Original Paper

The School Leadership Is a Key to Break the Higher Education Iron Triangle through Borderless Distance Education: The Case of UNISA in Addis Ababa Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of cross-border distance education institutions in providing access to quality postgraduate education in Ethiopia, using the South Africa University (UNISA) as a case study. It draws on the appropriate school leadership for the development of distance education, and it further explores the potential of a distance education program delivery system in an Ethiopian context. In addition, the study explores the policy gap between conventional and distance education in relation to international postgraduate distance education. Two instruments were used to gather relevant data, namely: interviews and document analysis. Theoretical framework developed through three key elements: access, cost and quality were used as tools of analysis.

Keywords

access, cost, quality, higher education, delivery mode, distance education, distance education generations, qualitative, school leadership, method, quality assurance, conventional education, student support services

1. Introduction/Background

Like other complex human activities, leadership might be difficult to pin down. It might even be unwise to narrow it unnecessarily. Nonetheless, a working definition can provide a useful frame of reference. In this regard, Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (1998, p. 91) defined leadership as "the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation". Leithwood and Riehl (2003) on their part also noted that, at the core of most

definitions of leadership are two functions: providing direction and exercising influence. Leaders mobilize and work with others to achieve shared goals. This definition has several important implications towards traditional and distance education leadership. Higher education, without appropriate leadership it is meaningless to rise the quality issues and low costs to be achievable within traditional systems of higher education which is based on classroom teaching and learning mode. Expansion is now the defining trend in the worldwide development of higher education. Some scholars have predicted that by 2020, 40% of the global workforce will be knowledge workers with a need for tertiary qualifications Mannan (2009). The World Bank, which made basic education its priority in the 1980s and 1990s, has changed its focus towards the development of higher education. This is an indication that higher education is getting precedence in the contemporary knowledge based economy. This, in turn, requires countries that have not yet developed their higher education systems to do so. Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that developing countries want to join the knowledge society by following the example set by developed countries, where age participation rates in higher education of 40% to 50% are now perceived as necessary for sustained and sustainable development *Kanwar* (2009, p. 30). According to Mannan (2013), national policies on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emphasise the need for expansion of the education system, which focuses on the conventional method of delivery of basic education and tertiary level services in building human and social capital. However, today, it is further seeking and explaining the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as an intervening strategy to break the conventional business as usual and in doing so providing access to quality higher education services and dissemination of information and knowledge that affects personal and community life of individuals became vital especially in developing countries.

It is widely acknowledged that the traditional face-to-face education method is no longer the only means of accessing higher education. An alternative means has been devised in response to a demand for access to higher education. An ever-growing world population; an increase in the complexity of all aspects of life; increasingly higher education requirements for almost all types of jobs; accelerating change in nearly all occupations and jobs; and the special educational needs of disadvantaged and minority groups have all put pressure on the pursuit of an alternative means of access to higher education. Distance education found to be an alternative means to reach the higher demand for higher education. However, without effective and quality school leadership this will not be realised.

Globally, higher education has been expanding over the last few decades and, according to Altbach et al. (2009), it has struggled to meet demands. According to a UNESCO (2003) report, many countries have experienced higher rates of expansion and increase in student enrolment than anticipated. However, access to higher education in many developing countries including Ethiopia compromising the quality issues.

2. Method

A qualitative research design will be used in this study. In particular, a case study will be employed. Stratified and purposive sampling techniques will be used to select the research site and potential respondents. The study will delimit to UNISA (Addis Ababa) in Ethiopia. UNISA was selected as a case study because it is one of the largest universities in the world which provides higher education opportunities by means of a distance mode to local, national and international students. It is also one of the leading educational institutions in Africa with a high number of postgraduate students compared to other private universities in Africa.

2.1 The Diagram of Higher Education Iron Triangle

Theoretical framework will be developed through these key elements (variables for provision of Quality distance Higher education especially, the postgraduate level.
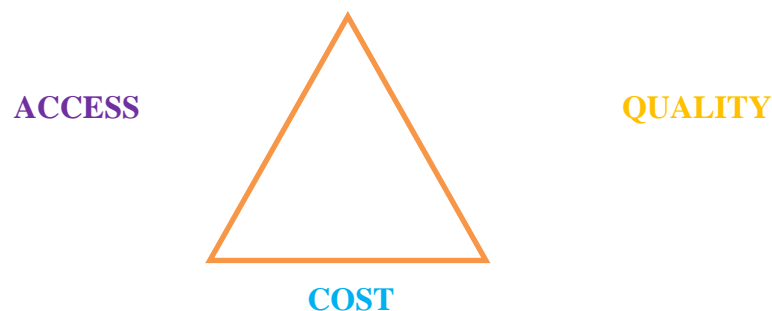
ACCESS   **QUALITY**

COST

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework Developed through the above Variables, Access, Quality and Cost

As described above in the theoretical framework summary, our premise is *access* to higher education via distance education is good and cost-effective. But it is not enough to conclude on the premises of access, however, distance education needs to provide a flexible source of *quality* postgraduate education as well cost-effective. We show that although UNISA provides access to postgraduate distance education, further studies are needed to ascertain the *coherence*, *efficiency* and *impact* aspects of the quality.

Suppose the necessary day-to-day organizational conditions in the operation of UNISA as a cross-border distance educational institution is provided; these conditions might be formal and informal: formal conditions refer to the official structure, arrangement of policy framework, and the quality enhancement procedures; for example, the formal condition includes curriculum designs, administrative and academic support and course materials preparation and assessment methods; informal conditions might include the relationship of staff among themselves and students to student's interactions. The study shows that these conditions give rise to the quality postgraduate studies for the learners in Ethiopia. Furthermore, we theorize that the following quality issue in higher education

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needs to be understood in general conditions as follows.

3. Discussion

Across the Globe, it is an accepted fact that competitiveness is the nature of a knowledge market economy, in responding to this reality, quality education and training programs have been at the center of the national education agenda of many countries. According to Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) recommended that, in the field of higher education, quality should be considered to be a notoriously vague, slippery concept. This simply suggests that it is not possible to find a universally accepted and comprehensive definition of quality in higher education. Therefore, defining the term quality in the contemporary higher education is challenging.

Vroeijentijn (2006) points out that the concept quality has been subjected to various ambiguous interpretations. Quality as fitness for purpose, meaning conformity with an institutor's mission as well as capacity to fulfill customers' requirements, is the principal perspective that is upheld by scholars with eyes of stakeholders. This way of thinking is obviously of paramount importance to external stakeholders (Harvey, 2006). Quality as transformation refers to the classic notion that sees quality in terms of change in the learners from one state to another.

4. Results

Quality is usually connected to the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness. Although, the concept of quality does not have a universally accepted definition, many scholars consider quality in education in terms of what the system is all about and what the system offers the learners. In education, quality is determined by three crucial elements, namely: inputs, process and outcomes. **Input**, includes the key players: the learners and the academic and administrative staff members, who have the necessary skills and facilities for teaching and learning; **process** consists of the various teaching and learning activities; and the **outcomes** are the graduates and their required skills and training.

Given the constraints of resources that many governments face in meeting the demand for higher education, distance education is seen as an alternative mode of delivery in providing access to quality higher education. In particular, in developing countries, including Ethiopia, distance education providers, such as UNISA, offer educational opportunities for rural-based communities and marginalised groups, who would, otherwise, not have been able to access higher education. However, without effective leadership the above objectives will not be materialized.

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