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Book Review – African Virtual University: The case of Kenyatta University, Kenya

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African Virtual University: The case of Kenyatta University, Kenya

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As was the case in most African countries, during period between 1970 and 1992 witnessed Kenya too witnessed a tremendous expansion in university education. In 1970, Kenya had only one university with a student population of 2,786. By 1991-92, there were five public universities with a combined student population of 40,000. Such increase has had great implications on capacity utilization, quality, instructional materials, facilities, and most importantly, access to university education. Astronomical increases in student enrolments reflect an insatiable demand for higher education. It is in this context that the rise of the African Virtual University is examined.

African Virtual University: The case of Kenyatta University is a forty-page book that succinctly examines the antecedents, objectives, courses, implementing strategies, student enrolments, and analysis of assessment. In 16 sections, it focuses on management, achievements, challenges, and the future of virtual education in Africa.

In her background information, the author says that the African Virtual University (AVU) was established to serve the Sub-Saharan Africa. Funded by the World Bank, the University's mission is to use the power of modern information technology to increase access to educational resources throughout Sub- Saharan Africa.

In her discussion of programme implementation, the author states that AVU pilot programmes were conducted in three phases: 1) the 1997-98 prototype pilot phase; 2) undergraduate degree programmes offered by universities worldwide; and 3) the offering of science and technology curricula by one or more partner institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa. In total, the book listed 27 institutions across Africa that have started AVU courses during 1998-99 academic year.

In a nutshell, this book enumerates those attributes that positioned the AVU as an open distance learning institution. Such attributes include the installation of equipment necessary for both live and pre-recorded instructional programmes, linkage with external institutions through INTELSAT, support to partner institutions in receiving digital satellite transmissions, and opportunities for 30 to 40 learners to engage in two-way interactive educational sessions.

This book describes the series of courses offered to the first 40 learners who participated in the three sessions pilot programmes. Detailed case studies cover enrolments, gender distribution, courses offered, Internet intervention, as well as an analysis of performance semester by semester. One thing that will fascinate readers is the graphic illustrations that accompany these detailed descriptions.

This book familiarizes readers with other programmes offered by AVU in the form of short computer courses, ranging from two weeks to one or two months in length and targeting civil servants, bank workers, university graduates, doctors, and school leavers – a target population that constitutes a major source of revenue for the AVU. In addition, pre-university programmes that prepare students for university degree courses are also touched upon.

The book also spotlights cost effective management principles associated with open distance learning. Examined is a mechanism in the form of a small nucleus of full-time staff supported by a number of temporary specialist consultants, whose role is to minimise operating costs. Such management techniques also help to maintain ties with partner universities.

In presenting the strategies adopted by the AVU, the author illustrates how modern technology may serve as a tool for the enhancement of learning. Apart from the curricula oriented learning processes aimed at on-campus students, other seminars are organized for the business community member, which are sometimes transmitted via video-conference live from the Virginia Technological Institute in the United States, in addition to those facilitated by the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank.

Juma also highlights the AVU's achievements in terms of the provision of educational resources, introduction of new courses, capacity building, income generation, increases in enrolment, and the digital library. She then focuses on the challenges facing university lecturers such as their need to adopt and become proficient in virtual teaching strategies, electricity interruptions, lack of a clear national communication policy, and slow Internet connectivity premised on narrow bandwidth.

In her closing section, the author informs readers of the mechanisms that AVU put in place during the operational phase, namely the training of scholars in curriculum development in core science courses, introduction of income-generation oriented courses, installation of Internet service provider (ISP), and establishment of a dynamic consultant section.

I have tried to present a concise view of the book, African Virtual University, highlighting some of its most noteworthy attributes. First, as revealed in the introduction, AVU was a timely intervention designed to widen access to formally exclusive higher education systems that must now strive to become inclusive. Equally too, the book shows the advantages of integrating ICT in higher education, and reveals how the teaching and learning process can become more cost effective – although the case studies presented in the book fail to explain the costs per student or how virtual education is being funded. Clearly, these are pressing issues, particularly when lean administrative structures are in place.

The book also demonstrates how a North-South collaboration among higher education institutions can contribute to development in the South, particularly when it is ICT driven. More importantly, the book shows that more work needs to be accomplished if Sub-Saharan African nations are to succeed in bridging the gap between poor and rich, particularly in the spirit of New Partnership

for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a programme of action conceived and developed by African leaders for the redevelopment of the African continent.

Because the book reports on the programme conducted as a pilot study 1997-98, rather than when the full operation took place in 1999, I believe it would have been more relevant if it had been published sooner than 2001. With the speed at which ICT changes, the programme itself needs to be reviewed in terms of how it now meets the demands of the 21st century. A section on how to best integrate ICT into open distance learning practices would also have been helpful, especially for African countries that already have established ODL systems reliant solely on print media.

In spite of this shortcoming, the book remains a pioneering examination of ICT-driven ODL in Africa. I recommend this book to all those who wish to explore the mainstreaming of ICT in African educational processes.

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