, audio and video tapes will be added to the instructional materials.

Achievements

The project goals have been achieved in the area of partnership building, training and resource development. Institution building, curriculum development, project management, understanding of gender issues in education and linkages between the University and partner institutions and organizations was achieved.

a) Partnership building

A sustainable partnership now exists between Guelph and Dschang.;

b) Training

50 Faculty and two technicians have been trained in Cameroon and Canada in various aspects of distance education;

c) Experience

Faculty and Staff have acquired hands-on experience and understanding of the problems, prospects and challenges of distance education and how these can be harnessed to enhance education access in Cameroon;

d) Social Change

Project participants have gained knowledge in the processes of social change, the obstacles in programme implementation and the challenges of innovation in education;

e) Participatory Management

Faculty and staff have learned participatory methods in project identification, implementation, management and evaluation;

f) Up-grading of skills

Faculty on the project have declared that their teaching, writing and communication skills have improved considerably as a result of their participation in the project;

g) Indigenous Capacity-building

Project has enabled indigenous capacity building in needs assessment and project formulation;

h) Distance Education Centre

A functional distance education Centre has been established at the University of Dschang. 175 students from all of Cameroon's ten provinces are currently enrolled;

I) Course Manuals

Twenty course booklets have now been written, printed and are now being offered to students;

j) Translations

3 of 20 courses have now been translated into the second official language of Cameroon These have been printed and are now being delivered to students;

k) Bridge-funding

The Canada-Cameroon Counterpart Fund has provided CA\$85,000 in bridge funds to the project. These funds will be used to printed translated courses, organize information seminars and organize practicals for students on the campus of the University of Dschang;

l) Awareness Creation

The project has increased awareness among policy makers, university administrators, faculty and staff about the challenges and opportunities offered by distance education;

m) Ownership building

Through a process of participatory project implementation, ownership of the project has been established;

n) Linkages

Linkages have been established with other agencies and donors in Cameroon and Canada, (Moore, Nji and Janakiram, 1998).

Problems Encountered by Project Activity

A. Course Development

None of the authors of the 20 courses currently being offered on the Distance Education Programme have prior experience with distance mode of educational delivery. Thus, course development constituted a source of much anxiety for course authors who are more accustomed to face-to-face classroom teaching.

This obstacle was overcome through training of Core Faculty in Guelph. Supplementary training workshops were held in Cameroon in writing for distance, as well as the techniques and procedures of technical editing (Nji et al., 1995). Apart from the technical issues involved with writing, there was need to ensure a linguistic balance in the presentation of the first original courses. This balance was achieved by recruiting authors in English and in French so that authorship of twenty courses on the curriculum was equally distributed between English and French.

B. Editorial Constraints

As the project team and leaders soon realized, structural and technical editing are critical for a viable distance education programme. Unfortunately, these issues were not addressed in the short-term training received in Canada by DEP faculty.

This problem was promptly resolved with the training in Canada, of the project coordinator in technical editing. Upon return to Cameroon, the Coordinator was then able to train the other members of the team in technical editing.

In addition to course editing, the project design also made room for Subject Matter Specialists (SMS) to give a technical/substantive technical review of each course before it went to the press. Each course was, therefore, submitted to an SMS for review and comments.

Two major problems were encountered with the reviews. First, many SMS did not do as thorough a review as was expected. Many of the reviewers barely skimmed through the text and returned it to the project in return for the reviewer's fees which they also complained was insignificant (CA\$80-90 per review).

The second problem was that of untimely delays in returning the work to the project after review. Approximately 50% of the reviews were returned within 4-6 weeks; but some took as long as 12 weeks (Lauzon and Teboh, 1997). In one case, the reviewer never returned the manuscript even after 18 months of reminders. In this particular case, the course was given to another SMS for review; but costly delays would have been inflicted on the project.

This behaviour caused delays in project execution (course completion, printing and delivery), frustrations on the part of the authors and impatience among affected course authors.

C. Course production

As has been explained elsewhere in this paper, the Media Centre of the University of Dschang was to print all the courses and related publicity material. But unexpected political and economic changes in the country obfuscated the capacity of the Print Shop to function as planned. Again, as in the case of course writing, undue delays were experienced in printing. Authors and students became frustrated and the project experienced cost over-runs due to the inflation and increased costs that came on the heels of the devaluation of the Franc CFA.

The printers at the Media Centre did not have as much printing experience as was required for the volume and quality of work exacted by the distance education courses. This lack of experience was translated in delays, poor quality printing and multiple re-runs of two courses. The printing quality of one course was so poor that it had to be reprinted by a second printer. The result was that the budgeted costs of printing the particular course was virtually doubled.

D. Student Recruitment

The project is facing two problems with student recruitment. The first is the low representative of female students in the programme. In spite of the fact that women were specifically targeted in the project proposal.

Two reasons seem to ginger low female participation. First, that women represent only 6% of the students in higher education in Cameroon. Secondly, because most Cameroon women are not as economically viable as men, (Nji, 1997) they may ill afford the course fees of 15,000 francs CFA.

The other obstacle to student recruitment is a structural one: relative distance from the project site. Current student profiles show that 23.7% of students in the programme come from the West Province (where Dschang is located), 20.8% from the North-West, and 17.3% from the Centre Province. Dschang is 110 km from the North-West Province and 400 km from the Centre Province.

On the other hand, the Far North, North and Adamawa Provinces are the least represented in the programme. These Northern Provinces are between 700 and 1,500 km from Dschang. Because of distance and poor communication between Dschang and this region of Cameroon, postal and telephone rates are high and unreliable.

E. Marking Mail-In Assignments

Perhaps the greatest single problem in student assessment has been the turn around time in marking mail-in assignments, (Lauzon & Teboh, 1997). Most instructors do not return assignments forwarded to them for marking within a reasonable time. The average turn around time for mail-in assignments is 4 weeks. This tended to kill participant morale and unduly extends the completion time for the programme for most students.

Much of this sluggishness and unresponsive behaviour is due to a decided decline in faculty morale within the last two years of the project. The low morale is as a result of the lack of the institutional recognition of faculty contributions to the distance education activity.

F. Marketing

The programme did not benefit from as much marketing as it should. A major constraint to effective marketing is the lack of adequate institutionalization of the programme with clear indications of the academic value of the courses beyond the Certificate and the Diploma. Yet, institutionalization is the most critical issue related to project sustainability after the end of the Counterpart supplementary funding.

G. Institutionalization

Institutionalizing the project into a programme remains a high priority on the project. Unfortunately, not enough is being done to institutionalize the project through for example, release time for faculty working on DE activities, promotion, teaching and research credit.

Both the University and the government have not worked as fast as expected to establish a concrete policy for distance education in Cameroon even though the danger of no recognition of faculty time was mentioned in the formative evaluation report (Galatianos & Tah, 1995:39-43). This reluctance or delay seems to be caused primarily by ignorance on the part of those who have to take the action. Also, some of the key players on the decision-making chess-board deliberately block all efforts to develop and institutionalize the programme (Lauson & Teboh, 1997).

Barriers to Project Achievements

Barely one year into the implementation of the project, the Cameroon political, social and economic landscape began to undergo major shifts. Political instability preceded the economic and social stress that came on its heels. This was translated in delays of implementation. The deep financial crisis within the Cameroon economy, political and social uncertainties inflicted a serious dent in the morale of project participants. The barriers experienced during the project life between 1991 and 1998 can be summarized as follows:

1. Uncertainty created by a volatile political climate in Cameroon;
2. High turnover of University of Dschang leadership (6 Director Generals and Rectors in 8 years);
3. Institutional changes involving the transformation of the University Centre of Dschang into a full-fledged University with 5 Faculties;
4. Increase of the student population from 700 to 7000 in four years without additional infrastructure nor funding;
5. Lack of recognition of, and reward for faculty time leading to low morale among course authors, project leadership and staff;
6. Financial upheavals caused by salary cuts of up to 70% in the public and private sector, the devaluation of the CFA Franc and spiral inflation;
7. Lack of institutional preparedness at the University of Dschang. The Print Shop on which course printing was pegged was not functional due to lack of funds, qualified technicians and high prices of printing paper added more salt to the wound.
8. High project costs caused by macro economic changes. High prices in postal charges, fuel and printing costs impacted the project negatively;
9. Lack of interest in, and awareness by some University administrators of the concept, principles and benefits of distance education;
10. Stonewalling, Blackmail, conservatism and ignorance by and among some key actors and gate keepers in the University system;
11. Inability of women to take advantage of the programme due to historical cultural patterns that have worked to reduce the participation of women in the educational system. For example, only 6% of the teachers in the Faculty of Agriculture are female. But DEP has performed better than the national average with a female student registration of 12.6%;
12. Off campus stations which were considered to be the focus of farm practicals for students were not adequately prepared to contribute to the project's objectives;
13. Envy and jealousy fueled by materialism and a chronic satisfaction with failure stood as roadblocks on the path of project implementation;
14. The lack of appropriate skills by the DEP technical staff and scarce appropriate equipment impeded project implementation;
15. Power failures resulting at one time in blackouts that lasted 10 consecutive days in Dschang delayed project implementation;
16. Apathy, cultural relatively of time and resignation by participants dampened project success;
17. Break down in equipment, lack of spare parts, qualified technicians and the absence of a maintenance culture complicated project management strategies.

Lessons Learned

1. Participatory management is an asset for the project. This helped to build ownership and joint responsibility from the beginning. This enabled the project team to achieve present results in spite of the problems enumerated.
2. The selection of project leaders by election rather than by appointment as is customary in Cameroon is seen as a major factor that has contributed to accountability and attainment of project goals, (Moore et al., 1998).

3. Establish of trust and mutual respect between the participating agencies strengthened the commitment of project participants.
4. The establishment of a *quasi* independent management system for the project and a system for decision-making that is responsive to the needs of students is seen as an asset.
5. The formulation of a programme based on the expressed demand and preferences of potential students is instrumental to project success.
6. Flexibility of the funding and implementing agencies is beneficial
7. The acquisition of project vehicles facilitated communication, and improved the project efficiency that comes with organizational independence

Conclusions

This case study confirms the age-old development theory of change as a gradual process. the experience also demonstrates the saliency of democratic principles, participation and good management in project success. Perhaps what stands out even more clearly in the results that can be achieved through Management By Objectives (MOB).

Resistance to change is a universal reaction by persons who either show ignorance or good old fashioned conservative tendencies. Here, the Learning Theory is seen to be instrumental to behavioural change particularly in adult education (Verduin and Clark, 1991).

The experience of the Distance Education Project at the University of Dschang also demonstrates the need for change agents to remain focused, determined and courageous even in the face of adversity. Persuasion, imagination and critical analysis are seen to be assets in all efforts to transfer technology. When persistence yields positive results as is the case with the distance education project, even skeptics (or what adoption-diffusion theory refers to as laggards (See Rogers, 1962), are ready to adopt the technology.

A significant and most encouraging outcome of the Cameroon experience is the encouragement that the Cameroon Minister of Higher Education, Mr. Atangana Mebara, is giving to the distance education project. He has declared publicly that the distance education programme in Dschang has his "personal and institutional commitment". This statement was reaffirmed again in public at the University of Dschang on Monday November 16, 1998 by the Honourable Minister himself on the occasion of the official opening of the academic year at that institution. On the occasion, he said that Dschang should get ready to lead all the other Cameroon Universities on the path to distance education as an effective and rational means to open the doors of higher education to all Cameroonians who deserve and desire it, in the face of shrinking national resources.

This positive outcome of a project shows that in countries where sub-cultures are pitted against each other by self-interest and uninformed intermediaries or gate keepers, development diplomacy characterized by negotiation, bargaining and simple short examples of positive achievements are instrumental in winning support and encouraging adoption of an idea, object or process. Careful listening and the establishment of trust at both the donor and recipient ends of a development project are critical for the attainment of project objectives and eventual project or programme sustainability.

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