

## The Impact of Globalization on Distance Education\*

Marew Zewdie\*\*

**Abstract:** *Globalization is one of the hottest issues that the world at the moment is entertaining. It is now common to come across discussions about issues related to the merits and demerits of globalization in many international, regional and local economic, social and political meetings. Its sphere of influence has also expanded to cover many of the sectors of development in the world. This paper intends to focus on one of the sectors of development, i.e. distance education, and explores the extent of the impacts of globalization on distance education. To this effect, the paper reviews the trend of globalization as well as the growth and spread of distance education, identifies the strategies used to globalize distance education, highlights the positive and negative impacts of globalization on distance education and ends by suggesting possible strategies of interventions.*

### A Brief Review on the Trend of Globalization

Among the many definitions given to globalization the one given by Su-Hoon seems broad and inclusive. He defines globalization as a *process of reconstructing the world into a single political, economic and cultural system* 2001:128. Keeping this definition in mind, experts in this area write that globalization has a longer history than is thought. They say that it has been getting stronger since the coming of the modern world economy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, as one of the invariants of the world capitalist system. Since then, the aspects of economic globalization have been taking place through cross border movement of goods, capital and people.

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\* Paper presented in the workshop held in Addis Ababa University, November 2002, to commemorate African University Day under the theme: *Globalization and Higher Education in Africa*.

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During the expansion of the world economy in the 1950s and 1960s, the centre of capital accumulation maintained *cooperative relationships* as part of globalization. In this period the concern was more on social and developmental issues than on economic matters.

In the last decades the trend, however, seems to move away from the developmentalists/socialists to the *marketers of global goods and services*. This has brought about sharp competition and rivalry among countries and has also resulted in what Su-Hoon (2001) calls *Core Struggle*. This *Core struggle* has led countries to rapid price falls and devaluation on one hand, and rapid price rises in labor and energy on the other. As a result globalization has been called upon to deal with this core struggle or core capital crisis. This core struggle has increased further in magnitude with the advances in information technology and expansion of the financial sector and has expedited the growth and spread of globalization.

The current phase of globalization began in 1975 when the US, France, Germany, Italy, Great Britain and Japan met in Paris to coordinate plans to reflate their economy (Friedman, 2001). In subsequent years Canada and Russia joined the group and it is now known as G-8 or some times as G-7 and Russia. Most of the meetings of this group have always been accompanied by thousands of protesters in many parts of the world. For instance in July 2001, the G-8 met in Genoa, Italy, and faced a very strong protest. Below is the report of what was to happen during the Genoa meeting.

With up to 100,000 protesters threatening to march on this week's Genoa summit meeting of the Wealthy Group of Seven Nations and Russia, the Italian government is going to extraordinary lengths to avoid a violent showdown by trying to establish a *dialogue* with protest leaders. But the Italian-style effort to defuse the wrath of anti-globalization militants was rejected Sunday by the supposedly peaceful leaders of the Genoa Social forum, a loose collection of protest group. They were angered by plans to shut down Genoa's airport and train stations and send in 2,700 troops and 16,000 police officers and by Italy's decision to temporarily suspend the Schengen accord on the

free movement of European travelers and reinstate passport controls until the summit talks are over (Friedman, 2001).

The above report indicates the tension that globalization has brought about to the world and the measures the protesters and the leaders of the Wealthy Nations want to take. From this, one can imagine how serious the next meeting in Canada will be.

In general the review on globalization indicates that it is either the best thing that is happening to human kind i.e. *globalise and grow* or it is the most selfish and self-serving manifestation of our greed i.e. *globalise and perish* (Dhanarajan, 1997).

### **The Growth and Spread of Distance Education in Brief**

Most experts in the field agree that distance education is a system of education offered by someone who is removed in space and time from the learner. The use of different media, other than printed material, is an essential part of distance education. Though the teacher and the learner are separated, and the learner is often an individual who learns in his own place and at his own pace, the distance education system envisages some sort of a two-way communication. Advancements in satellite communication technology and the expansion in the financial sector have made this possible. In this instance, teleconferencing, electronic networking and others are all used.

Distance education is believed to reach a wider student audience, meet the needs of students who are unable to attend on-campus classes, involve outside experts in the support centers who would otherwise be unavailable and link students from different social, cultural, economic and experiential backgrounds. It can be used to promote basic education, secondary education and tertiary level of education both in the formal and non-formal system.

In most cases single institutions and government agencies play a vital part in enhancing the activities of distance education in a country. But with the growing potential, availability, and use of information technology and the expansion of the financial sector, the development of distance education is becoming an increasingly international affair. Besides, some distance education institutions add inputs to the growth and spread of distance education. For instance, some distance education institutions have been among the leaders in developing and implementing schemes for institutional collaboration, often across national borders, and the trend toward such collaboration seems likely to accelerate. Furthermore, governments, particularly those in developing countries, have begun to encourage their institutions to enter into collaborative arrangements, as they consider the possibilities of distance education as a mechanism for national and regional development. These government and non-government distance education institutions use different strategies for globalizing distance education. Here are two strategies used for this purpose.

### **Collaboration**

According to Mason (1994) collaborations among distance teaching institutions have taken several forms in the past 20 years. These include joint development of materials, joint delivery of courses or programmes, joint programmes to offer a credential, and the delivery of programmes through collaborating institutions. Mason (1994) categorizes the collaborations in distance education into four groups.

- *Franchise Type* in which one partner designs, develops, examines and makes awards, while the other provides students with support mechanisms.

Example: The collaboration UK Open University has with institutions in Eastern European Countries.

- *Marketplace Type* in which one institution purchases course materials from the other, adapts and delivers them and examines learners and awards credits.

Example: The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong.

- *Collaborative Type* in which several institutions jointly design and develop courses which they use in their respective institutions independently of each other.

Example: The Multimedia Teleschool Project funded by European community.

- *Technology-based Type* in which students from other countries access the host institutions via electronic communication possibly enhanced by print materials, occasional videoconferences or even face-to-face meetings.

Example: The course the London University Institute of Education and the Open University Institute of Educational Technology developed aims at training the trainers based almost entirely via computer conferencing. It is on line education and training.

### **Involving Broad Based Institutions**

Further contributing to the trend of globalizing distance education has been the growing involvement of international agencies, sub-regional organizations and local institutions. Some examples are given below to show how these agencies/ institutions are used to globalize distance education.

#### *International Agencies: The United Nations*

The three United Nations agencies; namely, UNICEF, UNFPA and UNESCO have been greatly involved in encouraging different

countries to use distance education. For instance, a few years ago these agencies developed a collaborative framework among nine high-population countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan) called Distance Education Nine (DE9). According to Visser (1995) these countries comprise more than half of the world population including 72 per cent of its illiterates. Thus it is hoped improvement in the education in these countries will constitute a quantum leap in reaching the global aims set in 1990 World Conference on Education for All and in universalizing access to education and combating illiteracy. This initiative has helped these countries first to meet the basic learning needs of the unreached and second in training and upgrading teachers (ZINTEC), and in reinforcing the quality and capacity of informal education (Visser, 1995).

UNESCO's virtual environments such as virtual libraries, virtual schools, virtual universities or virtual laboratories are becoming venues for supporting the information society of the world. According to Cyranek (2001), they are becoming useful to broader access to knowledge and skills as far as connectivity is available. In combinations with traditional face to face classroom based teaching and learning, virtual environments have become efficient means in translating the principles of the right of access to knowledge and into reality. Through the initiatives of UNESCO more than 43 African countries are now participating in the Regional Information Society Network for Africa (RINAF) as part of the Intergovernmental Informatics Program (IIP). This network is concerned with strengthening the roles of the public sector and the civil society in Africa in exploiting information and communication technologies for development (Cyranek, 2001).

In addition, UNESCO with its objective of promoting learning without frontiers and education for all in Africa, is also supporting an initiative called Creating Learning Network for Africa. The network aims at connecting African Teacher Training Institutes, Teacher Education Colleges and educators to the internet.

Apart from these, the World Bank is also financing African Virtual Universities (AVU). It has financed the supply and installation of satellite receiver terminals in 14 universities in English Speaking African countries, including Ethiopia, Namibia, Uganda and Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Kenya. As a result of this, the AVU Business Centre Approach at Kenyatta University, Kenya, the AVU at the Addis Ababa University and the Ethiopian Civil Service College, to mention a few, are doing their best to broaden access to knowledge and skills to people in the region. In the long run, access to virtual learning environments will be provided by traditional academic institutions, vocational training centres, schools, public libraries, cyber cafes, multipurpose community telecentre merging media TV, Radio and Satellite Radio Broadcasting (Cyrank, 2001).

In addition, international organizations such as the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the Consortium International Francophone de Formation a Distance (CIFFAD) and the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) are supporting developing countries to use distance education.

#### *Sub-regional Organizations*

At sub-regional level, African organizations such as Distance Education Associations of Southern Africa (DEASA), Zambian Association for Distance Education (ZADE) and the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) are active in using distance education. To this end, UNESCO in a seminar held in Arusha proposed the establishment of a Regional Programme for the Development of Distance Education in Africa (RPDDEA). The rationale of this cooperative effort is to pool human, physical and fiscal resources and to share results.

#### *Local Institutions*

In recent years the numbers of local distance education institutions have been increasing tremendously. According to Reddy (1996),



there are 835 institutions offering 35,511 courses through distance education in 95 countries. Reddy gives the details as follows.

**Table 1: Number of Regions, Countries and Distance Education Institutes Upto 1995**

Continents/Broad Regions	Number of Countries	Number of Institutions
Africa	34	126
Asia	18	101
Australia	04	68
Middle East	02	3
Europe	18	240
North America	02	237
Caribbean	04	6
Latin America	13	54
Total	95	835

**Table 2: Number of Courses Offered By Distance Teaching Institutions In Various Fields/ Discipline-Wise**

Field of Study	% of Courses discipline-wise	No. of Courses
Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	23.1	8187
Business, Management, Economics Services	21.1	7519
Education and Training	12.5	4447
Pure Science and Mathematics	9.4	3332
Technology, Computers, Environment	11.2	3979
Applied Sciences	8.7	3072
Health, Social Welfare, Medicine	3.4	1199
Law, Law Enforcement, Regulations & Standards	3.8	1333
Broad Multi-subject studies, study skills	2.7	956
Architecture, Surveying, Planning Building	2.9	1050
Personal, Home and Family Affairs	1.2	437
Total	100.00	35511

1995). In addition, it is believed to affect local efforts. They believe that producing curricular materials for the consumption of all people in the world is an impossible task. Neither is it easy and practical to make locally prepared material global. They believe that such dilemma whether to produce materials that would help to *think globally and act locally* or to *think locally and act globally* in one way or another enhances dependency and deters initiations.

### **Possible Interventions**

People who consider globalization as an unavoidable phenomenon of today's world suggest several possible interventions, one of which is using selective approaches. By this they mean that the principles and practices of globalization must be revisited to provide alternatives. In distance education this means that it should provide local and regional institutions the choice to focus more on accessibility and transfer of know-how of distance education than on importing programmes and curricular materials of a global nature. International organizations can intervene and play a major role in these instances. The second alternative is considering value addition. During collaboration/partnership the cooperating local and regional distance education institutions must be "heard" and be given the *lion share* in the participation and decision-making. The third is a systematic state intervention. Governments have duties and responsibilities to fight against any negative impacts of globalization in their countries politics, economy, culture in general and on education, be it conventional or distance, in particular. Last but not least is undertaking more research on the trend and impacts of globalization on several issues of the world and to take measures of interventions before its negative impacts get worse.

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