



**PHEIs as New Alternatives for Students in Ethiopia:
The Case of Distance Education Provision
at St. Mary's College**

**by
Ayalew Getachew**

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Ayalew Getachew

Editor, Distance Education Division, St. Mary's College,
P.O.Box 1211, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Abstract

The widespread emergence and development of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Ethiopia is a recent phenomenon. Among other things, this is the result of the fact that government higher education institutions alone could not absorb the high educational demand from the society. Many countries of the world, both developed and developing, have never been successful in responding to the educational demand of the public through conventional institutions alone-*institutions established on the basis of the customary classroom teacher-student interactions mode*. Their educational history shows that they are extensively using other alternatives chief among which is the introduction of distance mode of education into their educational system.

Distance Education in Ethiopia, is gaining momentum with the appearance of PHEIs in the country. This paper tries to show Distance Education (DE) as an alternative mode of teaching and learning in creating access, flexibility and cost effectiveness, and suggests possible ways of exploiting it for the purpose of academic delivery. The paper focuses, mainly, on distance education provision at St. Mary's College.

A method of descriptive statistics (tabulation and percentage values) was applied to analyze the data collected from the application forms of 206 distance learners (half of the Megabit 1994 E.C. intake) of St. Mary's College. The findings of the study show that DE is really accessible, flexible, and cost-effective to diverse types of learners in Ethiopia, at least in reference to the provision of the mode at St. Mary's College, more than the conventional mode of education.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of population coupled with the increased responsibility of governments to improve access to education, the explosion of information technology and the growing awareness of societies in considering education as a major means of upward social and economic mobility, have made the demand for education very high in the developing world. This high demand for education does not seem to be met by government institutions and the traditional/conventional mode of delivery alone. Private higher institutions have to join public institutions to meet the ever increasing demands.

It is with such an intention that the Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia states "*the government will create the necessary conditions to encourage and give support to private investors to open schools and establish various educational training institution*" TGE (1994:32).

Many private higher educational institutions have been established since the introduction of the Education and Training Policy of the country and they are playing their part in producing skilled manpower that can be employed in different organizations at different capacities.

St. Mary's College is one of the private higher educational institutions in Ethiopia that was established in 1991 E.C. By considering the high demand for education from various age groups, professions and the like, the college has been trying its level best to provide education in different programmes: *regular, extension and distance*.

The distance education division at St. Mary's commenced operation in the middle of 1992 E.C. Within a short period of time, it showed a rapid progress in enrolling a large number of workplace learners throughout the country (see Map 1).

This study dwells on distance education as a significant alternative for tertiary level education to the conventional mode by raising the following questions:

1. Does distance education create access to education to many people who need tertiary education?

2. Is distance education flexible enough than the conventional mode?
3. Is distance education cost effective as compared to the conventional mode?

Map 1: The Regional Distribution of Distance Education Coordinating Centers of St. Mary's College

Source: Office of the Distance Education Dean, St. Mary's College

1.1 Defining Distance Education

Distance education does not have a clear-cut, single definition of its own. The reason for this, according to Louise Suave (cited in Keegan, 1993:102) is:

- a. there is wide sphere of definition of distance education. Each definition is formulated according to the contents and the authors involved.
- b. the rapid evolution of applications in distance education has created a certain amount of terminological confusion.
- c. despite the divergent views, there are some constants, communication, distance (in terms of time and/or space), the use of media or technologies, planning and organization.
- d. at present distance education stands as an umbrella concept covering correspondence courses, televised teaching, radio-broadcast teaching, open learning, computer assisted instruction, individualized learning and self-learning.
- e. distance education is viewed differently by many authors depending on their personal version of education, of teaching and learning.
- f. for the last ten years [1983-1993], distance education has distanced itself from broadcast type media and has embraced technologies that offer interactive and individualized communication opportunities.
- g. the authors cannot agree upon common definition.

Keegan (1994) tries to offer a comprehensive definition of distance education. He defines distance education not in terms of a single statement but in terms of its different characteristics. For Keegan (cited in Manjukika and Reddy, 1994:4) distance education is a form of education characterized by:

1. The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner through out the length of the learning process; this characteristic distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education.
2. The influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services; this distinguishes it from private study and teaches-yourself programmes.
3. The use of technical media- *print, audio, video and computer*, to unite teacher and learner carry the content of the course.
4. The provision of two-way communication so that the students may benefit from or even initiate dialogue, which distinguishes it from other uses of educational technology.
5. The teaching of students as individuals and rarely in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.
6. The participation in more industrialized form of education (based on the view that distance teaching is characterized by division of labor, mechanization, automation, application of organizational principles, scientific control , objectivity of teaching behavior; mass production, concentration and centralization).

1.2 The History of Distance Education Provision in Ethiopia

Modernization in the history of Ethiopia is considered to have begun during the reign of Menelik II. Educational expansion, as part of modernization, was the concern of Menelik, which later was pursued by Emperor Haile Selasse. The concept of introducing the distance mode of education into the educational system of Ethiopia began in the period between 1962- 1964, when the Distance Education Division at AAU invited an American Dean of the Extension Division of Nebraska University as a consultant to help design a course that could serve the need of Ethiopia (IGNOU, 2002:131-132). This was the period immediately after the conference of African states on the development of education in Africa, which recommended primary education to be "universal, compulsory and free" by the year 1980 (Bishop, 1994:1).

Early trials in promoting distance education failed because the courses that were tried to be introduced did not meet the requirements of the needs of Ethiopia, as the courses were actually imported from Nebraska University (IGNOU, 2002). Tilson and Getachew (2003:79) indicated that after the failure to implement Distance Education (DE) programs under AAU, Ministry of Education took over the responsibility for the program in 1976. In the Ministry of Education, the DE unit was organized under the Department of Adult Education, which was eventually transferred to EMA in 1994 (*Ibid*).

DE in Ethiopia now comprises radio and television broadcast to schools to supplement and enrich the curriculum, a non-formal secondary level distance education programmes for out of school youth and adults, and some broadcasts to general audience on development issues. In addition, Addis Ababa University initiated its first post-graduate distance education programme in 1998 with two M.Ed degree programs in education, one in educational management and the other in curriculum development (Tilson and Getachew, 2003:80)

Though the distance education program of Ethiopia stayed for nearly four decades, it showed no significant change in fulfilling its roles as an agent of knowledge delivery in the country. A statement in the publication of IGNOU (1999, block 5:132) clearly puts the situation of distance education programme in Ethiopia as follows: "*the Distance Education Division of Ethiopia is presently passing through a period of doldrums which seems to be the result of long neglect, under-financing, under-staffing, besides suffering from lack of good leadership*".

But currently, thanks to the new educational policy of Ethiopia, which allowed the participation of PHEIs, this period of doldrums in the history of the distance education provision seem to be reversed positively. Distance education, currently, is gaining momentum in some private colleges in Ethiopia. As one of the first dual-mode private colleges in Ethiopia, St. Mary's College has become the prominent one gaining success in providing distance education to the broad masses of Ethiopia reaching even the remotest and inaccessible villages that are far away from modern communication networks. It has now opened more than forty coordinating centers throughout Ethiopia along the major transport arteries in the country (see Map 1).

St. Mary's College began providing education at a distance in the middle of 1992 E.C. in Business and Law courses. But, it soon launched a program in teacher education considering the needs for training of teachers at both primary and secondary school levels.

2. Methodology

The data for this study were collected from St. Mary's College Registrar Office. The sample size for the study was 50% of the 1994 Megabit batch students' record. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics; specifically, percentages and mean values are used.

3. Results and Discussions

As compared to the conventional mode of education, DE is highly appreciated by politicians, economists and educators. Some professionals in distance teaching argue that DE facilitates the right way of learning where the learner is involved in self-directed learning. This idea, they say, is not new but was forwarded by Copernicus long ago. The various data presented under the tables below might show how distance education could be useful for the various sections of the society.

Table 1: Region, Type of Work, Age, Sex, Marital Status and Educational Background of the sample population

1. Region	Frequency	Percentage
Tigray	1	0.48
Afar	1	0.48
Amhara	75	36.4
Oromia	75	36.4
Beneshangul Gumuz	1	0.48
SNNRS	29	14.0
Gambella	2	0.96
Dire Dawa	3	1.45
Addis Ababa	18	8.75
Harari	1	0.48
<i>Total</i>	<i>206</i>	<i>100.00</i>
2. Type of Work	Frequency	Percentages
Teaching	169	82.03
Finance	11	5.33
Administration	4	1.94
Justice	8	3.88
Others	14	6.79
<i>Total</i>	<i>206</i>	<i>100</i>
3. Age Groups	Frequency	Percentages
≤ 20	10	4.85
21-30	111	53.88
31-40	64	31.06
41-50	15	7.28
Unspecified	6	2.91
<i>Total</i>	<i>206</i>	<i>100</i>
4. Sex	Frequency	Percentages
Male	167	81.06

<i>Program</i>	<i>Frequency of enrollment in a year</i>
Regular	1
Extension	1
Distance	2

Source of data: Office of the Registrar, of St. Mary's College

Table 3: Comparison of Cost among Distance, Regular and Extension Programs at St. Mary's College

		<i>St. Mary's College</i>					
<i>at</i>	<i>ymment in Bi</i>	<i>C</i>		<i>ourse fee</i>	<i>Per Cr</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>l</i>
<i>rr</i>	<i>fe</i>	<i>e Re</i>	<i>gula</i>	<i>r 7</i>	<i>Hrs</i>	<i>it</i>	<i>e</i>
<i>stration</i>	<i>Re</i>	<i>nsi</i>	<i>on</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>0 1</i>	<i>strat</i>	<i>100 15</i>
<i>fee</i>	<i>xte</i>	<i>Distance</i>	<i>40 60 10 55</i>	<i>2310</i>	<i>Source o</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>5465</i>	<i>76 5465</i>						

f

Data: Cash Office, S

t. Mary's College 1.1 Access and Equity Every platform in the political discussion is full of slogans like "education should be accessible to every human being" as it is a weapon for any social, economic and political development. But these slogans have remained mere slogans in most developing countries, except in the developed ones where the predominant members of their population have attained not only primary, but also secondary and tertiary level education. Developing countries don't seem to achieve the capacity of providing access to the majority of their people unless they choose another alternative to the conventional mode. Today, it has become a point of discussion that "the universities of the conventional type function almost like ivory towers showing little care for the needs of the students or the society" (IGNOU, 2002 block1:39). This statement shows that the traditional tertiary level institutions are providing education of an elitist type, ignoring education for the needs of the masses. The discussion on the weaknesses of the conventional

institutions offers more points: Educational programs/courses offered are not

- I. not relevant to the existing social needs; The age-old class-room teaching method has become more and more stale and ineffective as indicated by the present level of absenteeism;
- II. The highest paid teachers are re

IV. The rigidity regarding course duration, class-room attendance, etc. remain unchallenged; and

V. Benefits of higher and better education continue to be enjoyed by a privileged few.

The long-standing educational problems of the Ethiopian educational system as indicated in the new education and training policy are identified as inaccessibility, and lack of relevance and equity (TGE, 1994: 6). It is a well known fact that distance education is the ideal mode in improving access of education to the broad masses in a nation. This happens due to the fact that DE uses a mediated communication through which few qualified teachers can reach hundreds and thousands of learners anywhere in a country (even any part of the world).

The accessibility to learners by the distance mode of academic provision at St. Mary's College seems to support the above idea.

As can be seen from Table 1, distance learners at St. Mary's are from all the regional states in the country, though there is a very large discrepancy in number of learners from region to region. Amhara and Oromia (36 % each) are the leading in the number of learners. In fact, these regions are first and second (Oromia and Amhara respectively) in terms of their total population. Southern Nations Nationalities Regional State follows the two regions in learner population. The fact that many learners are from the most populous regions of the country indicates that DE has a potential of creating wider access to education. One important point in the regional distribution of learners is the case of Addis Ababa. Though people in Addis Ababa have more access to extension and other conventional programmes, the number of learners from Addis Ababa represents the fourth largest group. The reason for this could be the possibility that the DE mode has created the chance for learners to learn while they are still on their job. Hence, it has increased access to learning.

The majority of learners at St. Mary's distance education division (82.03%) are teachers by profession. Many of these teachers are currently teaching at the first cycle of primary schools, though there are some who teach in the second cycle primary schools. The DE

education programme has given these teachers the chance to attend their tertiary education while they are at their work place. Hence, this has created the chance for them to improve their living condition on the one hand and the teaching learning process on the other hand. There are also students from finance offices, justice and administrative sectors. All these attend the program while working.

Age wise, the majority of the learners (53.88%) are in the age group of 21-30; and 31.06% of the learners are in the age group of 31-40. There are about 7.82% who are in the age group of 41-50. These are people beyond the age of those who attend conventional classes. The average age range in the conventional universities at the world level is between 18-24 years (Tait and Mills, 1999:86). This shows that the DE program at St. Mary's College has truly created access to education to learners who have been denied of the chance irrespective of their age limit.

Married people usually have difficulty of attending conventional classes since they have family and other social commitments. Out of the total sample of learners, 46.11% are married people. Since knowledge goes to their doorsteps, they can learn and at the same time pursue their family and social responsibilities.

56.73% of the students are 12th grade graduates. These are dropouts who could not attend tertiary level education in the conventional class because they are unable to meet the stringent entrance criteria in the traditional tertiary training institutions. From this, one can deduce that the DE provision at St. Mary's College is fulfilling its mission of providing an alternative for learners to attend a tertiary level education.

In terms of their educational background, 41.26% of the students are TTI graduates. The new opportunity at St. Mary's College is enabling these people to upgrade themselves from first cycle primary school teachers to second cycle primary school teachers in the form of in-service training. This situation justifies the necessity of launching DE for workplace learners, especially for teachers, as stated below

To overcome severe shortage of trained teachers, many developing countries have used the distance teaching approach as a supplement to conventional college-based training. Over sixty distance-teaching programs

throughout the world have been launched and this approach has been used for training or upgrading teachers in more than forty countries. Indeed it has many advantages in teacher education in that it is economical, and costs much less than equivalent college based programs; the trainees remain at their posts while being trained and do not need replacements; the tendency for college trained teachers to work in urban rather than rural areas is offset"(IGNOU, 1999 block 5:3)

Another advantage of interest in distance education is its potential in solving the problem of gender inequalities. Evans (1994) explains the potential of DE as an important agent of solving the problems of gender inequalities in a society. He says,

As with many social problems, gender inequalities are seen as being, at least partly, solved through education. In particular, open and distance education have been nominated in many societies as key means of providing educational opportunities for women who have been previously disadvantaged. Such educational opportunities once taken are then believed to provide access to the workplace and more career options therein.

This fact has also been supported by Guri-Rosenblit (1999:70) who notes "*...distance education per se is a women friendly way of acquiring formal qualifications. There is little or no attendance requirement, at the same time it has a high degree of flexibility in learning schedules and time management*". As noted above, distance education is said to be '*women friendly*' in its characteristics. This means as women are mostly involved in household activities, DE has a better potential to reach them than conventional education programmes. But in the case of St. Mary's College, the predominant number of learners are men (81.06%) and women constitute only a small proportion (19.4%). However, this does not seem to emanate from the nature of distance education itself. Rather, it seems to emanate from the nature of the proportion of the workforce in the country as a whole and the educational history of the country. Ababayehu (2003:169), tried to prove this fact by discussing the educational history of the country as the main factor of gender imbalance. He says that despite the age-long literary history in the country [Ethiopia], women entered the intellectual pursuit in general and tertiary level education in particular later than their male counterparts.

1.2 Flexibility of Learning

Vertecchi (cited in Keegan, 1993:154) explains the stability (and the insignificance of recurrent learning in the past) of European schooling before the beginning of information explosion. He says that in traditional European thought the time of schooling (the time required for transmitting knowledge from one generation to the other) was a small proportion of the time of knowledge (the time required for establishing knowledge which has to be transmitted). One of the possible advantages of this type of schooling, Vertecchi (Ibid) says, is that the knowledge acquired at school could be applied during all the working life of an individual.

But today's world is extremely '*volatile*' in the '*reproduction*' and development of knowledge. Hence unless one updates him/herself to the dynamic world situation, life may become very difficult. The traditional way of staying for twelve to thirteen years and getting employed for a work has become no more a guarantee to stay at work. This type of training which is acquired at school, cannot be considered complete but must be modified, reviewed, and in some cases, replaced during the working life (Vertecchi as cited in Keegan, 1993:154).

In this world of dynamic atmosphere of knowledge, the rigid conventional mode of academic delivery has become no more a viable mode. As a result, distance education is gaining prominence, as it is highly flexible and ideal in providing recurrent education to people better than the conventional mode. The flexibility of DE can be seen from different directions.

First, as it requires no classroom, permanent teachers and classroom attendance, it enables people to learn wherever they are: *at their office, home, military and refugee camps, and even in prison*, etc. and acquire the rapidly flaring knowledge which helps them not to fall behind modernization.

Second, distance education is flexible in terms of beginning and ending of a programme. This characteristic of DE is significant from pedagogical point of view. Pedagogically, learners are different in their level of understanding. Some are fast learners, others are

moderate learners, and still others are slow learners. Since DE individualizes learning, one can start and finish his/her educational program not according to a fixed time period but according to his/her pace of learning.

Third, DE is flexible in using the type of media for teaching/learning purpose. It can use face-to-face tutorial, print, radio, television, computer or Tele Video and audio conferencing (though the latter two are not developed in Ethiopia). Different people do not have the same taste to all these media. They can choose either face-to-face tutorial, print (or both), radio, television or the others. Such flexibility in the use of media is very high in DE than in the conventional mode.

The nature of flexibility of Distance Education in its program (time) of registration is another important variable for which we have data at St. Mary's College. As can be seen from Table 2, it can be said that DE is more flexible than the regular and the extension programs in terms of registration time. This means, DE at St. Mary's conducts registration two times a year while the rest of the programs practice registration only once in a year. But the type of flexibility observed in registration at St. Mary's College shows only the potential of the flexibility of the program. In DE programs registration and graduation are, theoretically, possible every day as far as there is efficiency in the management of student affairs.

1.3 Cost effectiveness of Distance Education

Many developing countries of the world are progressively investing on education knowing that it is a precondition for every form of development. Mass education, particularly universalization of primary education, has become the order of the day in the developing parts of the world where democratic cultures are growing. The expansion of tertiary level of education is a must to universalize primary education. But, persistent investment in tertiary education institutions in the traditional or conventional way has become beyond the economic power of developing countries.

Ramanujam (1995:23) cites many reasons to promote distance education as an alternative mode to conventional education. But, he focused mainly on political realization [among politicians] as the main factor to promote distance teaching. The increasing demand for

quality education and uniform/ comparable facilities such as buildings and other infrastructure facilities in the conventional mode have led governments to more expenditure. This forced them to promote distance education which is more cost effective than the former one. Guri's (1999:191) idea seems related to what Ramanujam explained. He (Ibid) said that despite the considerable variance in operating budgets between different distance teaching universities, the study costs are invariably cheaper than the traditional universities in their milieu. According to him, the economic variables which distance teaching universities can manipulate are:

- 1 the media employed,
- 2 the number of courses taught and developed,
- 3 the cost of producing and maintaining such courses,
- 4 the quality assurance mechanisms employed,
- 5 the number of students, and
- 6 the extent of tutorial support.

The most common type of media used in DE is the print media. Print and radio are considered to be cheaper than TV and other communication media. DE institutions that use print and radio are considered to be more cost-effective than those which use other types of media. The most beneficial variable which helps such institutions to be cost effective is the vast number of students encompassed in the programme that enables it to benefit from economics of scale. The quality assurance mechanism, on the other hand, can cost the distance teaching institution more as it forces institutions to invest more in order to ensure the quality standards expected from that institution. The number of courses taught and developed and the cost of producing and maintaining such courses is another factor that incurs cost to distance teaching institutions. The more the frequency of tutorial support, the more will be the cost on the distance teaching institution.

Though DE institutions have many variables of cost, the cost of running them as well as the cost per student is lower at the distance teaching institutions than at the conventional institutions. This fact has been confirmed by Daniel (cited in Guri, 1999:192). According to Daniel, the 1991 government review of the British Open University's comparison of its costs per graduate with those of three other institutions [conventional ones] indicated that the British Open University's costs were significantly lower, between 39 percent and 47

percent of the other universities' costs for ordinary degrees and between 55 percent and 80 percent of honors degrees.

In general, the cost effectiveness of the distance mode can be shown by the following important expression:

Distance teaching attracts the economists because it uses mass production methods, which changes the structure of educational costs. With traditional classroom methods, the costs of education rise in proportion to the number of students being educated. When every thirty or forty children need a teacher and a classroom, salaries and buildings swallow up most of an educational budget. Few economies are possible, unless quality of education is sacrificed. With print and broadcasts, however, the marginal cost of each additional student is very small. Indeed if radios are widely distributed, it costs no more to broadcast a million students within reach of a transmitter than to a hundred. In theory, then distance teaching can bring economies of scale to education (Growth and Philosophy of Distance Education, IGNOU, Block 5, 1999:34)

The data on cost at St. Mary's College seems to agree with the above idea. As indicated in Table 3, the cost of distance education at St. Mary's, in comparison to the rest of the two programs (extension and regular), is quite different. The cost of learning (completing, for example, a diploma program) in distance education is less by 57.73 percent than the regular and extension program at the same college.

4. Conclusions and Recommendation

4.1 Conclusion

The analysis of data shows that DE is the right alternative to conventional education, at least in the case of St. Mary's College, because of the fact that it is accessible irrespective of distance, age, marital status, type of work and the like. It is also clear that DE is cost effective as compared to the extension and regular programs at St. Mary's College. Its characteristics also seem promising in producing large number of trained labor force within a short period of time. Because of its flexible nature, it enrolled a large number of learners who will otherwise lack access because of lack of classroom, shortage of

teachers and lack of leave from their workplaces.

4.2 Recommendations

DE, as many distance educators believe, is the result of the thought of the industrial society. It appeared as a result of the failure of the traditional mode of education to respond to the increasing demand of societies for education. The current situation in Ethiopia, as indicated in the new educational and training policy and strategy, shows this fact (TGE, 1994:6). In addition to this, with the intention of disseminating literacy among the different regions of the country, the document on implementation capacity building strategy and programme prepared by the Ministry of Information in Ethiopia has indicated the serious problem of distributing education among the nomadic population of the country (MOI, 2003:31-32). Although the document doesn't clearly state the importance of distance education as a potential solution for promoting education in such peripheral areas of the country, the experience of many countries show that distance education is a remedy.

In the current situation of Ethiopia, it seems practically impossible to completely solve the shortage of trained manpower in the country using the conventional mode alone. Recurrent training has become the order of the day and people need training not only in a pre-service mode, but also in in-service training. As the experience of many countries indicates, distance education is a reliable mode of learning. This is true also in the case of St. Mary's College distance education programme.

In view of the above discussion, the researcher would like to recommend the following points to tap the full potential of DE in Ethiopia.

1. Provision of education at a distance mode should be facilitated both on the side of the government and PHEIs, as it plays an important role in disseminating the idea of distance teaching and in improving the conditions of teaching at a distance.
2. Face-to-face tutorial is one of the mechanisms through which the loneliness of distance learners can be greatly minimized and the problems with learning materials can be rectified. The major problem in providing access to education to every part of the country at St. Mary's is the lack of offices for coordination purposes and rooms to provide tutorial classes. It would be good if the Ministry of

- Education allows the use of different school classes and offices that are found in the different localities of the country at the weekends for tutorial purposes. It could also be good if libraries are used jointly with local high schools.
3. The functioning of the current infrastructure facilities has to be given special attention and further improvement be made jointly between the governmental and private organizations.
 4. A clearly defined performance indicator has to be designed by the Ministry of Education so that PHEIs in DE could strive to achieve a certain standard in their activities.

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