THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models & Messages | Lessons from Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

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A newly created institution

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List of abbreviations

AUF	Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (Agency of Universities of the French-speaking World)
AVU	African Virtual University
CNF	Campus numérique francophone (Francophone Digital Campus)
DESS	Diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées (Diploma of Advanced Specialized Studies)
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LMD	Licence-Master-Doctorat
MIAGE	Méthodes informatiques appliquées à la gestion des entreprises (Computer applications for business management)

Developments since 2003

1.   Campus numérique francophone and its context

The year 2004 marked a turning point in the distance education policy of Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF). Until then, AUF had concentrated on strengthening the capability of its university members; but with the approval by its Academic Council of a whole set of new distance education courses in April 2004, the number of available courses increased from four to twenty-four. As a result, AUF is now a leading distance education provider in French-speaking universities in countries in the South. As such, it aims to achieve the following:

- adapt Francophone education and training systems to the knowledge society;
- in the context of increased international competition, offer high-quality, French language open and distance provision on an international scale, with the support of inter-university educational consortiums;
- enhance skills and promote French language academic output.

More specifically, AUF seeks to:

- offer innovative, learner-centred services using digital technologies;
- take account of the development of lifelong learning provision, while giving learners the freedom to determine where and when they study;
- provide scope for flexible course paths that are consistent with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

At the national level, at the beginning of the 2005/2006 academic year, the University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar and the Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis planned to introduce the *Licence-Master-Doctorat* system, known by its initials, LMD, or '3-5-8', referring to the length of its various *cycles*. The new system is based on ECTS-type credits. This implies that students will be offered some measure of choice regarding their course path, that their past experience will be taken into account, and that they will be able to take their courses when and where they wish. It also means that courses will be compatible with international standards, a factor that can only facilitate the development of local distance provision.

Internationally, implementation of the Bologna Process in Europe has also influenced African higher education. In spite of the development of local universities, many French-speaking African academics have studied in Europe, particularly in France, and many students go abroad to continue the process of study started in Africa. The international environment is leading African universities to join the LMD reform process. Indeed, this year the Conseil africain et malgache pour l'enseignement supérieur (the African and Madagascan Council for Higher Education) held a special meeting on this issue to develop a coordinated approach for the countries concerned.

2.   Organization and current programmes

Drawing on research into 'skills mapping', since July 2004, AUF has made available a knowledge credit and accumulation mechanism entitled Passeport TIC pour le développement (ICT Development Passport). It enables experience gained in ICT (training, participation at an

event, etc.) to be recorded electronically in a small, passport-sized booklet, thereby tracking the training path of learners. However, it does not amount to a recognized knowledge certification system at national – let alone international – level, and therefore its holders are not guaranteed that the knowledge they have acquired will be validated and taken into account for professional purposes.

3. Administrative issues

The increase in the number and nature of the distance courses on offer has led the Dakar Campus numérique francophone (CNF) to set aside dedicated rooms for distance education provision for the first time. Several computers have been upgraded in order to satisfy the requirements of certain computer science courses, so that they are compatible with particular kinds of software that make heavy use of resources, such as software for the production of multimedia content.

Course descriptions and entry requirements are now available on the AUF portal for distance courses[1]. The submission of applications is also handled fully online via the AUF portal. The role of the CNF is confined to organizing various promotional activities, for example, forwarding descriptive documents on the various courses to higher education institutions, publishing press advertisements or organizing sessions to discuss the distance provision available. CNF staff are also active in replying to requests for further information from applicants, even though the essential practical information is available online.

4. Academic issues

In 2002/2003, AUF offered just four distance courses, namely the *Diplôme universitaire Droit de l'environnement* (postgraduate university diploma in 'Environment law'), the *Diplôme universitaire Droits fondamentaux* (postgraduate university diploma in 'Basic rights'), the *Diplôme universitaire Ethique des droits de l'homme* (postgraduate university diploma in 'The ethics of human rights') and the DESS[2] UTICEF (advanced specialist diploma in 'The use of ICT for education and training'). From the beginning of the 2004/2005 academic year, however, the AUF course catalogue increased substantially in size to include twenty-four courses based on the ECTS and leading generally to *Licence* or *Master* qualifications. The following first- and second-cycle courses are now offered by the Dakar CNF:[3]

- Conservatoire national des arts et métiers certificate in statistical techniques;
- *'Label Internet'* university diploma (training in Internet use);
- University diploma in 'The ethics of human rights';
- University diploma in 'Common law';
- *Licence professionnelle* (first professional degree) in 'Developing multimedia and Internet projects';
- *Licence professionnelle* for 'Internet services design managers';

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[1] http://foad.refer.org/
[2] The DESS (Diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées, or Diploma of Advanced Specialized Studies) is a specialized higher national diploma at the level of 'Bac+5' (i.e. five years of further study after the *baccalauréat*).
[3] Certain courses are limited to particular countries or geographical areas and therefore cannot be accessed by Senegalese students.

- *Licence* (L3) E-MIAGE;[4]
- *Licences* in 'Education and health promotion' and 'Commerce and sales'.

The following third-cycle courses on offer are:

- Postgraduate university diploma in 'Basic rights';
- Postgraduate university diploma in 'Methods and practice in epidemiology';
- *Master* in educational research;
- *Master* in 'The use of ICT for education and training';
- Professional *Master* E-MIAGE;
- Professional *Master* in 'Computer applications, management, research, multimedia and e-learning';
- Professional *Master*, 'MIAGE in multimedia information systems' and professional *Master*, 'MIAGE in technologies and network applications';
- *Master* in 'International and comparative environment law'.

Establishing this group of new courses requires the recruitment of tutors from higher education institutions in potential 'receiving' countries. To this end, the CNF has encouraged staff from Senegalese institutions to offer their services as tutors to universities with distance courses. After a phase of training as trainers in distance education methodology, the precise nature of which depends on each qualification, these local tutors assume responsibility for some distance tutoring, although they may also be asked to assist with in-class tutoring. Tutors selected in this way, and who carry out distance tutoring for one of the qualifications on offer, are remunerated by the universities concerned in accordance with their normal arrangements. However, AUF generally covers in-class tutoring fees at a basic rate that is higher than the hourly overtime rate paid by the local institutions.

5.　Cooperation

On 18 March 2004, AUF and the African Virtual University (AVU) signed an agreement to develop the principle of integrated cooperation for the following purposes:

- using the capability of partner institutions in the North to offer electronic French language course material, expertise and training in the computer science, business, medical, public health and engineering fields, as well as in the training of trainers, etc. for the benefit of recipient institutions;
- strengthening existing South-South cooperation through the exchange of learning, knowledge and ideas, and the development of academic mobility for teachers, researchers and students;
- enabling African students to gain access to good quality higher education;
- developing the French language section of the AVU library;
- strengthening AVU centres of excellence;
- developing AVU capacity in the design and transmission of programmes, quality control, evaluation, accreditation and certification;
- encouraging AUF member institutions to accommodate AVU training centres;
- developing a network of AUF digital campuses on the one hand and an AVU training centre network on the other, with a view to establishing a common network;

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[4] MIAGE (*Méthodes informatiques appliquées à la gestion des entreprises*, or 'Computer applications for business management') courses lead to a professional qualification.

- increasing the supply of appropriate technology at reasonable cost to reduce the digital divide between African institutions and the academic and scientific community in the rest of the world, and providing for the use of new teaching technologies;
- boosting the research and innovation capacity of recipient institutions.

The result is a partnership between two bodies that previously had little to do with each other and were even sometimes in competition. An initial project cementing the agreement and involving the Gaston Berger University of Saint-Louis, the AUF and the AVU, may lead to the establishment of a distance course on new technology law.

6.   Lessons learned

It is important to:

- recruit tutors in sufficient numbers to ensure effective supervision for learners, to reduce the risk of their dropping out;
- combine distance learning with in-class provision;
- provide learners with preliminary ICT training so that they have the basic skills needed to make use of the resources that they will have to use during their courses;
- establish partnerships with third-party institutions in countries where distance learning is provided, so that they may act as an intermediary in administrative matters (registration, the awarding of qualifications, managing local tutors, organizing in-class sessions, organizing and supervising examinations, etc.);
- provide learners with full information about their workload and the obligations entailed in taking certain distance courses (synchronous work, group work, etc.);
- consider the introduction of special grants for distance learners so that students from the South are able to take certain very expensive courses;
- ensure that there are effective channels of communication between learners and the institutions providing the distance courses;
- combine the use of online and offline resources (particularly resources on CD-ROM) to avoid the problems of connection costs and bandwidth availability.