

Institutional Framework for Developing Sustainable Quality Distance Education in West Africa: Guidelines, Engines, and Policy Options

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ABSTRACT

As a tool in an educational delivery system contributing to social and economic development, distance learning has become an accepted and indispensable aspect of the mainstream of educational systems in developed and developing countries. Indeed, the globalization of distance education provides several opportunities for developing countries, including the West African sub-region, for the realization of education system goals, especially the growing need for continuing skills upgrading and retraining. As countries in the West African sub-region become more aware of the potential of distance learning, it is important for their educational planning that the opportunities provided by new technologies prominent in distance learning be realistically harnessed within the framework of well-defined policies. In this regard, a policy framework is needed to ensure that quality education is provided for learners in new and long-established distance education institutions in the West African sub-region. Regardless of the diverse distance education practices in the West African sub-region, a regional policy framework is possible and imperative to regulate the organization and implementation of quality distance higher education programmes in West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is not a new delivery method of learning in the West African sub-region. It has been acclaimed by many as an independent and complementary delivery approach to the provision of the formal educational system (Sait, 2000). Recently, it has become a viable educational training tool and many countries in the West African sub-region have turned to alternative educational means such as distance education to meet their human manpower needs. Research conducted on the effectiveness of distance education in many parts of the world has proven that it can be as effective as the conventional approach in producing trained human assets (Debebe, 2003).

Distance education opens the door for education for those who cannot attend regular higher education. For instance, the conventional educational system in Africa has not met the demand for higher education NOUN (2005). Koul (2005) observed that as a result of rapid population growth and economic stagnation, the gap between sub-Saharan African and the rest of the world appears to be widening. Distance education, no doubt, has a great potential in helping fill the gap. Similarly, Arger (1990) noted that distance education possess the comparative advantage in the areas of massification of higher education, democratization of education and cost effectiveness as well as efficiency over conventional education system.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The need to clarify common terms used to describe distance education becomes imperative in order to provide direction to the discussion. Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to distance education. These terms include, but are not limited to, distance learning, distance teaching, and independent study. The compound concept “distance education” subsumes the other terms as most of those terms merely address specific aspect of distance education (UNESCO, 2002). For instance, distance learning describes the student centeredness of distance education and deals with use of print media technologies to present individual lessons to learners at a distance (Keegan, 1996). Distance teaching refers to the didactic strategies of delivery of instruction to students, and is instructor centered (Yusuf, 2006). Independent study is used for a range of teaching-learning activities, which indicates students’ control over learning time, pace, and place (Koul, 2005). Distance education has within its purview elements of these terms. Thus, Holmberg (1990) defines distance education as:

the various forms of teaching and learning at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or in the same premises but which nevertheless benefit from the planning , guidance and teaching of the staff

of the tutorial organization.

Arising from the above, distance education is the delivery of useful learning opportunities at a convenient place and time for learners, irrespective of the institution providing the learning opportunity. The concept of distance education represents an approach that focuses on opening access to education and training, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place of learning, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individual and groups (Ibara, 2008). Thus, it is an unconventional mode of educational delivery where the learner has choice as to the time and place learning can occur. It adopts more of open learning than the conventional institutions in which learners must be studying at a set time and place (Emenalo, 2007). Distance education not only shares the goals of conventional education, but it also aims at providing access to an historically under-served, place-bound, and highly motivated population (Keegan, 1996; Yusuf, 2006). Nevertheless, at the West African sub-regional level, and some national levels, distance education delivery remains largely uncoordinated as a result of the absence of regional or national policy on distance learning. Generally, national institutions operate in isolation, resulting in operational problems such as lack of collaboration and support for each and avoidable duplication of activities (Braithmoh & Lekoko, 2005). These developments require well-defined policy to enhance effective networking and collaboration. Collaborative effort can accelerate the provision of distance education activities that are responsive to the needs of the diverse interests in the West African sub-region. This paper, therefore, points to the need for a sub-regional policy framework to ensure sustainable quality distance education programmes in the West African sub-region.

THE NEED FOR SUB-REGIONAL POLICY

Dodds and Youngman (1994) observed that since the 1970's, distance education has been an important policy option for educational planners and policy makers in developing countries. Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1997) noted that the presence of policies can provide a framework for operation. Conversely, the absence of policy compromises the quality of programme. Also, the increasing popularity and demand for distance education in the West African sub-region is signified by the rate at which several tertiary institutions are adopting a bi-modal educational delivery approach. A bi-modal delivery approach is the capacity of an institution to administer open distance learning education and face-to-face courses as combined programmes. Some institutions, however, are ill equipped to administer the bi-modal delivery approach. For instance, these institutions may not have adequate learner support services, such as libraries, skilled manpower, and appropriate technologies before adopting the bi-modal delivery approach. Consequently, students pay for poor quality and in some cases unaccredited programmes. The formulation of a policy framework can strengthen the already desirable effects of distance education, and also safeguard against such exploitative tendency.

Arising from the above, the increasing awareness of distance education as a tool for widening access to education at different levels has led many countries and sub-regional groups to contemplate policy frameworks. Braithmoh and Lekoko (2005) indicated that practitioners at the centre for Continuing Education, University of Botswana prepared a working paper on the development of open and distance learning (ODL) policy. The paper highlighted some critical areas that can be adopted for regional use. The areas include:

- To control and maintain quality of services provided;
- To protect the innocent distance education clientele from willful exploitation by profit seeking organizations through exorbitant fees for an unaccredited programme;
- To harmonize the use of physical, human and material resources through partnership and collaboration in order to achieve economics of scale and to operate an efficient distance education programme, while at the same time avoiding unnecessary duplication of activities;
- To forge linkages with international bodies to achieve exchange of expertise and facilitate staff training progress in ODL;
- To guarantee credit transfer to other institutions through national, regional and international accreditation process;

- To create an enabling learning environment through the provision of adequate learners support services, such as libraries, access to appropriate technologies, availability of skilled manpower;
- To ensure parity of products by mainstreaming ODL programmes with the conventional system for the purpose of recognition and respectability;
- To guarantee legal copyrights for authors;
- To ascertain the relevance of educational programmes to the needs of the country; and
- To improve the quality of programme through the supply of quality staff including the adequacy and appropriateness of infrastructures available before embarking on distance education programme.

The above goals can be addressed in a more appropriate and responsive manner through well-defined regional institutional policies. Stressing the importance of policy, Epper (2004) observed that some tertiary distance education institutions in developed and developing countries do not have a policy framework. Perhaps, some problems encountered regarding distance education in the West African sub-region might be attributed to a lack of a policy framework to guide the modus operandi of achieving higher quality in the programmes offered. Also, a policy document can guard against exploitative practices. Braimoh and Lekoko (2005) rightly noted that while the virtues of distance education as a potential mode for widening access to and providing flexibility of learning styles cannot be over-emphasized, there is the need to guard against the mushrooming of distance education institutions with doubtful academic performance records. In the West sub-region many institutions are engaged in providing distance higher education programmes, with increasing concern over what is now referred to as commodification and commercialization of education. This, therefore, underscores the need for regional policy that will focus on fundamental policy areas in distance education.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AREAS

Policy connotes a plan of action in specific areas geared towards the development of distance-learning framework in the West African sub region. Berge (1998) proposed a model to assist decision makers look at the policy areas of distance education. The policy areas include, academic, administration, government/administration, legal, student support services, technical, and cultural. Given the peculiar circumstances in the West African sub-region, an additional policy area, exchange programme/partnership, is warranted as well as modification of two aspects suggested by Berge to yield a seven-item model aimed at providing the basic framework for policy development.

Table 1: Policy Development Areas

POLICY AREA	KEY ISSUES
Academic	Course development and integrity, transcripts, admission criteria, programme accreditation and evaluation policies.
Government/Administration	Policy practices, budgetary matters, staff hiring, goals, vision and mission.
Legal	Copyright ownership, intellectual property, institutional liability.
Students Support Services	Counseling, registration, library services, material delivery, financial aid.
Technical	Appropriate technology, access connectivity, expertise, system reliability, infrastructure, equipment and maintenance.
Cultural	Adoption of innovations, organizational values, acceptance, language and custom.
Exchange Programme/Partnership	Staff training and exchange, access to learner support system, research fellowship, financial aid, exchange of expertise.

Source: Adapted from Berge, Z.L. (1998) Barriers to online teaching in post secondary institutions: Can policy fix it? *On-line Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, p.3.

The above seven policy areas are not only critical to developing and managing distance education, but also consistent across many institutions and countries within the sub-region. The seven key policy areas as indicated suggest aspects in which an administrator can intervene in a distance education system. The seven-item model is briefly expounded upon below.

Academic

The key issues that fall under this category relate to evaluation of the learner and the tutor. There is no gainsaying the fact that programmes of study taken at a distance require periodic evaluation for successful continuous improvement of the curriculum and delivery. A programme, whether conventional or through distance learning, is likely to be more successful when developed on a foundation of strong needs assessment and programme review (Gellman-Danley & Fetzner, 1997). Also, an important academic issue is the overall integrity of the course, measured through accreditation guidelines, quality assurance, and assessment methods for learning outcomes (Valentine, 2002). These considerations add to the products of the institution being seen as credible and also guarantee recognition of students' results or credits in the case of transfer to another institution within the West African sub-region.

Government/Administration

The prominent issues of this category are institutional policy, goals, vision and mission as well as their actualization. Governance, no doubt, is a strong tool for institutions to achieve overall institutional goals and objectives, and acts as a key link between institutions and other agencies of interest. A policy framework is also needed to streamline university programmes, admission criteria, and staff recruitment, and programme offering.

Legal Issues

Many of the academic staff are naïve about the legal dimensions of distance learning. A variety of training programmes, workshops, and seminars that address the legal aspects of educational technology and learning at a distance are essential. The awareness programme will form the basis for the formulation of policy in areas such as: copyright, fair use, liability for improper electronic messages, and many other challenges in the light of emerging complex technological devices that disseminate knowledge across geographical boundaries.

Student Support Services

In expanding access to distance education one of the major issues has been that of finding appropriate student support services that will assist in minimizing issues of isolation and lack of motivation which are necessary in ensuring successful completion of programme (Holmberg, 1990; Keegan, 1993). Thus, student support is central to the success of any distance-learning programme. Hence, institutions need to develop distance-learning policies on student counseling, library services, instructional methods, and delivery of course materials. It is also important that current student support services be reviewed with the distance-learning student in mind. It may be useful to look into the steps that students must take to learn, enroll, participate and successfully complete a distance-learning course. Comprehensive policy development is a key component of a well-run distance-learning initiative.

Technical

The use of relevant technology is critical to the success of distance-learning programmes. In many countries in the West African sub-region, unlike the developed countries of Europe, the problem of epileptic power supply still persists. This implies that the adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) for educational delivery must take into consideration the issue of appropriate technology.

Culture

There are some fundamental innovations that are necessary in academic settings such as taking into

consideration linguistic and religious standpoints. The effective implementation of these innovations necessitates a paradigm shift in traditional beliefs, organizational values, and orientation. More over, many institutions are mounting new programmes that are market-driven to replace old ones. A policy can harmonize the diverse organizational cultures in the sub-region.

Exchange Programme/Partnership

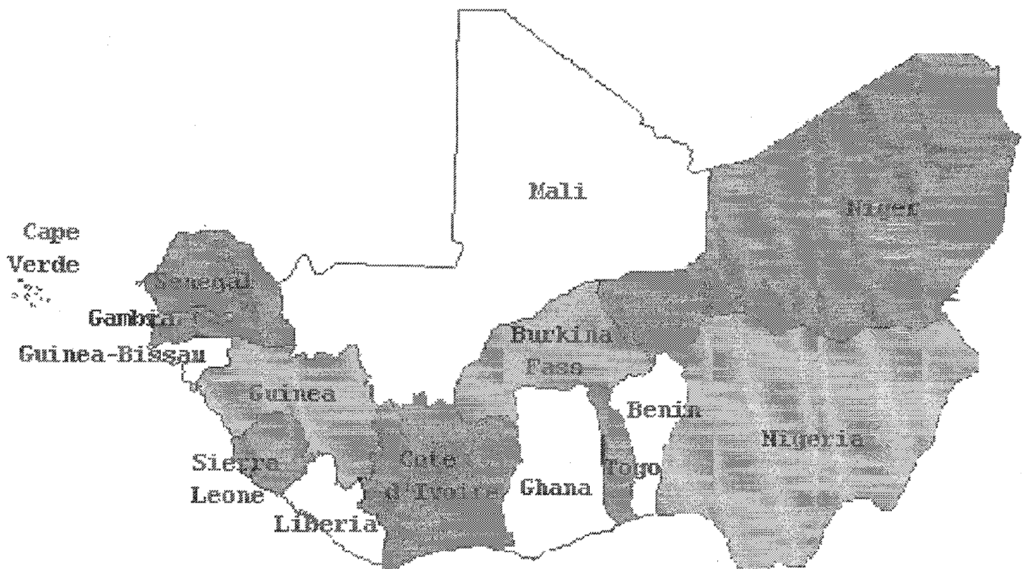
Distance education is a relatively new field with limited human and material resources. This underscores the need for institutions in the sub-region to seek ways for cooperation and collaboration at local, regional, and international levels. Institutional exchange programmes and collaboration involves a working partnership supported by institutional commitment based on formal agreements between two or more organizations which include the desire to make better or extensive use of resources available within one or more countries (Moran & Mugridge, 1993). Formulation of policy in this regard can provide a framework for operation, detailing set of rules that explain stakeholders’ roles and responsibilities.

Challenges to the Development of Policy Framework

This section briefly examines diversities in economic profiles, population, linguistic and socio-political issues, that could pose challenge to sub-regional policy framework in distance education. West Africa is that part of Africa that is bounded in the West and South by the Atlantic Ocean, the Sahara desert on the North, and on the East by the eastern boundaries of present day Nigeria. Practically, it is that area of Africa that is:

encircled in the North by a line running from the Senegal River to Lake Chad, in the East by a line running from Lake Chad to the Cameroon Mountains, and in the south and west, by the Atlantic Ocean coastline. The southern and western borders remain clearly cut out by the sea, the eastern and western boundaries are largely unclear due to the near absence of natural geographical barriers demarcating it from the rest of Africa. (Onwubiko, 1973, p. 54)

Figure 1: Map of West Africa



Source: Adapted from *History of West Africa*, Onwubiko, K.B.C (1973), p.28. Copyright 1973 by Africana Educational Publishers.

The population of the countries of West Africa constitute about 32% of the African population,

although some West African States have small populations, together they constitute almost a third of the population of Africa (Economic Commission of Africa, 2007). A majority of the West African countries can be defined as Least Developed Countries or underdeveloped. According to United Nations Development Program (UNDP), ten of the fifteen states in the region have low levels of Human Development. A low ranking on UNDP's Human Development Index is explained by low values on the variables such as life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate and GDP per capita (United Nations, 2007). In most of the countries, a high proportion of the populations live in poverty. In some cases, like Benin, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone, more the 70% of the population survives on 1 or 2 dollars a day (United Nations, 2007). The low level of welfare creates popular discontent. The industrialized states provide foreign aid to all of the West African countries. Official development assistance constitutes about 15-20% of GDP in many cases, but it has not had any decisive effect on living conditions.

Except for Cape Verde, Gambia and Guinea Bissau all of the countries of West African have a variety of natural resources. Gold, diamonds, oil, uranium, natural gas, copper, iron ore are some examples of what can be found in West Africa. Sierra Leone and Liberia have been "famous" for the quantity of diamonds that have been used to finance armed conflicts.

Nigeria is Africa's largest petroleum producer and an Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) member since 1971. It is a top ten petroleum producer globally, and the fifth largest oil-exporting country to the United States. Nigeria is also assumed to have large amounts of unexploited crude oil reserves. For many years, there have been disturbances in the oil rich southwestern Delta State of Nigeria. Overall, the Nigerian economy accounts for more than half of the economic activity of West African, and developments in the Nigerian economy are of importance for the whole region (Economic Commission of Africa, 2007).

Most of the countries of West African are mainly producers of primary commodities and export products like cotton, cocoa, coffee and nuts. The agriculture sector is of great importance and, in general, it dominates exports. In Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Niger, and Cape Verde, primary commodities constituted 70% of the total export in 2003. Industrial production is of lesser importance, in most cases accounting for about 25% of GDP. Individual West African countries tend to produce the same types of products, which makes it difficult to promote significant within-region trade.

Contemporary armed conflicts tend to be internal and a majority of the armed conflicts worldwide occur in Africa. In most cases, ongoing conflicts have long, complex histories, and they share certain common characteristics. For example, they occur in states that have been defined by the United Nations as Least Developed Countries (Adebayo, 2009). These are characterised by extensive poverty, malnutrition, serious health problems, low levels of education, and weakly developed industry sectors. They are heavily indebted and highly dependent on agriculture production. The states are significantly vulnerable to changes in the global economy. Economic downturns and social disruption both cause and trigger armed conflicts. A majority of the countries classified as Least Developed have experienced armed conflicts in the last twenty years. Twelve of the fifteen West African States are defined as Least Developed Countries (World Bank, 2006).

Nevertheless, earlier efforts to co-ordinate economic cooperation on a sub-regional level in West Africa dates back to 1963, with a conference on industrial harmonization in the sub-region in Lagos, Nigeria and the Niamey conference on economic cooperation in 1966. Similarly, in 1967, another conference was held in Accra, Ghana where a tentative agreement on the Articles of Association of a proposed economic community in West Africa was signed (ECOWAS, 1975). In 1972 the process was revived by the Heads of State of Nigeria and Togo by mandating their officials to streamline a framework for community cooperation based on the following guiding principles.

The envisaged economic community:

- a) Should cut across linguistic and cultural differences.
- b) Should pursue limited realizable objectives.
- c) Should adopt an approach that is flexible and practical.
- d) Should create the necessary institutions to allow all countries to become members at their

convenience.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was therefore established in 1975 to coordinate and promote trade, cooperation, and sustainable development throughout West Africa. The signing of the ECOWAS Treaty of Lagos in May 28, 1975, was indeed a kind of radical response to the plague of poverty and underdevelopment bedeviling West Africa, and as a result, practically provided the much desired framework for the realization of rapid and sustainable socio-political and economic development throughout the sub-region, and has to date the following member states: Republic of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and the Republic of Togo.

Table 2: Schematic Representation of ECOWAS Countries

Countries	Land Area	Capital City	Estimated Population	Major Language(s)	Income per Capita [USD]	Economic Resources	Average Annual GDP [USD billions]
Benin Republic	113,000km ²	Cotonou	6,000,000	French, Fon, Yoruba, Bariba	886	Cotton, Oil, Mining, Limestone, etc.	2.35
Burkina Faso	274,122km ²	Ouagadougou	11,000,000	French, Moore,	898	Cotton, Peanuts,	2.6

		gou	0	Dioula, Peul		Sheanuts, Gold	
Cape Verde	4,033km ²	Praia	430,000	Portuguese, Crioulo	1,546	Services Oil, Gas, Coffee, Cocoa beans, and Palm Oil	10.46
Cote d'Ivoire	322,462km ²	Yamous-soukro	15,000,000	French, and 60 other native languages		Tourism, Services etc.	
Gambia	11,295km ²	Banjul	1,000,000	English, Wolof, Fulani, Mandinka, etc.		Gold, Diamonds, etc.	
Ghana	239,460km ²	Accra	19,000,000	English, and over 100 native languages	1,793	Coffee, Cotton, Fruits, Oil, Nuts etc.	7.4
Guinea	245,857km ²	Conakry	7,000,000	French, and other native languages	1,761	Rice, Maize, Plantains, Beans, Millet, etc.	3.7
Guinea Bissau	36,125km ²			Portuguese, Crioulo		Iron ore, Timber, Diamonds, etc.	
						Gold, Phosphate, etc.	

Liberia	111,369km ²	Bissau	1,100,000		---	Uranium, Cotton, etc.	2.6
Mali	1,249,192km ²	Monrovia	3,000,000	English, and other native languages	693	Oil, Gas, Limestone, Coal, and others	2.0
Niger	1,267,000km ²	Bamako	11,000,000	French, Bambara, etc.	727	Oil, Cotton, Peanuts, Rice, Livestock, etc.	37.9
Nigeria	923,768km ²	Niamey	10,000,000	French, and other local languages	744	Diamonds	
Senegal	196,192km ²	Abuja	126,635,000	English, Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, and over 200 other native languages	1,341	Fishing, Agriculture, etc.	4.7
Sierra Leone	71,740km ²	Dakar	9,000,000	French, Wolof, and other native languages	414	Cotton, Coffee, Cocoa, Phosphate etc.	0.7
Togo	56,785km ²	Freetown	5,000,000	English, Krio, etc.	1,346		1.5
			5,000,000				

Source: *United Nations World Development Report: Attacking Poverty*, 2007, p.274.

All these countries differ considerably in their colonial history, natural resource endowments, institutional and administrative systems. At the one end of the scale is Nigeria, rich in human and natural resources, and at the other end is Burkina Faso with poor human and natural resources. These remarkable differences significantly and constantly shape their regional relations and their ability to participate meaningfully in regional economic and education integration programmes. Thus, diversity in major languages, income per capita, economic resources, average annual gross domestic product and low level human development index identified in the discussion could pose a challenge to the development of sub-regional policy framework on distance education.

STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING POLICY FRAMEWORK

From the preceding discussions there is a strong rationale for the development of policy framework to guide the operation of distance learning in the West African sub-region. The procedures for achieving the framework are highlighted below:

1. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional group founded in May 28, 1975 with the signing of Treaty in Lagos, could serve as a veritable instrument to achieve an institutional policy framework for distance learning in the West African sub-region. The ECOWAS as a regional group of fifteen countries comprising Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Togo can play a useful role in some policy areas as providing the platform for a staff exchange programme and partnership and other areas such as access to connectivity, expertise, appropriate technology and research fellowship in distance learning. In as much as ECOWAS has the mandate to promote economic and cultural integration, and that of a single large trading block, it is equally possible for the body through the heads of government to harmonize and provide a regional framework on distance education.
2. The heads of government can facilitate the process of integrating a policy framework on distance learning in the sub-region by creating an enabling environment that would enhance research efforts on overcoming the challenges posed by the digital divide. As Akubuilu and Ndubuizu (2003) rightly noted, many Nigerians are enmeshed in the challenges inherent in the digital divide, and the capacity to use such technology is also negligible compared with those of developed countries. Corroborating this view, Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) observed that the use of instructional technology and information communication technology remains rather sparse in the pedagogical practice of distance education in Nigeria. This shortcoming could be a reflection of the entire distance-learning programme in the West African sub region.
3. Attainment of a policy framework on distance learning in the West African sub-region is multidimensional, a multi-stakeholder approach is therefore needed for the development of distance-learning policies. Thus, public institutions, private sector, civil society, academic community, and ICT industries must be involved. A multi-stakeholder approach ensures such policies are grounded in reality.
4. Furthermore, a holistic approach that recognizes and resolves conflicts resulting from organizational values and customs is needed. This calls for close coordination and coherence among member countries.
5. Finally, it is absolutely critical that distance-learning policy in the sub-region is regarded as a priority and mainstreamed into national development programmes of respective countries in the sub-region. However, it should be based on precise goals and objectives that focus on priority needs.

CONCLUSION

The West African sub-region has witnessed a remarkable increase in the domain of distance higher education. A major problem persists on how to ensure that a quality-learning experience is provided. Thus, the need for a policy framework to regulate the planning and delivery of quality distance higher education programmes in the West African sub-region. In developing a policy framework, some basic issues should be considered within the historical and cultural contexts. Historically and culturally, the West African sub-region has many features in common, especially from the linguistic and religious standpoints. Also, in many respects countries in the sub-region are diverse in population, national income, and human resources. In spite of the diversity, a sub-regional policy framework on distance education is possible and, indeed, desirable.

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