

Turning Ghana's Youthful Population Into Skilled Human Resource

by: George Koomson

Ghana aims to increase its per capita income from its current level of \$400 to \$1000 per annum within the next 10 to 15 years. Included in plans to bring about this development, are turning the country's large youthful population into a skilled human resource and increasing the percentage of her key technical and professional manpower. The plans identify e-learning as a cost effective and quickest way of achieving this. In this piece, George Koomson looks at how e-learning initiatives already underway in the country are doing.



By far though, the most ambitious e-learning programme underway in Ghana is the President's Special initiative on Distance Learning, (PSI-DL). Launched on April 30, 2002 to "demonstrate how open college system bolstered by ICT would work throughout the nation," the initiative, which is in three phases, is about to enter its second phase which will run along the first.

The first phase focused on delivering English and mathematic lessons to Junior Secondary Students and Senior Secondary Schools during school hours on the national television because according to the Programme Coordinator, Abena Agyakoma Kwarteng, these were the two subjects which have prevented a large number of Ghanaian youth from continuing with their education. The second phase, which is expected to start before the end of this year, will involve using a multiplicity of media, radio, television and Internet to deliver vocational, technical and teacher training education.

Kwarteng explained that the government settled on television as the mode of delivery for the first phase because studies have showed that it was the most cost effective way of delivering the lessons to widest number of pupils.

The lessons are based on the Ghana Education Service syllabus for the Junior and Secondary Schools and were designed with help of teachers from top Junior and Secondary schools in the country and previewed by experts before being aired, Kwarteng said. Two mathematics and two English lessons are delivered in one week. They are first broadcast in the morning and repeated twice, with at least once being in the afternoon.

Unlike the PSI-DL, the Distance Learning Centre of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) targets a different cohort – professionals working in government, NGOs and the private sector. The GIMPA Distance Learning Centre is one of 14 pilot centres that became operational in June 2000 globally. The Centres are all members of the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN), funded by the World Bank and counterpart funding from respective governments.

The Centre's use of video conferencing makes it possible for its course participants to interact with some of the world's top experts. Such training is often held in at least two African countries simultaneously so that participants can share experiences, according to the acting director/training coordinator of the Centre Mrs Vivian Attah.

The Ghanaian government has identified the Centre as key to its institutional reforms programmes, and according to Mrs Attah it has saved the government, donors, businesses and individuals' huge amounts of money which they would have otherwise spent on travelling expenses for just one or two participants when training is done outside the country. The Centre's facilities broaden access to many who will have missed the opportunity of sharing knowledge, experiences and skills with contemporaries around the world.

Aside it programmes it runs on institutional reforms, the Centre is also running a number of undergraduate programmes such as Business Communication and Certificate in Journalism, in

conjunction with the African Virtual University. “We decided to make use of our idle capacity,” was how Attah explained the decision to run undergraduate programmes at the Centre.

While most training programmes at the Learning Centre take place at the GIMPA campus and primarily involve continuous education for professionals, e-learning programmes run by the Global Teenage Project (GTP) take place at the various primary and secondary schools which participate in its programmes. GTP typically delivers content through the Internet in learning circles of 10 weeks. Topics treated so far in the learning circles include democracy, human rights, AIDS, environment and diversity and globalisation.



At least 5,000 pupils and students have participated in one or more of the learning circles.

GTP is currently operating in three of Ghana's 10 regions and plans to add a fourth one shortly. Schools, which want to participate in GTP's learning circles, sign a memorandum of understanding with GTP. According to the GTP project manager, Ebenezer Malcolm, his outfit adopted this procedure after it realised that not all schools, which said they wanted to participate, were committed to the programme.

“Once a school joins the programme, GTP ensures the delivery of content while the schools provide infrastructure in terms of computers and Internet Access”, said Malcolm. Also, GTP provides initial training to teachers to become facilitators of the learning circles. But not all the schools which sign on have Internet Access to their premises. Such schools often have to arrange with commercial Internet café operators so that they can use their facilities at specified periods.

Although most of these e-learning projects have been running for years and have delivered training to many, independent studies have not been done - except for GTP - on how these programmes are impacting on their targeted beneficiaries.

In the study commissioned by the initiators of the GTP found that the project had impacted positively on the lives of students and teachers in participating to schools. Authors of the report of the study reasoned that the fact that students signed into the project without prior knowledge in ICT applications but acquired skills as they progressed through and successfully completed the learning circles is an indication of success. “Some of the students indicated that the knowledge and skills they acquired were self-taught and they believed these would remain with them in their life time,” the study said.

According to the study, which interviewed 35 pupils and students who are participating in the program, 32 of participating students said they have become more critical in their questioning skills and also developed effective communication methods in submitting their findings to the “virtual classroom”. Aside that, all 35 students from participating schools attested to the fact that they observed a change in the role of their teachers from being specialists and sources of information and facts to that of being organisers, tutors and pedagogical mentors.

Like the students, teachers said the programme had helped them to organise themselves better –they now employ software programs to produce “To do Lists”, develop term planners for departments, prepare lesson notes as well as document continuous assessment of students.

The students did not give high marks to all aspects of the project. For instance, about half of the students (17 of them) interviewed raised an issue with the mode of assigning them to an Learning Circle (LC) and suggested that they would prefer to choose their own topics for

discussion, but 25 opted to “be thrown into the jungle” to discover the truths, facts and figures behind the questions their groups are asked. Four (4) students expressed reservations that the project disrupts regular schoolwork because it is not scheduled into the main school timetable and would prefer a regular school lesson to a GTP activity.

In spite of the successes chalked by the program, the study found some constraints. The foremost constraint was regular and reliable Internet Access. The current solution of visiting Internet cafes has complications because of the hesitance of the headmasters approving of the practice. They found the number of functioning computers in most participating schools limited and Internet Access is either absent or of poor quality.

In Ghana, the government hardly makes budgetary provision to procure computers for schools or install Internet Access points; schools therefore have to rely on donations from philanthropists, parent-teachers associations (PTAs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or development partners, the study revealed.

“These developments are a drawback to the success of the programme and portend a collapse of the initiative where such support is not forth coming,” the study said.

Initiators of the PSI-DL also claim the programme is impacting positively on their targeted beneficiaries. From a nationwide tour of schools, Kwarteng said her visits have shown that an impressive number of schools are making use of television lessons. Kwarteng could not give an approximate number of students or schools which have been watching the lessons because, according to her, the district education officers who should be supplying such figures have not been reliable.

Kwarteng said she found that a number of the schools have adjusted their timetables so both teachers and students could watch the programmes, while others have drawn up roasters to enable different sets of students watch at different times.

However, interviews by iConnect with the targeted beneficiaries of the PSI-DL drew a mixed report card. While some of the targeted beneficiaries said they had never watched the televised lessons, others said the few lessons they had watched had been beneficial.

Fred Akomah Nyarko is a final year student of Senior Secondary School who asserts that he has never watched the televised lessons. He stated that they had no access in his boarding school, and he had not noticed schedules to follow lessons while on vacation. While Nyarko had never watched any of the programmes, Linda Opong also a final year student of Senior Secondary of a boarding school had watched some of the televised lessons and made some difference. She points out that one lesson in English corrected her use of an English phrase and a maths lesson had changed her attitude toward mathematics. “The teacher was encouraging before he started the lesson,” she said of the teacher of one of the maths lessons she watched. Similarly, Theresa Adarkwah told iConnect that the pace of the broadcast (the pace is slower than that of the classroom) had given her greater understanding of some topics in mathematics.

While the Coordinator of the Presidential Special Initiative on Distance Learning said some schools had adjusted their timetables to accommodate the televised programmes, some schools iConnect visited had not made any adjustments.

Herbert Dadzie-Bonney is a mathematics teacher of the Winneba Secondary School and reasons that the schedule they run for the Senior Secondary is too tight to accommodate the lessons from the Presidential Special Initiative on Distance Learning. Teachers have to use a shorter time to cover their syllabus; with Ghana’s educational reforms the period spent in Senior Secondary school was shortened from 5 years to 3 years but has to cover the same syllabus. “The Senior Secondary School system is too packed, leaving very little time to do anything else,” Dadzie-Bonney said.

Dadzie-Bonney reasoned the lessons should rather serve as revision for less endowed schools, but these schools have to contend with lack of electricity and access to television sets, which the coordinator of the PSI-DL also concedes.

Although no independent study has assessed the full impact of the programmes of the GIMPA Distance learning Centre, managers of the Centre assert that the Centre has been particularly helpful when new concepts or reforms are being introduced. It has run courses aimed at preparing professionals and stakeholders for the liberalisation of the telecommunication sector; democracy and governance; judicial reform; investigative journalism, economic and business journalism; Information and Communication Technology (ICT) governance, benefits and challenges, to mention a few.

For instance, Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper was adjusted to be gender sensitive because of one of the events held at GIMPA's Distance Learning Centre, According to Attah.

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