The Challenges of the Curtin-AVU-AAU Distance Learning Program in Ethiopia: A Case Study

Los Desafíos del Programa de Aprendizaje a Distancia Curtin-AVU-UCA en Etiopía: Un Caso de Estudio

Rakesh Belwal
Associate Professor
Faculty of Business
Sohar University
Sohar, Sultanate of Oman
rakesh.belwal@gmail.com

Dawit Ayalew Kassa
Assistant Lecturer
Department of Management
Addis Ababa University
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
dawitayalew@yahoo.com

Medhanie Gaim Asgedom
Assistant Lecturer
Department of Management,
Addis Ababa University
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
medhaniegaim@gmail.com

Abstract

Distance education programs are emerging globally in the form of joint ventures among higher educational institutions. This paper describes the research undertaken to explore one such joint venture program in business between Australian and African universities. This study utilizes both primary and secondary data gathered through a review of the literature, consultations with program administrators, interviews with faculty members, direct observations, and questionnaires administered to sample students. This case study explores factors affecting the program. Using quantitative and qualitative analytical tools, this study discusses the outcomes of the analyses to facilitate experiential learning. It finds that for students originating mainly from remote regions of Ethiopia, distance learning can offer good opportunities of receiving cost-effective, quality-education on their doorsteps. This experience could contribute immensely to the extension of such programs to other regions of the country. Although the joint venture reveals the potential of coordinated educational efforts, internal weaknesses and inefficiencies need serious attention to ensure the success of such initiatives in the future.

Keywords: Distance education, joint ventures, Ethiopia, Australia

Resumen

Programas de educación a distancia están surgiendo a nivel mundial en forma de joint ventures entre instituciones de educación superior. Este artículo describe la investigación llevada a cabo para explorar uno programa joint venture de negocios entre universidades de Australia y África. Este estudio utiliza datos primarios y secundarios que se reunieron a través de una revisión de la literatura, las consultas con los administradores del programa, entrevistas con los profesores, observaciones directas, y los cuestionarios administrados a estudiantes que fueron parte de la muestra. Este caso de estudio analiza los factores que afectan al programa. Este estudio analiza los resultados de los análisis para facilitar el aprendizaje experimental, mediante el uso de herramientas de análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo. Concluye que para los estudiantes originarios principalmente de las regiones remotas de Etiopía, el aprendizaje a distancia puede ofrecer buenas oportunidades para recibir una educación rentable y de calidad a domicilio. Esta experiencia puede contribuir enormemente a la extensión de este tipo de programa a otras regiones del país. Aunque el joint venture deja de manifiesto el potencial de la coordinación de los esfuerzos educativos, conviene prestar especial atención a las debilidades internas y las ineficiencias, para asegurar el éxito de tales iniciativas en el futuro.

Palabras clave: educación a distancia, joint ventures, Etiopía, Australia

Introduction

Distance education has gained wide acceptance as one of the successful modes of extending education in context of reach, acceptance, and productivity. Reach in a sense that it has been instrumental in addressing the educational needs of scattered communities in different continents (Mitchell, 2009); acceptance in the sense that it has emerged "as a viable alternative delivery system and an alternative to the conventional system" (Rao, 2006:225); and productivity in the sense that "R&D in this area has contributed in many ways to more general educational research and development." (Spector, 2009:160). The provision of an opportunity to learn without being restricted by geographical or time constraints is a

major factor behind the growth of distance education programs. Furthermore, factors such as interactivity achieved through the use of telephone, two-way video, two-way computer connections, cable, satellite downlinks, and the Internet have contributed immensely to the online mode of learning since many people are able to continue working and attending virtual classrooms on their own schedule and at their own pace (Evans & Hasse, 2001; Chan & Welebir, 2003; Rao, 2006).

Questions posed about the efficacy of distance education, however, reveal mixed reactions (Kotey & Anderson, 2006). Some view distance education as a "cheap option" (Lawton & Barnes, 1998, p. 106) and vehemently oppose distance educational institutions, by calling them "digital diploma mills" (Morris & Noble as cited in Evans & Hasse, 2001, p. 250). Although the physical reach of the traditional universities has been dramatically extended by online mode of deliveries, the strategy for delivering courses needs compatibility with this mode (Chan and Welebir, 2003; Lawton & Barnes, 2008). The Sloan Survey (2010) of Online Learning reveals that, in fall 2009, enrollment rose by almost one million students in a year and approximately 5.6 million students were enrolled in at least one online course in 2,500 colleges and universities nationwide.

Online education, according to Volery and Lord (2000), may offer four different benefits to education providers: enabling access to students; alleviating capacity constraints; capitalizing on emerging market opportunities; and serving as a catalyst in institutional transformation. Chan & Welebir (2003) advise that administrators need to understand *strengths*, *weaknesses*, *opportunities* and *threats* to match their resources and capabilities with different states of nature, where:

- *strengths* can be assessed in terms of faculty in place, curriculum, physical location, name recognition, and capital;

- *weaknesses* can be assessed in terms of technology, trained faculty, reaction to change, and quality;

- *opportunities* can be assessed in terms of enrolment, recognition, and expansion; and

- *threats* can be assessed in terms of competitors, new entrants, insufficient enrollment, and lack of demand.

Although, education is undoubtedly expanding around the world, its delivery and effectiveness are major concerns. The rapid economic development in the Asia-Pacific region over the past decade has resulted in a growing number of educational systems. Since the education systems of most countries or areas have expanded quickly, these institutions have suffered from a poor understanding of quality and a lack of educational standards and indicators, (Cheng & Tam, 1997). Consequently, there is a strong emphasis on the pursuit of education quality in ongoing educational reforms in both local and international contexts. In Africa, UNESCO, ECA and other agencies support the African Information Society Initiative (AISI). AISI aims to create an African information infrastructure with a single goal of providing equitable remote access to resources in support of both distance education and strengthening of educational capacity (Enakrire & Onyenania, 2007).

Strategic alliances of traditional institutions exhibit a powerful strategy to enter into e-education and to tap the global market (Chan & Welebir, 2003). Mazzarol, Soutar, and Seng (2003) identify alliance or coalition in distance education as the second wave of internationalization in education. According to them, educational service providers use alliances or 'twinning programs' as a part of their foreign market entry strategy to offer students a foreign degree in their home country.

Development of distance learning courses needs good market research and business planning where a quality-based approach is a necessity, not a luxury (Lawton & Barnes, 1998). However, understanding of pedagogical issues in the online realm is a basic requirement to create a quality online course. Research at Central Queensland University (CQU) - one of seven universities authorized by the Australian government as a provider of distance education - indicates that lack of affordable network infrastructure over vast areas of Australia near the end of the past decade led to the use of paper-based study material and limited learning opportunities (Cooke & Veach, 1997). In a trial mode solution, it was realized that the introduction of electronic interactions led to certain benefits. It enhanced the learning experience (resulting in increased interaction,   free and thoughtful comments), and the lecturers were able to delay the choice of the text book to recommend either the best or the most recent one. Furthermore, it demanded concise paper-based material, which shortened lead time for changes, updates, or rewrites.

Another study by Tennent, Windeknecht, and Kehoe (2004) claims that CQU - which has been using paper-based distance education materials since 1971- considers the use of technology not only as a

necessity but also as a value-adding tool. The study finds that the key to success is to cater constantly to the demand of a large and diverse group of students and to provide manageable and cost effective courses. This study recommends future researchers to conduct quantitative and qualitative research that measures student perceptions and expectations of the teaching technologies used in terms of variables such as: student characteristics; learning styles; acquisition of generic skills; and the more practical but important aspects of computer confidence and accessibility.

Other important aspects of distance education, according to the Division of Distance and Continuing Education (DDCE) of CQU, are the production and initial distribution of learning materials and the management of the student/lecturer interface using tools that permit the tracking of assignments and response times (Cooke & Veach, 1997). In a survey conducted amongst students enrolled in an online management course at an Australian university, effectiveness, technology, student characteristics, and instructor characteristics emerged as four key success factors for online delivery (Volery & Lord, 2000). Among these factors, 'technology' contained sub-factors such as ease of access and navigation, interface, and interaction, while 'instructor characteristics' contained sub-factors such as attitude towards students, instructor's technical competence, and classroom interactions.

Mazzarol et al (2003) claim that though the Higher Educational (HE) Institutions offering twinning programs focus increasingly on the market, their administrators, managers, and academic staff still face significant challenges in terms of effectiveness. Particularly, African universities have been affected by drastic budget cuts and deteriorating infrastructures in teaching and research facilities over the past two decades (Kargbo, 2002). Regarding the networking projects in Africa, Adam (1996 as cited in Enakrire & Onyenania, 2007, p. 2) observes that networking projects lack mutual national, sub-regional, regional and international coordination where "Everyone wants to coordinate, but no one wants to be coordinated".

This paper presents a case study of one such strategic alliance between Curtin University of Technology in Australia, the African Virtual University (AVU), headquartered in Nairobi (Kenya), and the Addis Ababa University (AAU) of Ethiopia. It reveals a program that began with much enthusiasm and high expectations of success but fell victim to certain forces described later in this paper. However, the failure of the joint venture to achieve its objectives needs a detailed analysis. The principal aim of this case study is to expose certain issues that led to the end of this valuable alliance. The next section discusses the aims further.

Background

In 2003, Curtin University launched a $5 million virtual education project in partnership with AVU offering Business programs tailored to local needs in Africa. This launch was accompanied by the establishment of learning centers in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania and Kenya with an aim to improve the availability of education in these places. Figure 1 explains the context of this overall initiative. The purpose was to address a number of problems associated with students' poor access to universities; large number of high school dropouts and unskilled labor forces; lack of quality in private education and its being expensive; and Africa's isolation from the global knowledge society. The African continent, with its 53 countries and a population of over 700 million - of whom over fifty per cent are under 20 years of age (see www.elearning-africa.com), was an ideal target to meet the growing demand for quality education at the tertiary level.

With one of its divisions (the Curtin Business School), Curtin University of Technology entered into a tripartite agreement with the African Virtual University (AVU) and Addis Ababa University (AAU) to offer a Bachelor (3 year) and a Diploma (1 year) program in Business Studies in Ethiopia. This virtual educational project - which came from AusAid in line with the Australian and World Bank Virtual Colombo Plan- started at AAU in Ethiopia in December 2003. Similar projects took place at Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (Rwanda); Kenyatta University (Kenya); and University of Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania). This study is limited in its scope as it covers only the project that took place in Ethiopia.

While AAU Ethiopia (see www.aau.edu.et) is one of the most prominent and oldest universities in Africa, Curtin University of Technology (see http://about.curtin.edu.au/) is Western Australia's largest university offering over 850 undergraduate and postgraduate courses with over 31,000 students. AVU (see http://www.avu.org) is an independent, reputable, inter-governmental organization based in Nairobi (Kenya) with over 57 learning centers in 27 African countries. Other than this, AVU has implemented degree programs in Computer Science from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (Australia) and Université Laval in Québec (Canada), as well as eight-to-ten week certificate courses from New Jersey Institute of Technology and Indiana University of Pennsylvania (UNDP,2006).
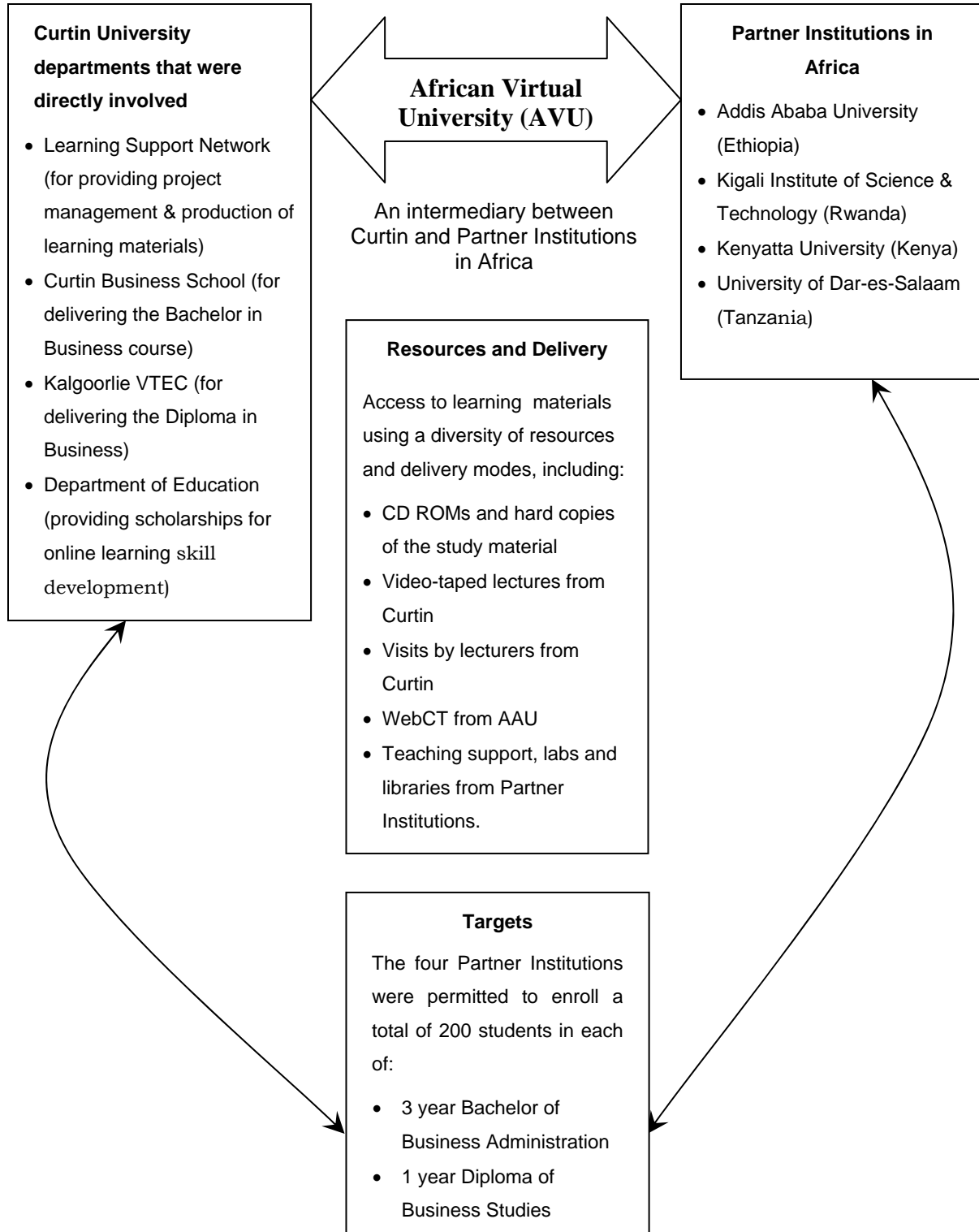
Curtin University departments that were directly involved

- Learning Support Network (for providing project management & production of learning materials)
- Curtin Business School (for delivering the Bachelor in Business course)
- Kalgoorlie VTEC (for delivering the Diploma in Business)
- Department of Education (providing scholarships for online learning skill development)

African Virtual University (AVU)

An intermediary between Curtin and Partner Institutions in Africa

Partner Institutions in Africa

- Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia)
- Kigali Institute of Science & Technology (Rwanda)
- Kenyatta University (Kenya)
- University of Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania)

Resources and Delivery

Access to learning materials using a diversity of resources and delivery modes, including:

- CD ROMs and hard copies of the study material
- Video-taped lectures from Curtin
- Visits by lecturers from Curtin
- WebCT from AAU
- Teaching support, labs and libraries from Partner Institutions.

Targets

The four Partner Institutions were permitted to enroll a total of 200 students in each of:

- 3 year Bachelor of Business Administration
- 1 year Diploma of Business Studies

Figure 1. *Context Diagram for the Curtin–AVU Project for Africa*

A collective goal of enrolling a total of 200 students (for a three-year Bachelor of Business Administration program from Curtin Business School) was set for the four facilitating institutions in Africa. The program officially started in January 2004 and was expected to culminate in December 2007. The aim was to build

the capacity of these institutions and prepare them to continue with the programs independently thereafter. Access to learning materials was provided using a diversity of resources such as WebCT, CD ROMs, hard copies of course materials, video-taped lectures, computer laboratories, the AVU Digital Library, Curtin's Online Library, local facilitators and visiting professors from Curtin. The initial term of 5 years for the project finished with almost all the students passing, except a few who had to take admission in the regular program through credits transfer. Though the program produced 190 graduates (120 bachelors and 70 diploma holders) in Ethiopia, the journey had several ups and downs. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm witnessed at the time of launch faded in the succeeding years.

The aim of this case study is to explore the issues that led this potentially valuable program to the verge of closure after the capacity building. With the initial experience, this program could have been continued in other regions targeting remote youths.   The study aims to investigate the realties associated with the Curtin–AVU Business Program. This may provide useful information for future stakeholders who undertake and participate in such joint ventures. The outcomes of the study provide certain insights and indicate some precautions that may help in managing such collaborations.

Methodology

To secure the success of such programs, evaluation is an important means of social inquiry and a mechanism to maintain accountability and control. Depending on the goals of the evaluation, different methodologies and strategies are employed to guide the inquiry (Chapman, 2006). The study used a triangulation approach in collecting data. Secondary data sources comprised documents, archival records, and research papers, while primary data were collected using direct observation, surveys, and interviews. The study employs a holistic case study design using the Curtin-AVU-AAU project as a single unit of analysis, and discusses the results obtained using quantitative and qualitative analytical tools. Quantitative measures include the recording of students' perceptions about the program components using the Likert scale and their analysis using MS-Excel. Qualitative analysis was performed by recording and compiling interview responses, and producing transcripts and their subsequent analysis. The study explores different aspects of the program through a review of the literature, consultations with program administrators, interviews with faculty members, and questionnaires administered to students. For coverage and presentation, the study developed a framework of sections categorizing different themes. The researchers also attempted to assess the comparative progress of Curtin programs at the other three partnering institutions in Africa by mailed questionnaires to facilitating institutions and Curtin officials; however, no one responded. The outcomes of the study, therefore, are limited to CU-AVU-AAU joint venture.

The Curtin-AVU-AAU Program in Ethiopia: Major Findings

To be effective, distance learning programs need to address several issues seeking appropriate and timely decisions on the nature of educational program and their learning strategies, their use of technology and equipment, their dealing with students' and instructors' concerns, and organizational, governance, and financial matters (Hall, 1979; Valentine, 2002). Furthermore, Berge (2002:182) observes that "impediments to teaching and learning at a distance can be: situational; epistemological; philosophical; psychological; pedagogical; technical; social; and/or cultural." To cover most of the above mentioned concerns, the findings of this study have been grouped under three major sections: organizational, administrative, and delivery aspects.

Organizational Aspects

Initially, the 'AVU Learning Centre Director' headed the AVU office in Ethiopia with assistance from one Technical Coordinator and two Program Coordinators. The Technical Coordinator received assistance from one System Administrator who, in turn, received support from four lab assistants (see Figure-2). There was a separate Program Coordinator for Curtin University of Technology's BBA Program.

The program initially offered four courses with five contact hours per week for advising each course. Facing excessive queries and demands for explanation from the students, the program had to convert these contact hours into classroom lectures following a schedule of four hours per week. Degree students took four courses per semester, whereas Diploma students followed modular classes where completion of additional modules led to a degree. Two cohorts of Diploma students successfully graduated following this program.
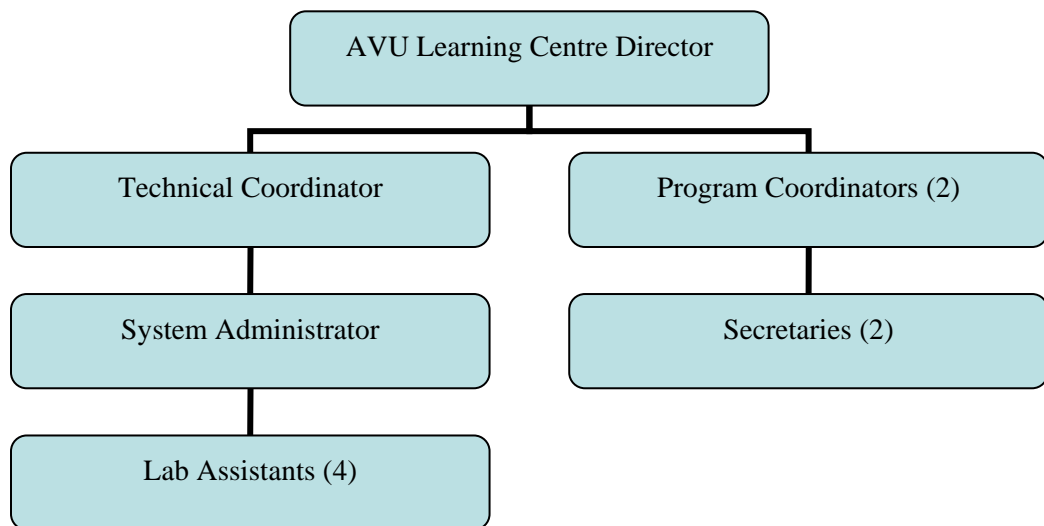
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                      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                      │  AVU Learning Centre Director  │
                      └──────────────────────────────┘

   ┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
   │  Technical Coordinator     │        │  Program Coordinators (2)  │
   └──────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘

   ┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
   │  System Administrator      │        │      Secretaries (2)       │
   └──────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘

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   │    Lab Assistants (4)      │
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Figure 2. *The Earlier Organizational Structure of the Program in Ethiopia*

Surprisingly, AVU had no job descriptions for senior position holders at Addis Ababa Learning Center. Only lab assistants had job descriptions drafted at the level of System Administrator. The absence of job descriptions at higher levels created confusion in the area of roles and responsibilities.

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                      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                      │   Associate Academic Vice      │
                      │      President AAU             │
                      └──────────────────────────────┘

   ┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
   │  Director for AVU Projects │        │        Dean FBE            │
   └──────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘

   ┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
   │ Academic Program Coordinator│        │    Department Heads        │
   │        for BBA             │        │ (Business & Accounting)    │
   └──────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘

   ┌──────────────────────────┐
   │  Course Facilitators & Lab │
   │        Assistant           │
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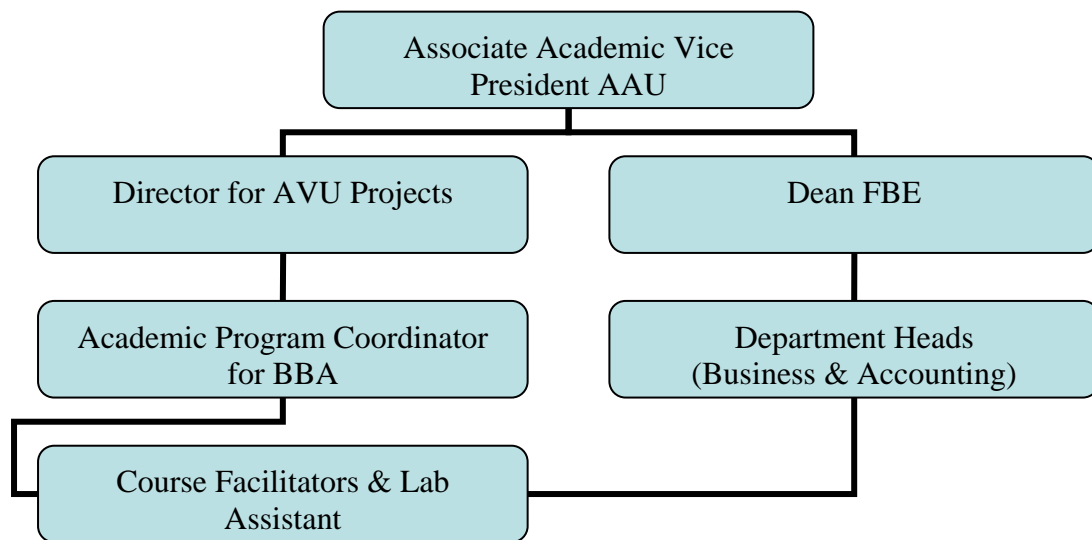
Figure 3. *Changed Organizational Structure of the Program in Ethiopia*

Later, the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) of AAU took over the program from AVU with the organizational structure shown in Figure 3. The alterations in the setup, however, could not bring any major change, because the program was still lacking in terms of 'overall networking synergy' and administrative aspects. The following section explores the reasons for this lack in networking synergy.

Networking Synergy

Discussions with different authorities revealed that the program lacked networking synergy. The coordinators complained that the lack of clear cut roles and responsibilities of the three parties (AAU, AVU and Curtin) opened the door for a lack of synergy in the program. The role of one of the partner institutions was questioned much by the majority of the stakeholders, since it emerged as a competitor by

launching its own consortium programs, contrary to the provisions of the tripartite agreement.

The organizational structure and the hierarchical relationship in the AVU-AAU program lacked clarity even at FBE level. "I did not understand who my immediate supervisor was, for example, the Dean of FBE, AVU Director or Academic Vice-President (AVP) of AAU" cited one past coordinator at AAU, when it came to securing permissions/sanctions. Despite the attempted structural changes reflected in Figure 2 and Figure 3, no significant improvement ensued and the problems remained unchanged. All the past coordinators rated the program as 'strong' in terms of its composition of courses and content, but commented negatively when asked to what extent the Curtin-AVU program delivered the promised education in Ethiopia. The organizational structure and the lack of clarity in organizational roles and responsibility were cited as the major limitation. Further, the coordinators had no information on how similar projects were doing in other African countries.

To summarize, there was reduced synergy because of the lack of clear cut roles and responsibilities at various levels, adverse action of one of the participating institutions, and an absence of a proper organizational structure. Poor administration aggravated the situation further. The next section gives a detailed account of administrative aspects.

Administrative Aspects

Administrative Support

The project lacked a well laid formal organizational structure of roles and responsibilities within AAU. There was a lack of clarity in authority, responsibility, and functional relationships among the Program Coordinator at FBE, the Learning Center Director at AAU, AVU headquarters, and the Curtin Business School. The following discussion reveals the administrative weaknesses faced by the project.

The absence of a clear organizational structure (with respective responsibility and authority) within AAU contributed to ineffectiveness despite having experienced people at the top. The profile of the administrative staff involved at Curtin was impressive, but not enough was known about the profile at AVU headquarters in Kenya.

Rozenblit (1993) claims that the diversity and heterogeneity of distance learning systems makes stakeholders unclear about features of institutions for their countries or context of operation. He argues that a clear cut division between tasks, major departments in the system and how they interrelate in organizational structure helps in the realization of distance/ open methods of education. Hall (1979) found that at the startup, administrators need to establish a clearly defined mission for the new program, but the coalitions supporting a new program often hold diverse and sometimes conflicting goals among themselves. Strong mediation skills or a high 'binding energy' (Bacsich, 2005) is needed to resolve this problem. According to Hall (1979), it is vitally important for administrators to aim for early and complete program acceptance and accreditation for establishing program and institutional credibility. Zhao (2003) considers that the enhancement of quality and effectiveness of online higher education requires a framework for the measurement of both the process and outcomes of online teaching and learning. Harvey, Buckley, Milorad, and Elfessi (2002) present a decisional framework to administrators based on the notion of social time or "timescape" that provides a way to justify their choices under severe time pressures.

There exists a significant difference between the normal cellular structure of the traditional university with its essentially self governing academic departments, and the necessarily more hierarchical organization of the external program which requires firm central coordination (Hall, 1979; McLendon & Crobnk, 1999). Even within the more developed countries or for their universities operating abroad, effective administration of a distant learning program can be a considerable challenge (Moses, Edgerton, Shaw & Grubb, 1991; Ayadi, Adekoya & Ikem, 2005). The administrator needs to show not only how a new program can serve an untapped student clientele, but also in what ways the program links to traditional post-secondary learning and its institutions (Hall, 1979).

Since this project lacked special administrative attention, over the regular programs at one of the institutions, it became victim to inherent, inefficient and ineffective university procedures and bureaucracy in procurement, finance, and general administration. Inefficient decision-making processes and the slow pace of transactions impacted its effectiveness and efficiency. Some of the pertinent facts are:

- At the Coordinator's level, purchases of operating supplies took months because of the bureaucratic procedures at one of the institutions.

- The program did not own a photocopier in the five years of its existence. Photocopies of lecture notes had to be arranged privately, since requesting the purchase department for photocopying would have taken weeks.
- The V-Sat technology equipment remained in the stores of the Ethiopian Customs Authority for more than 2 years because of failure to secure a licence and the lack of concern.
- Delay in the acquisition of simple network cables and minor equipment (taking more than six months for a month's job) affected Internet services at FBE's computer lab.

Financial Matters

Funding from AusAid (under the Australian Government and World Bank Virtual Colombo Plan) channeled through AVU, and the tuition fees collected from students were the major financial resources for the program. While the former helped in developing curricula, content, and the administration of some of the activities at Curtin University, the latter supported the operational needs of the project at AAU. The financial resources at AAU were more than sufficient to run the project. Estimates indicate that the program raised around 2 million Birr (approx. 222,000 USD) from tuition fees alone. Since, the average annual expenditures were around 400,000 Birr, the savings were substantial.

Financial controls exercised by a concerned unit at the main campus of AAU and lack of autonomy at FBE impacted many routine and most basic functions. Lack of clarity regarding financial powers, low level of commitment of authorities, and non-cooperation of financial units at the faculty level resulted in coordinators running out of money needed to conduct the program effectively. Passing a concluding remark in his research for universities in Kenya, Mutula (2002) categorically states that the income generated by the universities in Africa should be put back to improve the learning environment at the universities. This did not happen in this case.

Delivery Aspects

Course Content

The Curtin-AAU program was not much different in content from the regular AAU programs. However, it was a technology oriented and internationally benchmarked program. The coordinators were contented with the support from Curtin on items such as educational material, CDs and the like. However, the lack of resources such as photocopiers and operating supplies posed a greater challenge. Due to the absence of these hardcopies could not be effectively produced and distributed to instructors and students. The key strengths of the program as reported by past coordinators included a pragmatic curriculum, rich online materials, better accessibility to computers, open book exams and free Internet access to students.

Learning Strategy

The program employed the blended mode of learning, offering distance education mixed with occasional classroom instruction. In blended learning, about half of the teaching is done in class and the rest by using technology outside the classroom. According to Ruth (2006), large universities could double-book hundreds of classrooms per semester, with fewer new buildings, and could achieve higher levels of productivity, substitution of adjuncts for full-time faculty and other innovations.

In the Curtin-AAU venture, students used text and reference books, e-books, WebCT materials, digital libraries and other learning support materials. Course content and assessments explicitly aligned with learning outcomes. The assessment of students relied on course content as well as critical thinking, presentation, and communication skills. Students had access to HP I-Paq handheld computers on an experimental basis for communicating with their peers abroad, using wireless Internet connections. However, only a few second-year students could access the devices as there were only 15 I-Paqs. With impressive initial results, the equipment failed and the I-Paqs could not serve the succeeding students. The reasons were lack of Wi-Fi hot points, inadequate user training, and lack of reinforcement by facilitators for their use in coursework. Other students utilized the desktop computers available in the lab for distance learning, but the connectivity in the lab was also poor.

The program admitted students initially with little screening. In fact, all those who met the minimum requirement were allowed to join the program. This resulted in a greater rate of failure and as a result many students could not graduate on time. "The program, which was intended to be a facilitation-based one, wherein students come to class only to get clarifications on some issues, changed to a normal lecture-oriented program because students were not doing well academically on their own", said one of the past Coordinators.

Facilitators

Academically, the program had competent facilitators at Curtin (unit controllers) and AAU to deliver on their part; however no information was available regarding those at AVU headquarters. At AAU, more than 95 percent of the facilitators had a Master's Degree or even higher qualifications and the same was true for unit controllers at Curtin and Coordinators and Learning Centre managers at AAU. In addition, there were two contract workers who managed office routines. In spite of that, the results of the survey administered to students revealed that students were not enthusiastic about the local facilitators. Students' complaints centered primarily on facilitators' modes of delivery, attitudes towards students, and classroom punctuality. Also some students complained that some facilitators skipped routine classes and arranged too many make up classes towards the end of the semester. Researching students for their views on online learning modes across two programs in an Australian university, Dixon, Pelliccione, and Dixon (2005) recommended that academics embarking on a mixed-mode approach need to extend their working day in order to increase interaction, and improve teaching, deep learning and reflective practice.

A study by Woolls, Dowlin and Loertscher (2002) indicated that distance learning is not much different from traditional learning, if the instructor is good. The weight was rather given to the design of reliable online syllabuses, cooperation among students, use of email for advising and evaluating work, and use of good materials while developing such courses. To teach distance learners, the training desired was not only on how to use the technology but also on strategies for teaching students at distance using appropriate teaching behaviors (Johnstone, 1991). Some of the facilitators in the present study lacked training in the delivery of online education.

The interview with the local facilitators revealed that access to the Internet was a very good resource but it remained unexploited by both the students and staff. They complained that students lacked preparation for the courses and were not committed to presentations and case analysis. They complained about conducting classes in a computer room, western bias in some courses, and the staff's lack of vigilance while supervising the exams. However, the local facilitators appreciated the courses for being practical and containing the latest information.

Students: the receiving end

An analysis of the questionnaires administered to the students using factor analysis revealed 12 major factors around which assessment can be made. These factors are:

- program package or offerings,
- fair deals,
- competence of facilitators,
- comparative advantage offered by program,
- use of technology,
- sincerity of facilitators,
- availability of teaching and support staff,
- class conduct, access to study material,
- availability of support devices,
- communication and feedback, and
- students' technological know-how.

To assess the program from the perspective of students, an image profile was developed to give an overall picture regarding student perception (Figure 4). The overall image of the program was satisfactory from the perspective of students. Their average responses ranged between neutral (3) and agreement (5 means strongly agree) on the five-point Likert scale on 9 out of the 12 factors.

The results of the student survey also supported the view that management was not prompt in solving students' complaints. In particular, the survey revealed that management considered the problems of the students as secondary. The results further showed that academic calendars of the program were not strictly followed, which adversely affected students in covering course topics on time and in their preparations for the examinations. The survey also reflected that there were problems relating to access to computing facilities when the program was transferred to the FBE since the computer lab was not

transferred along with the classes. Students were not provided with a space (or library) for reading and doing other assignments.
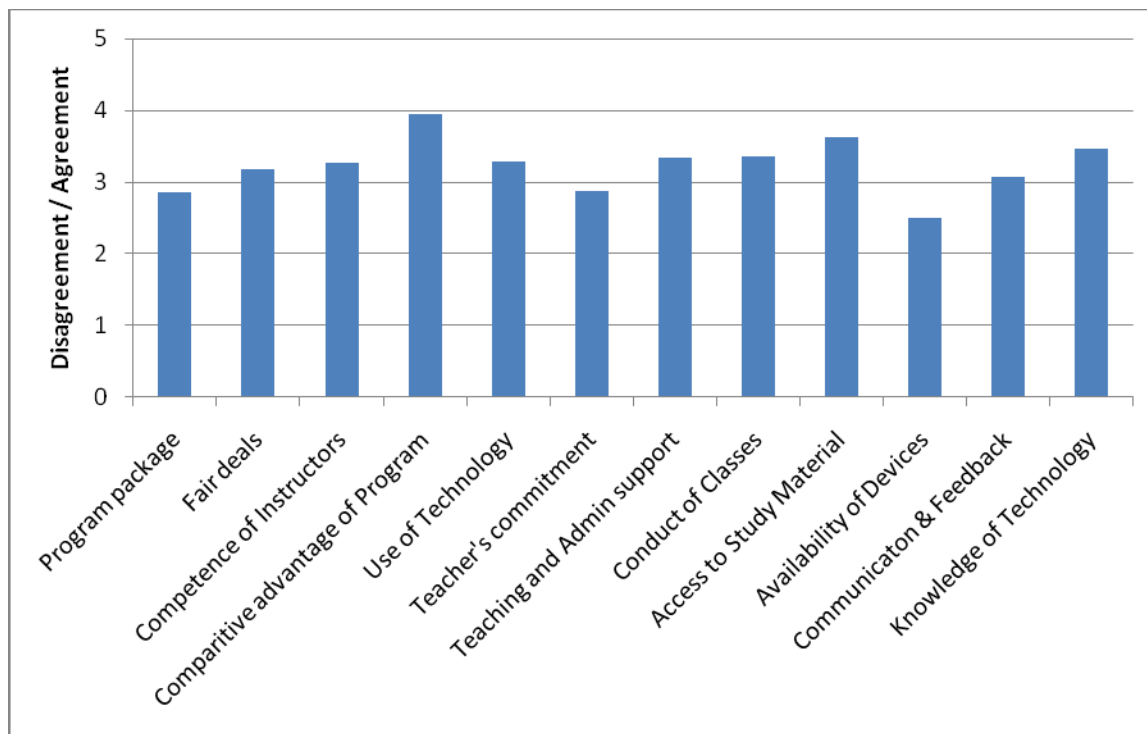

Figure 4. *The Image Profile of Curtin-AVU Program in Ethiopia (Year 2006/7)*
Source: Analyzed using primary data secured through students' responses

Students had no access to their exam papers once shipped to Australia for corrections. Curtin offered online grade reports, believing that the grading had been done accurately. But to the students' surprise, some grades were mistakenly posted by the system for exams they had not taken. The scores of exams marked locally by the facilitators were adjusted at Curtin without the consent of or the communication of rationale to the local facilitators. Among the major irregularities witnessed locally were some incidents of plagiarism, cheating, and some access to exam papers before the exam date.

Lessons Learned and Policy Implications

To students residing mainly in remote regions of Ethiopia, distance learning can offer a good opportunity and this experience could contribute immensely to the extension of such programs to other regions of the country. Countries like Lesotho in Southern Africa and Indonesia have greatly relied on the distance learning mode (Moses et al, 1991). The Curtin-AVU-AAU project supports the possibility of such efforts; however, it also highlights internal weaknesses and inefficiencies that must be controlled for the success of such initiatives.

The program was terminated in 2008 after an initial term of 5 years and an additional term of 1 year for clearing the students in progression. The property of the program was transferred to AAU by Curtin. The six person evaluation committee set up at AAU recommended its accreditation to enable the graduates to be eligible for admission to masters program within the country. This program provided a good learning experience to all parties involved. It is clear that multilateral agreements to impart distance education must be made on firm grounds and clear-cut roles and responsibilities must be defined at the outset. It appeared that all of the parties were not equal in discharging their responsibilities as per the provisions of tripartite agreement. Such initiatives should be made on a partnering basis and there should be a sense of responsibility and commitment among all the partners.

Staff training and development are necessary to sustain such programs and minimize the turnover of staff and dissatisfaction of students. As provisioned in the tripartite agreement, AVU could not extend its support for capacity building to the facilitators at AAU who applied for some training or the PhD program.

For smooth and efficient delivery of distance education programs, a good administrative and financial setup is very important. This was lacking at the host institution. There was not only a lack of commitment at the top but also inherent weaknesses in the form of bureaucratic procedures, inefficiencies, poor communication, and isolated decisions. These all proved to be fatal for the project. Further, there was a lack of attention as well as a result of the lack of clarity in the authority-responsibility relationship for the management and coordination of the project. The utilization of the resources provided to this project was less than perfect due to the fact that the management and coordination of the project's activities were mainstreamed with the regular AAU business.

Lead institutions such as Curtin with experience of work in different geo-political setups should play a more prominent role in setting up effective memoranda of understanding and other regulations in a timely manner (Mazzarol et. al., 2003). Mazzarol and Hosie (1996, p. 11) observe that "The long-term competitiveness of Australian higher education institutions is likely to depend on their capacity to establish and maintain international strategic alliances with overseas institutions". This indicates a need for effective leadership.

Sustaining quality in twinning programs is also an issue in itself. Lenn (2000, p. 7) rightly claims that "It is not always easy to sustain quality at remote locations. For reasons of custom, law, language, cost or just plain convenience, the challenges to providing a quality educational program can be difficult". This indicates the need for contextualization and customization of such programs.

Conclusions

The African continent has witnessed several joint-ventured online educational programs in the recent past. The Curtin-AVU-AAU online learning program in Ethiopia is a prime example of this. The students benefited from the program and had positive perceptions about it. However, coordination problems among participating institutions were more prominent than the popularity of the program. In reference to the regular BBA program of the Faculty of Business, though this program was considered more or less redundant, the knowledge gained from this experience could help in future programs. In particular, there is a great need to disseminate such programs to the remote regions of Ethiopia. Although a tendency was noticed among the respondents to blame one particular institution for a majority of the problems, there are more general conclusions that can be drawn from the study. It would be fair to conclude that despite having a credible educational package, this five-year project led to utter administrative chaos. The people who conceptualized the project did not realize how to enforce/carry-out the project in a foreign land, especially when an intermediary exists between the designer and the implementer institutions. The partnering institutions lacked in securing proper coordination and in building effective control and feedback mechanisms. Overall, this project reveals the importance and the possibilities of coordinated educational ventures, and emphasizes that internal weaknesses and inefficiencies need serious attention for the success of such initiatives.

Study limitations and direction on future research

This study is limited in its scope as it covers only one twinning program in Ethiopia. The lack of responses from officials involved in similar ventures in Rwanda, Kenya, Dar-es-Salam, and even Curtin resulted in the study being confined to a specific case. The researchers could not take the views of officials stationed at AVU headquarters in Kenya. A comprehensive coverage on all the Curtin-AVU-local university ventures would lead to a better insight and a more general account of factors affecting such programs. This, in turn, would result in the identification of actions which could have wider policy implications.

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