The Provision of Distance Education in Selected Higher Education Institutions of Japan: Benchmarking Lessons for Ethiopia

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to look for benchmarking lessons on provision of distance education from selected higher education institutions of Japan. The Open University of Japan, Nihon University and Waseda University were selected to draw benchmarking lessons on provision of distance education for Ethiopia. A purely qualitative research involving primary and secondary data was employed to identify best practices from the selected higher education institutions of Japan. Physical visit was made at the institutions and interview was conducted. Five professors (instructors) from the Open University of Japan were selected purposively and participated in the semi-structured interview. Key-informant interview was also conducted with distance education division oficials of Nihon and Waseda Universities. Secondary data was also collected and used as a source of data for the research. The findings of the study indicated that the presence of well organized study centers to facilitate the provision of quality distance education in the institutions. Study centers have multiple functions and are places for face-to-face tutorials, examinations, academic counseling, viewing/listening broadcast lectures. Besides, they are places where library services were provided. They have put in place system for course preparation and revision. They have set maximum years that a distance teaching material will be

used, after that it will be re-written. In the provision of distance education, student assessment is one area that has an impact on quality. The institutions have devised mechanisms that help to assess their students objectively and appropriately. The sampled institutions don't apply the "Tutor Marked Assignment" but rather they use tests, quizzes, project works and final examinations to assess student's achievement. To foster communication and cooperation among students, institutions like Nihon University have organized the student group. The sampled institutions have also devised mechanisms to collect feedback from their respective students about courses and programs of distance education and this has helped them to take corrective measures on issues raised which in turn improves quality of distance education.

Key Words: Distance education, Japan, Ethiopia, Benchmarking lessons

I. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

It is important to highlight the increasing importance and popularity of the distance education (DE) systems in the world. Reddy (1999) has underlined the need for distance education in developing countries, especially in Africa, for expanding educational opportunities, development of a country, and to have manpower that carry out social and economic activities. In addition, in most developing countries educational opportunities are available to a small percentage of the population. This is because of limited access to conventional education in classrooms. So, distance education will be the best alternative for opening wide access to these groups. DE is about the recognition that everyone needs education to adequately function in society. Reddy has put forwarded the following reasons for founding the distance teaching universities: realization that adult people with jobs, family and social commitments constituted a large group; a wish to serve both individual and society by offering study opportunities to adults, among them disadvantaged groups; they found in many professions for further training at an advanced level; and a belief in the feasibility of an economical use of educational resources.

Teaching at a distance is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner. Moreover, the learner is separated from the learning group. In addition to shifting the physical location, the term distance education conveys an impression of ever-increasing technological resources for organizing, presenting and disseminating knowledge (Shomaker, 1998). Distance education has its own advantages and disadvantages. It could be used for expanding access to education, for alleviating trained human power, serve as a means for institutional transformation, etc. scholars also agree that distance education has barriers like lack of feedback or contact with the teacher (Johnson, 2003). Distance education can be used to groups who are unable to make use of traditional/conventional provision of education for various reasons.

Distance education has been utilized in Ethiopia. Accordingly, in the last few years, it seems that distance education has gained its place in the education system of the country. Several government and private institutions are opening and providing distance education programs to the public. The Addis Ababa University, commercial college, in collaboration with the British University, provides diploma and MBA programs to government officials. Different government universities such as Alemaya University, Bahir Dar University, and Mekelle University are providing distance education programs to up-grade the educational qualifications of teachers. The Ethiopian Civil Service College is also providing diploma level distance education programs in different fields of specializations to the civil service employees of the country.

Alpha University, Admass University College, St. Mary University College, etc. are among the private higher educational institutions providing distance education programs in Ethiopia. It is observed that distance education is a steadily growing education in Ethiopia. However, unlike the conventional system, research in this model of education is rather limited. There is a need for conducting research on distance education and provide information for policy makers. Within higher education, there is evidence of constant innovation and changing approaches to provision of distance education. The provision of quality distance education in developing countries like Ethiopia should be improved. Nowadays quality is the main issue in the provision of education in higher education institutions, where distance education is not exception. Currently the Government of Ethiopia has banned the provision of distance Education in the country for quality and other reasons. To improve the quality of Distance Education, taking benchmarking

lessons from other countries, like Japan, which have good experience in the provision of distance education is of great importance. The aim of this paper is to explore the best practices in the provision of distance education in selected higher education institutions of Japan that could be used as best practices for Ethiopian Distance Education.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to take lessons from three selected higher education institutions of Japan (The Open University of Japan, Nihon University, and Waseda University) that could be drawn as lessons to the Ethiopian distance education. Though Japan is technologically advanced country, more emphasis was given to the print media and other related issues like; teaching material preparation and revision, the use of simple technology in provision of distance education and assessing/monitoring/authenticating student performance in distance learning.

1.3 Significance of the Research

The research is aiming at assessing best practices in the provision of distance education in selected institutions of Japan that could be used as lessons for Ethiopia. The researcher hopes the study would provide information that could contribute to the improved provision of quality distance education in Ethiopia. The research could also have a major significance as it could be used as a basis for policy and program decisions. The information obtained will also enrich the existing body of knowledge. Finally, the study can serve as a base for the research community and lead other researchers to study in the area.

1.4 Limitation of the Research

The researcher has faced a challenge in accessing secondary data sources of the selected higher education institutions as they were prepared in Japanese language. To overcome this challenge, the researchers' advisor has assisted in translating some of the most important documents to English. Moreover, the OUJ being single-mode institution, offering distance education only, has

different management structure than most Ethiopian higher education institutions which are dual-mode institutions, which contains both the distance and the conventional on-campus education.

1.5 Method of the Research

A purely qualitative research involving primary and secondary data was employed to identify best practices in the provision of distance education in the selected higher education institutions of Japan. Semi-structured interview was used to collect primary data from 7 professors (instructors) of the selected institutions. Secondary data was also collected from the respective institutions.

1.5.1 Sampling Design

Three higher education institutions were part of this benchmarking qualitative study. Open University of Japan (OUJ) was selected purposively while preparing research proposal for the funding organization, the Japan Foundation. The other two Universities, Nihon and Waseda University, were selected and arranged by the researcher's advisor as they are convenient for arrangement. From OUJ, 5 professors (Instructors) were selected purposively for interview by considering their experience in distance teaching and production of distance teaching materials. 2 professors (one from Waseda and the other from Nihon University) were selected purposively as key-informants.

1.5.2 Data Sources

Both primary and secondary data sources were used for this research. Primary data were collected from instructors and coordinators of the distance education of the selected institutions using semi-structured interview and key-informant interview. The secondary sources of data were gathered from official statistical documents and other related documents of the selected higher education institutions.

1.5.3 Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interview and key-informant interview was conducted to collect primary data from the selected interviewees. The interview guidelines focused on issues like; teaching material preparation and revision, quality assurance mechanisms, assessment of learners, technologies in distance education, etc. Secondary data was also collected from different sources of the selected higher education institutions and used for analysis.

II. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Distance Education

Distance education is known by several names, such as, correspondence education, home study, independent study, external study, open learning, open education, off-campus program, etc. Print medias are at the heart of correspondence institutions (Reddy, 1987). Correspondence education does not have the benefits of audio, video, and computer-based technologies. Today, multimedia approach is the cornerstone of distance and open education system. Compared to the formal educational institutions, there are fewer learning restrictions in the open system. The concept of openness is linked to the idea of access to education. For Reddy (1987) openness involves the following three ideas: People: it would not prohibit applicants on account of their lack of educational qualifications; Place: learning is not restricted to classrooms; and Multimedia approach: the use of new methods and means of teaching. Lockwood (1995) has itemized the following points to distinguish between conventional classroom learning and distance as to why distance learning is said to be open:

- there is no age restriction in terms of someone being too old to study
- there is no strict adherence to entry qualifications
- the learner, in most cases, decides on his/her own pace of study
- the learner is in charge of his/her own study timetable

Reddy (1999) has defined distance education as “the system of education in which education is imparted to students from a distance” (p.1). This definition contains two basic elements: the physical separation of teacher and learner; and the changed role of the teacher, who may meet the students only for selected tasks such as counseling, giving tutorials or solving students’ problems. Scholars like Shomaker (1998), Thrope (1993), Johnson (2003), Lockwood (1995), also shares the idea that there is physical distance between the instructor and the student. Selim (1987) also shares the idea that separation of teacher and student based on the self-instructional principle. So, distance education refers to the teaching learning process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner.

Keegan as cited in Reddy (1999) suggests the following main elements in any definition of distance education:

- the separation of learner and tutor as opposed to face-to-face teaching
- the influence of an educational organization which distinguishes distance education from private study
- the use of technical media, e.g. print, audio, or website to unite tutor and learner
- the provision of a two-way communication so that the student may engage in dialogue with the tutor
- the possibility of occasional meetings for purposes of interaction
- the self-directed nature of the learner’s involvement

In short for Keegan, distance education is the system of education where students learn by themselves in the absence of classrooms. According to Shomaker (1998), distance education is a means of attracting more enrollments by recruiting from a wider pool of students who were place-bound by home, family and employment.

Belanger and Jordan (2000) put distance education as “education or training delivered to individuals who are geographically dispersed or separated by physical distance from the instructor using computer and telecommunication facilities” (p. 6). The authors also added the difference between the terms distance teaching and distance learning, even though they are used

interchangeably, they refer to two different concepts. They viewed distance teaching from the instructors' side and involve delivering education or training material while not being physically present at the same location as the students. On the other hand, distance learning is viewed from the learners' perspective. Learning may not occur in the distance environment if there are barriers from the learners' point of view.

Selim (1987) has identified three elements which differentiate distance education from the conventional teaching approach. First, distance education system involves permanent recordings of instructions in the form of print, audiotapes, Videotapes, or some other forms of electronic media. Second, distance education system highly relies on self-instructional principles which actually are learner oriented. Third, from its nature, distance education requires the use of wider range of expertise for effective instructional course productions.

Peters (2000) has explained distance education system using the idea of industrialization. They argue that distance education is influenced by principles of industrialization like rationalization, division of labour, the assignment of fragmented tasks to specialists, mechanization and automation. Some similarities include:

- The development of distance study courses is just as important as the preparatory work prior to the production process.
- The effectiveness of the teaching-learning process is particularly dependent on very careful planning and adequate organization.
- The function of the teacher is split up into several sub functions and performed by specialists as, for instance, in the production process at an assembly line.
- Distance education can only be economical if the number of students is great: mass education corresponds to mass production.
- As is the case with the production process, distance education needs capital investments, a concentration of the available resources, and a qualified

Clearly understanding the difference between distance education and conventional on-campus education is of great importance to plan accordingly.

2.2 Quality in Distance Education

Although the benefit of DE is unquestionable, quality issues are also together. Most institutions are struggling with many challenges in order to provide quality distance education. There is a perception, among educators and the society at large, that graduates from DE are low graded ones and are also considered not competent with students from the on-campus graduates (SAIDE, 2004; Siddigui, 1987). No one will disagree with the fact that distance education should achieve quality in the overall system commencing from course design to graduation of learners. These may include course design, course preparation, teaching material production, facilitating student support, delivery, assessment, etc. But the question is, what is quality?

Do people attach the same meaning to the word er education has many stakeholders like students, staff (teaching and non-teaching), government, accreditors, employers, society, etc. and each has a different perspective and definition of quality. Many scholars have defined quality in a quite different way depending on their experience, assumptions and values. Some educators define quality in terms of the quality of teaching materials produced. Others might give more weight to the presence of two-way communication as a measure of quality. Garrison and Shale as cited in Modesto and Tau (n.d) also shares the idea that quality of education could be improved through increased two-way communication. Quality was reflected in the nature and frequency of communication between students and teachers and among students also. They also appreciated the impact of print media design and other resources on the quality of education.

Generally, those who view independence as the ultimate educational goal will measure quality in how self-contained the package of learning materials is when supporting the learning process. On the other hand, those who see sustained collaboration as the educational ideal will generally define quality education in terms of the nature and degree of the two-way communication process.

For other scholars like Parri (2006), quality is defined in the following ways:
Quality as exceptionality, excellence: this definition demands higher education institutions to be always the best, and should perform better than others.

Quality as zero errors: this one stresses the point that quality as consistent flawless outcome or perfection.

Quality as fitness for purpose: this definition is the most widely used in higher education institutions. This definition demands institutions to define goals in their mission statements. The level of achievement of the services or product to meet the goal set will be the basis for quality assessment. The product or service should meet the needs and wishes of the customer. Understanding customer wish will be of paramount importance and this demands setting goals that are relevant.

Quality as transformation, shaping: this one gives more emphasis to students, which are considered to be the main customer of the higher education quality. It deals with the notion that how much higher education institutions have prepared their students so that they can manage the future working life with the help of the knowledge, experience, and skills acquired at the university.

Quality as value for money: the essence of this approach is about cost-effectiveness.
Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2002) argued that most accrediting organizations routinely review seven key areas of institutional activity when examining the quality of distance learning.

- Institutional Mission. Does offering distance learning make sense in this institution?
- Institutional Organizational Structure. Is the institution suitably structured to offer quality distance learning?
- Institutional Resources. Does the institution sustain adequate financing to offer quality distance learning?
- Curriculum and Instruction. Does the institution have appropriate curricula and design of instruction to offer quality distance learning?
- Faculty Support. Are faculty competent engaged in offering distance learning and do they have adequate resources, facilities, and equipment?
- Student Support. Do students have needed counseling, advising, equipment, facilities, and instructional materials to pursue distance learning?

- Student Learning Outcomes. Does the institution routinely evaluate the quality of distance learning based on evidence of student achievement?

In whatever way we define quality of education, there are some common factors that deter the quality of distance education. The first factor is giving less time to the planning stage of launching distance education. As noted earlier in section 2.1, the development of distance study courses is just as important as the preparatory work prior to the production process in industry. Course approval should subject to a thorough quality assurance procedure as compared to conventional universities (Rosenblit, 1997). The Open University of Israel has the so called 'subject area committees' which are composed of academics coming from different disciplines to discuss each course proposal thoroughly. Designing and preparing courses in a hurry is another factor that hampers quality of distance education. Shortage of finance to produce high quality teaching materials and to have well organized study centers is also considered as a factor. Rosenblit argued that preparation of high quality learning material is at the center of the teaching learning system as it helps to facilitate and enhance self study of learners. Study centers are very important places in the provision of distance education for making students study independently, in group with other students and continuously (Hussain, 2008). Lack of well organized study centers is an implication that we are compromising quality. Conducting classroom teaching, providing academic counseling, availing books for study, availing taped lectures for reviewing, providing place for examination, and providing a place for students to meet and interact are some of the roles of study centers (Reddy, 1987).

Poor language competency of students also has an impact on quality of distance education (Reddy, 1987). Some countries, multi-lingual societies, like India and Sri Lanka produce course materials in more than one language to solve the problem.

2.3 Assessment in Distance Education

One area that needs attention to bring quality in distance education is the assessment and evaluation of students. The purpose of student evaluation is to know the status of achievement of educational objectives by learners. Appropriate assessment tools should be used in evaluating

learner's level of attainment of educational objectives set. Both continuous and end-of-course assessment can be used in distance education system. Reddy (1987) challenged the application of continuous assessment in distance education system as there is no continuous contact between the teacher and the learner. Different distance education institutions have adapted different mode of student assessment techniques. For example; end-of-course examinations were used mostly in Bangladesh Open University (Sultana & Kamal, n.d). Literature from Taylor (1989) indicates that in Allama Open University, Pakistan, home assignments constitute 40 % value and end of term examinations constitute 60 %. Past experiences of Sukhothai Thamnathirat Open University, Thailand indicates that student must undertake an assignment at the conclusion of each major topic and they constitute 20 % of the total evaluation, the remaining 80 % is for final examination. In the Open University of Japan, the evaluation was done (the same is true now) course by course assignments and course examinations. Only those who complete and submit the assignment which is called "mid-term assignment" are permitted to take the end of the semester examination which constitutes 100 % evaluation. The purpose of assignments is just to check the status of students' and to decide their eligibility to take the final examination (Aoki. 2010a). In the University of Terbuka, Indonesia, students have to take unit tests which account 30 percent and the remaining 70 percent will be for the end of semester examination. In some universities of China, experiences indicate that evaluation was mainly through examinations held at the end of each semester. In Andrha Padesh Open University, India, practices showed the same as OUJ; evaluation through home assignment is common but assignments are not counted to determine grade (Taylor, 1989). Case study on International Institute for population Sciences by Sinha et al. (2007) also shows that assessment of students is done by conducting two classroom examinations in a year. In addition, every student is required to produce a research paper at the end of courses.

SAIDE (2004) noted the importance of formative assessment as a crucial part for successful quality assessment in distance education. It is difficult to put in place formative assessment with large-scale programmes, which its absence denies students their opportunity to get continuous feedback on their work. An ethical issue over home take assignments (Tutor Marked Assignments, TMA) is another concern in the provision of distance education.

2.4 Distance Education in Ethiopia

In 1967 the Ministry of Education in collaboration with Addis Ababa University (Extension division) established a correspondence study unit and this marked the beginning of distance education in Ethiopia (Teshome Nekatibeb & Thomas D. Tilson (n.d)). The Unit was established to develop a Senior Secondary Correspondence Course for adults working in various ministries, factories and military organizations in general and teachers in particular. The programme was led by AAU until 1976 after that it was transferred to the Ministry of Education under the Department of Adult and Continuing Education, and later the Educational media Agency (EMA).

Literature from KUAWAB as cited in Tesfaye Ejigu (2002) indicates that an institution known as the British Tutorial College (BTC), which was based in Kenya, had opened an office in Addis Ababa as early as 1967 and offered correspondence education courses in Ethiopia. However, admission to higher educational institutions was based on students' achievements in entrance examinations conducted by the examining body of the University of London. 7,000 students were graduated from the BTC between 1967 and 1978. It was also noted that two other institutions opened office in Addis Ababa, International Correspondence Schools (IC S) and Trans-World Tutorial College (TTC) in 1972 and 1980 respectively. Courses offered by ICS and BTC were: Marketing and sales management, Management, Office Management, Book Keeping and Accounting, Secretarial Science, Industrial Technology and Auto-Mechanics, Tropical Agriculture and Journalism.

Eshetu Woncheko in his paper presented at the AAU Strategic Planning Conference (November 7, 2006) indicated that distance education in Ethiopia was initiated in the 1950's with the objective of upgrading primary school teachers. He also noted that the project commenced under the name *directed study for teachers* through a bilateral agreement of the Ethio-USA cooperative education program implemented by the then Haile-Selassie I University from 1968 to 1972. In 1975, after three years of interruption of the program, the Ministry of Education revived distance education through the Education Media Agency by providing service to primary school teachers.

The pioneer private distance education institution in Ethiopia is Alpha University College, which was formerly known as the National Vocational and Technical Distance Education Enterprise which was established in 1981. The institution was established with an objective of offering vocational and technical training to those Ethiopians who had no opportunity to attend day and evening classes. In 2005, Alpha University College was established from the former National Vocational and Technical Distance Education Enterprise with an objective of providing Relevant, Quality and Affordable Education.

Currently, most public and private higher education institutions are actively participating in the provision of distance education in Ethiopia. Moreover, most Ethiopians are attending their study through distance from different higher education institutions which are found abroad. The UNISA (University of South Africa) which has learning centres in different parts of the world has also opened a regional learning centre in Addis Ababa in January 2007. It is reported that there are a total of 64 private institutions and 23 public institutions in Ethiopia which provide distance education.

Teshome and Thomas argued that distance education in Ethiopia is needed for a variety of reasons like, expanding access of secondary education, improving the flexibility of education with working conditions, improving the competence of teachers in primary education, improving student learning, reducing educational costs, building capacity in the education and civil service sectors. Deribssa (2010) has also noted the importance of distance education in Ethiopia and has also recognized the presence of high demand for distance education.

Recent studies on the Ethiopian distance education by Deribssa Abate (2010) clearly indicates that the sector is married with a lot of problems and challenges that needs to be tackled for quality provision. According to Deribssa, much emphasis was given to the conventional education and less attention was attached to the distance education, and this was manifested in different situations like less attention given in the 1994 Education Policy of the Country and in the nature of resource allocation, which has neglected distance education at all levels of the education system. According to the researcher, lack of policy in distance education is the center of crisis which has resulted in failure of the system in organizing and coordinating distance

education. Moreover, the research has indicated that institutions providing distance education are characterized by a resource and capacity crisis which has an impact on course design, instruction and support, and assessment and evaluation of students. The main conclusion of the research indicates that lack of national policy and guidelines on distance education has adversely affected the practice of the distance teaching in Ethiopia.

In August 2010, the Federal Government of Ethiopia has banned all distance education programmes provided by both private and public institutions in the country, claiming that 'distance learning education is unnecessary at this stage in the development of the education sector'. By the time when this report was compiled, the task force which was organized to conduct research on different issues pertinent to distance education system of Ethiopia was on process and has also been expected to disclose the findings of the study shortly.

III. Findings of the Study

3.1 History of Distance Education in Japan

Before World War II, some Japanese universities published lecture notes intended for adult learners who were not regular students. These lecture notes were reportedly very popular and many adult learners utilized them (Mizoue, 2005). According to Kato, Kanya, and Yoshida (1993), the first practice of modern correspondence education in Japan took place in 1883, when Houbunkan School offered courses in Chinese literature to off-campus students. It is also indicated that another school named Tokyo Gakkan inaugurated correspondence program in stenography and bookkeeping in the same year. Full development of distance education in Japan began after World War II and this is due to the Fundamentals of Education Act and the School Education Act were enacted in 1947. Due to this legal arrangement, high schools and higher education institutions established correspondence education programs to open opportunity to people at large. Keio University and Hosei University established correspondence education courses in 1947, which were followed by Chuo University in 1948 and Nihon University and

Japan Women's University in 1949 (Kato et al., 1993). Distance learning has been around Japan for more than 50 years (Aoki and Bray, 2006?). Though it has been for more than 50 years, Aoki (201 0a) has described that Japanese distance education is still old static correspondence schools. E-learning is also popular in Japan like other parts of the world. The first time that correspondence schools or distance learning schools were officially recognized dates back to 1950. This is the time were it is noted as the beginning of distance education in Japan higher education system. Since 1950, the Japanese Ministry of Education has maintained two separate accreditation system: one for traditional on-campus institutions and the other for correspondence education. Distance education in Japan is launched with a view to provide access to education for those who cannot afford it in terms of the traditional mode of schooling (Abe, 1987). Aoki has also noted that distance education programs were considered as secondary to the regular on-campus programs but now a days there is a change and she has expressed her feeling that it might disappear in near future.

According to Kubota et al. (2008), distance education universities in Japan have increased for three main reasons. The first is the rapid development of information and communication technologies like internet, computers and mobile phones. Decreasing youth population caused increased competition among universities to attract, in addition to the youth generation, adults such as office workers, house wives and retired people. This is the second reason. The third reason is the change in the Japanese government policy of 2002 which allows students to get all credit units by distance learning courses without taking any face-to-face courses. Interactive synchronous media, such as video conferencing were allowed to substitute the face-to-face schooling and students can complete their degree by attending only distance courses.

In 2009, there are 773 Universities in Japan among which 86 are national universities, 92 are public universities, and 595 are private universities. Besides, there are 6 universities providing correspondence courses only (1 public and 5 private universities) (MEXT, 2009). From the above university statistics, there are around 43 universities that provide distance education. Out of the 43 universities, 37 universities provide both on-campus and distance education programs, while the remaining 6 are solely for distance education providing graduate and undergraduate programs. Among the six universities which provide only distance education, the Open

University of Japan is the most popular one with the largest distance education program in Japan and currently has about 85,000 students. The Open University of Japan uses broadcasts as a major medium to provide education. The second largest is Soka University (16,433 students) and the third largest is Bukkyo University with total enrollment of 15,600.

Three higher education institutions of Japan which provide distance education were considered to draw lessons and the findings are presented below. The Open University of Japan provides distance education only, no conventional on-campus education, while the other two institutions Nihon and Waseda University provide both distance and on-campus education.

3.2 The Open University of Japan

3.2.1 History of the Open University of Japan

The Open University of Japan (OUJ) was founded in 1981, and it was formerly known as the University of Air. The University of Air began enrolling students in 1985 with the following aims:

- To provide chance of lifelong university level education to working people and housewives
- To provide a innovative and flexible system of university level education which is open to all high school graduates,
- To cooperate with other universities in making full use of the latest knowledge and newly educational technology in offering a system of higher education which meets contemporary needs, and
- To contribute to further improving higher education in Japan by strengthening cooperation with other universities, promoting the transfer of credits, encouraging faculty exchange, and disseminating broadcast materials (Abe, 1987; Kato et al., 1993).

It modeled itself upon the Open University UK. Currently OUJ has set two objectives to achieve; providing opportunities for obtaining higher education to a wide range of people and promoting broadcasting media for universities and higher level education. When we see the chronology of

OUJ, OUJ started television and radio broadcast instructions in 1985. In 1987, it joined the Asian Association of Open Universities. It has advanced in technological innovations and in 1998 it began nationwide broadcasting over communications satellite digital broadcasting. This makes it unique institution than the majority of distance education institutions in Japan; it uses radio and television broadcasting as the major mode of instruction. In 2000, OUJ joined the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). To expand high level education, it launched the school of graduate studies in 2001. To this end, it began accepting students to the school of graduate studies and began broadcasting graduate school lectures in 2002 (OUJ, 2009; Aoki, 2010a).

The Open University of Japan is the largest distance higher educational institution in Japan. Currently it has a total of about 85,000 students, which is estimated to be one-third of the total distance education students enrolled in Japan (Kubota et al., 2008). Age wise, 48% of the undergraduate students are in their 30s and 40s and 32 % of the students are over 50s. 56 % of the undergraduate students and 36% of the graduate students are female. Out of the 85,000 students, about 52,000 students are enrolled in degree programs and on average it takes 6.5 years to earn a degree (Aoki, 20 10b).

The Department of Liberal Arts offers five BA level course; Living and Welfare, Psychology and Education, Society and Industry, Humanities and Culture, and Nature and Environment. School of Graduate Studies offers six programs, Human Life and Health Sciences, Sciences of Human Development and Education, Clinical Psychology, Social Governance, Arts and Information Science, and Natural and Environmental Sciences. The University also provides Nondegree "Expert" courses like mathematics and social sciences, energy and environment, Japanese culture and society, civil society and public affairs, social planning, food and health adviser, understanding management, and etc.

A lot can be said about OUJ for being the largest and for having 30 years of experience in the provision of distance education, but issues that could be taken as a lesson, by considering different situations like technology, were given emphasis. The following are some of the features

of OUJ that could give as an insight of the practice based on which we can draw lessons for benchmarking:

3.2.2 Practices of the Open University of Japan

1. Use of study centers: There are 57 local study centers located throughout Japan. The OUJ rent a part of the land or buildings of other universities, lifelong learning centers, or private institutions under contract base to use as a study centers. These study centers have multiple functions; they are places were classroom sessions (face-to-face tutorials) were conducted. Examinations were also held in the study centers. Moreover, they are centers for academic counseling, opportunities to view/listen broadcast lectures, and library services. They are also centers used for holding extracurricular activities and friendly exchanges among the students. Study centers are located on campuses of public/private universities or incorporated in facilities of municipalities. Strengthening services provided at study centers is crucial for quality improvement.
2. Use of entrance examinations: Entrance examination will be administered for students who apply to join the graduate school but no entrance examination is administered for students who want to join undergraduate programs.
3. Course material preparation and revision: A teaching material is prepared individually by a professor. To prepare a teaching material, the University allocates two years. The maximum year that a teaching material will be used without revision is usually four years (it might go up to six years in some courses) and after that the curriculum committee decides on the need for revision or continuation of the material and will be acted accordingly.
4. Study requirements: To earn a BA degree, students are expected to take 124 credit hrs with a minimum of 4 years. If students are not able to complete within the minimum 4 year, they can extend their education up to a maximum of 10 years (without withdrawal) or 14 years (with 4 years of withdrawal with justifiable reasons). For credit approval, the minimum period is a semester like the conventional education system. One semester comprises of 15 weeks. If a student fails in a course, he/she can request for re-test. If failed again, they are asked to re-register that particular subject.

5. Assessment: In the Open University of Japan, assessment of students is conducted through course by course assignments and course examinations. Completing a mid-term assignment which is conducted after the 8th week of a semester (which has 15 weeks) is one of the requirements before taking the final exam at the end of the semester. Only those who complete and submit the "mid-term assignment" are allowed to take the end of the semester examination which constitutes 100 percent evaluation. The purpose of the mid-term assignment is to check the progress of students on the particular subject matter and to decide their eligibility to take the final examination.

6. Quality assurance mechanisms: The University has different mechanisms which assist in assuring quality in the education. Some of them are presented as follows:
    - Every teaching material, prior to printing, is reviewed by two blind reviewers (mostly coordinators of study centers).
    - Each broadcast program and examinations are reviewed by two colleague professors
    - The evaluation of each course by students is conducted every year and the information collected will be used to update the course material.
    - Examinations are done in face-to-face mode. All learners have to attend the examination for credit approval in one of study centers.
    - If students have any questions in any course, they can ask in the Q&A corners of the web, by telephone or they can also look for assistance at the nearest study center.
7. Face-to-face instruction (schooling): The face-to-face schooling which is held at the study centers provides a platform to conduct experiments and gain practical training. Students can ask questions on matters which are actually difficult for them. In order to graduate, regular students (those registered for Bachelor and Masters Degree) must complete at least 20 credits through schooling. (Each class lasts for 2 hrs and 15 minutes and students receive one credit by attending five classes for one course during a semester). The remaining credits from the total 124 credits will be covered using broadcasting and printed text books. The 20 credits will be earned through schooling and

has also printed text materials. This demands all learners to come to study centers to attend classes. The schooling helps students to acquaint and support each other.

8. Broadcast lectures: The OUJ employs a TV and radio broadcast-based approach supplemented by printed textbooks and face-to-face instruction sessions. Therefore, TV and Radio are there for students to attend and they can study at home at their own pace. If a student missed a transmission or has an interest to retake a lecture, he/she might visit one of the study centers and watch/listen to a lecture using video tapes, DVDs or CDs. Some of the radio broadcast lectures can also be accessed from the internet. In OUJ, one semester comprises of 15 weeks, and two credit courses broadcast 15 broadcast lectures (once a week, 45 minutes each), and four credit courses broadcast 30 lectures (twice a week, 45 minutes each). Each course is broadcast on either radio or television. Broadcast classes are provided from 6 am until 12 midnight every day.
9. Printed study materials: All the courses offered through broadcasting are provided with textbooks. 2 credit courses have 100-120 page textbooks, written by the lecturer who teaches respective courses (Galsanjamts and Ulziinemekh, 1997).
10. Library services: The University Library, headquartered in the city of Chiba, is a comprehensive library. Smaller libraries attached to the Study Centers are utilized by students; students can access the books and journals that are in the University Library in Chiba through the Study Centre library. In addition to this, some students can access libraries where the OUJ makes an agreement with national/private universities for their study (The Open University of Japan, 2009).

These are some of the lessons from OUJ that could be adapted to our existing situations. Now let us see practices from Nihon and Waseda universities:

3.3. Nihon University

3.3.1 History of Nihon University

Nihon University is a private University which was founded in 1889 as Nihon Law School which was renamed as Nihon University in 1903. It offers courses in all disciplines of humanities,

social sciences and natural sciences. It has 20 graduate schools and 11 colleges. Nearly 81,000 students are enrolled in its graduate schools, colleges, correspondence division and junior college. The University provides both conventional and distance education.

The Nihon University correspondence division was founded in 1949 and currently has the following colleges: College of Law (department of Law, political sciences, and economics), the college of humanities and sciences (department of Japanese literature, English literature, Philosophy and History), the college of economics (department of economics), and the college of commerce (department of commerce). It has 18 study centers to support learners. Currently around 7000 students are enrolled in the correspondence division in four faculties; Law, Literature and Science, Economics and commercial (Nihon University, 2010). Like the experience from OUJ, to earn a Bachelor's degree, all students are required to take 124 credits including some schooling (face to face) credits. Some college like college of humanities and sciences require their students to submit a graduation thesis and pass a comprehensive oral examination.

3.3.2 Practices of Nihon University

1. Assessment: In Nihon University, most subjects have 12 chapters and for almost 90% of courses "understanding check tests" will be held after every 3 chapters to see their progress. These tests mostly constitute 50% of evaluation and the remaining 50% will be assessed using final examinations. Tutor marked assignments are not part of the assessment in distance education system of the university like the case from the OUJ.
2. Use of media: There is no use of Medias like TV and radio. An academic instruction is provided by mail and includes the return of corrected reports as well as written guidance on the graduation thesis.
3. Student groups: In order to encourage closer contacts and joint study projects with students, the correspondence division of Nihon University has organized student groups in some parts of Japan. These groups hold regularly scheduled meetings and study sessions. The 18 study centers of Nihon University which are found throughout Japan are

platforms to facilitate the student groups by serving as contact points and as places where students can write reports or work on joint projects, or where they can go to freely discuss any concerns they might have about their studies.

4. Discussion board: They have also the discussion board in the web page which mainly focuses on bringing instructors and students together to discuss on issues which are not clear on their course. There is interaction between instructors and students and also among students.
5. Schooling sessions: Various schooling sessions are arranged and offered. It includes a day time schooling sessions, spring schooling sessions, night schooling sessions, summer schooling sessions, etc. Each student selects the schooling that he/she is comfortable and attends the same. Students are required to attend 30 credits of face-to-face sessions to earn BA. The Night schooling starts at 18:30.
6. Study periods: The minimum and maximum year to earn BA in Nihon University is 4 and 12 years respectively.
7. Revision of course materials: Course materials, once produced, they will be used for maximum of 5 years without major revision. On some conditions it may get revised before 5 years.
8. Collection of feedback: They collect feedback about courses and programs of distance education annually from their students.

3.4 Waseda University

3.4.1 History of Waseda University

Waseda University was established in 1882 with the Departments of Political Science, Law, English, and Physical Science. In 1893 it launched the first graduate courses in the Department of Literature. In the year 2007, Waseda University celebrated the 125th anniversary of its founding. Waseda is one of Japan's top private, educational institutions of higher learning. Currently it has large number of graduate schools in different fields of specializations. The e-learning courses in the School of Human Sciences which was launched in 2003 are intended to

provide through lifelong education and are the first of their kind in Japan to offer degrees through e- learning. The e-school has graduated 341 students by March, 2010. E-school heralds the beginning of a new stage of learning for Waseda University as well for Japan education (Waseda University, 2007).

3.4.2 Practices of Waseda University

1. E-learning: Like Nihon University, Waseda University has also the e-learning mode of delivery. They have about 400 courses per year, of which 200 courses were prepared in the studio. The remaining 200 were recorded in classrooms while the instructor was teaching in the conventional classrooms.
2. Course revision: Course materials were used for 3 years without major revision. Every year the instructor is expected to revise some part of the material for class consumptions but after 3 years it will be revised completely.
3. Use of feedback: They conduct student questionnaire at the end of every course which will be twice a year to assure quality of courses.
4. Online service: The University has no study centers; it provides every assistance to their students online including library services. The university provides an on-line digital library and students can access it from everywhere with their Id and password supplied by the university
5. Assessment: For more than 90% of courses they provide, the assessment depends on two parts. The first part is students will be given an assignment that is related to the course they are taking and are expected to submit a report of about 3000 words individually. The report accounts for 80% of their evaluation and the remaining 20% will be through quizzes and tests.
6. Study requirements: Students are expected to take 124 credit hours to earn BA degree and the minimum and maximum years to complete BA degree are 4 and 8 years respectively. They can re-register after 8 years. Students are also expected to produce a research project, thesis, of about 13,000 words to earn BA degree and the evaluation is conducted face-to-face. The intake capacity is 150 students every year.

IV. Recommendations:

From the above three universities, we can draw some useful practices that could help to improve the provision of distance education in Ethiopia. The following are recommendations of the study;

1. Distance education stakeholders need to give every emphasis that they are extending to the conventional education; as both contribute to the development of the country by creating trained man power that is crucial to nation development. The Ministry of Education shall have a clear and proper policy about distance education provision in the country. It was a recent phenomenon that the government of Ethiopia has banned distance education provision in the country which indicates absence of clear directions on that. Issues like accreditation of distance education institutions, course design, study centers (numbers and standards), admission and number of intake of students, staff size and composition, quality assurance mechanisms, course material preparation and revision, delivery, tutoring, assessment, etc should be embraced in the policy/guidelines issues. Rigorous process of QA needs to be put in place.

2. Forming an association for Distance Education might also be of great important. Public and private higher education institutions offering distance education will be members of the 'association'. The proposed association formulates its own code of ethics for distance education, develop guidelines for quality assurance, may organize seminars on distance education so that members may exchange and share ideas among each other and will dwell itself in other activities pertinent to DER.

3. Higher education institutions should strive and work hard to bring and maintain quality in their distance education modality. They should note that quality of education is not a onetime activity; it needs continuous follow-up and involvement of different stakeholders like students, staff, university leadership, and also the government. Quality could be achieved through different mechanisms and the commitment to quality should be part of an organization's culture. Developing a quality assurance framework for distance higher

education would also be helpful to manage the problem (Gani, 2009). Institutions should establish an internal quality assurance body that follows the provision of quality distance education, preferably separate to the conventional schooling quality assurance committee. This may conduct periodic survey about student satisfaction, retention and dropout, and end of course surveys from students as well as from teachers. The same hold true for the external national quality assurance committee, separate from the conventional one.

4. The good impact of availing some learning resources in study centers should not be underestimated. Compared to the conventional students, off-campus students need more support from their institution. To this end, institutions should have a well established, in human resource, facilities, and learning resources, study centers that could facilitate the teaching learning process. Our institutions may not be able to have a library with large collections at study centers, but they need to avail some reference books at study centers. Availing teaching materials and records of lectures using electronic devices such as CD, VCD… etc shoul d be considered. Beyond the availability, work has to be done to encourage students to use the support system. We may also try to make some arrangements with other universities and public libraries so that distance learners can use libraries at their convenience. This calls for collaboration among universities in the country.

5. Strengthening student support services (Regional/study centers, library, counseling, and language development) should be given much priority. Establishing a body called ‘student support division’ in institution providing distance education could be of a great help for learners, they can assist learners to solve their questions and challenges in collaboration with other staffs and study centers. Some research findings indicate that availability of strong learner support reduces dropout rate (Ellis, 2009). As evidenced in Creed et al. (2005), a study conducted in Pakistan suggested poor management at regional level was responsible for a 69% drop-out rate. It also indicated low rate of graduation among learners in remote areas.

6. Most scholars agree on the positive effect of maintaining student-student-interaction for achieving quality (Yang, 2008; Gupte, 2009; Farajollahi et al., 2010). Higher education institutions should try their level best to achieve student-student interaction as collaborative work drives students to higher level of thinking. To do this, institutions need to have a well established study centers that are used as plat form for the same. Universities like OUJ, demand a minimum of 20 credits (out of 124 credits to earn BA) to be earned through face-to-face classes (schooling). Other higher education institutions also have the 'student study group' which aims fostering discussion among students. Geographic location and learners convenience should be considered while forming the study group.

7. Distance education institutions need to conduct a continuous assessment of their programs and how the distance education is working. The absence of evaluation of distance education system will have an impact on the quality of its provision. Formative and summative evaluation need to be conducted to check the quality of distance education and shape the program properly. To monitor the progress of various programs of distance education like-the use of university services by students, difficulties they face in learning, effectiveness of teaching methods, dropout rates, effectiveness of instructional media, costing aspects of teaching material production, formative evaluation should be conducted. To see how the distance education is working, summative evaluation needs to be conducted. According to Reddy (1987), this evaluation is the most important, difficult and seldom undertaken. Surveys needs also to be conducted at national level, to see how distance education is progressing in the country. Sound policy should base on scientific research.

8. Like the conventional system of education, establishing recognizing and empowering learner structures such as student representative councils to represent learners on structures of institutional governance could be of great importance. Feedback from students should be collected about courses/distance education program at the end of semester as an integral part of the system. Active student involvement in the learning process is required.

9. I am not far from thinking that one of the biggest challenges that Ethiopian distance education institutions facing is ethical concern over the tutor marked assignments (TMA). There is no doubt that continuous evaluation of learners through assignments is of great importance to achieve educational objectives. The question is how we are administering it; we need to make sure that ethical concerns are not our worries. The “copy and paste’ thing, letting others do one’s assignment, etc shouldn’t compromise the quality of distance education. The Open University of Japan evaluates his students using a final examination only. As clearly indicated in the literature part of this paper, other higher education institutions evaluate using mid and final examination and some other also use a series of quizzes and tests to evaluate their learners. I recommend two things from my observation: first, underscoring the need for TMAs for achieving educational objectives but attaching less weight to it and attaching more weight to final examinations. If this is the case, care should be taken while preparing TMAs questions in such a way that they should make the learner think than merely copy from different sources. Second, to exclude TMAs from assessment mechanisms and give emphasis to examination (mid and final) which showers off the ethical concern.

10. Most distance learners are engaged in social issues like family, marriage, etc. The possibility of allowing students to opt for fewer courses per semester in order to reduce dropout problem needs to be explored and acted accordingly. Allowing learners to take courses based on their ability (setting the minimum and maximum courses per semester, setting the minimum and maximum year a student could complete) can be considered for intervention. Counseling need also to be an important part of the distance learning.

11. Institutions should recognize the need for effective staff training in distance teaching. According to Abe (1987), lack of proper training to tutors/teachers in the distance education system has an impact on quality. Institutions should also strive to equip and upgrade their students with language skills, study skills and time management skills through induction training.

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