

Première Université Régionale du Mali - Education Distance (Prem-U): Challenges and Insights

S. Mackenzie Glander-Dolo, PhD

A land of color and dust, Mali, West Africa, is a French speaking country of a rich heritage ringing with names like Timbuktu, the Niger River, the largest adobe building in Djenne, and the cliff dwelling Dogon, amazing tourist attractions, and musicians known worldwide. Mali is a country of challenges and huge potential. It is the 10th poorest country in the world by Human Development Index (UNDP, 2010). More than half of the population lives below the poverty line, and even more significant 30% are unemployed. Yet even as a landlocked country, Mali has improved its roads to take advantage of the changes in transportation routes that resulted from the Cote d'Ivoirien war, initiated the spark of ICT development in Africa by hosting the ITU conference in 2002, and has developed its gold mining by inviting outside investment. Further development is stymied by many things, not the least of which is lack of skilled workers for accounting, maintaining machinery, and running private sector businesses. Yet Mali is cited as one of the most democratized and liberalized states in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nisbet, 2008). To meet these challenges, a non-government agency, Global PlanIt, is partnering to create a community college system in Mali utilizing distance education tools.

The education system has been run on the French model of free higher education, generous academic salaries, and student grants introduced after independence. With only 29% of the population literate (second lowest literacy rate in the world); 43% of children ever finishing primary school; and only 15% go on to secondary school (UNESCO, 2009), one can hardly imagine the challenges of finding educated men and women to lead in their communities and country. Currently there is the public University of Bamako with 33,000 students, centered in the capital with one a branch opening two hours out from the capital. Due to lack of funding, regular teacher and student strikes means it takes the average student 4-8 years to finish a three-year degree. Several private institutions are attempting to compensate and offer courses or certificates and degrees in business, computer, and management. Ubiquitous learning that "Exploring the anywhere/anytime possibilities for learning in the age of digital media" (Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, *Ubiquitous Learning*, 2009) may offer solutions for underdeveloped countries such as Mali.

Structure of education system in Mali consists of: Basic Education (enseignement fondamental) composed of two cycles (first cycle - six year corresponding to primary education for children aged 7-12; second cycle (three years corresponding to lower secondary education for children aged 13-15); and Upper Secondary general education (three years for 16-18 year olds). Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET, enseignement technique et professionnel), between two and four years long. In the context of the decentralization process, the following institutions are responsible for education at each level:

- community councils are responsible for basic education 1st cycle (primary),
- 70 district councils for basic education 2nd cycle (lower secondary) and
- 15 regional assemblies for upper secondary, technical and vocational education.

Local Authorities (that control school facilities' construction) and school management committees (who provide school furniture, supplies and teaching aids), and school management committees (Comités de gestion scolaire - CGS) were instituted in 2005 as a way to improve school management. Each CGS consists of parents, teachers, NGOs, associations, and council representatives. Local authorities are responsible for the development of educational access, the recruitment and management of teachers and school management (Chiche, M., 2010).

Teachers have classes of 80-90 students in secondary school, and sometimes are in locations other than their home area creating housing and cultural difficulties. In an attempt to meet the Millennium Development Goals for primary education in 2015, Mali has not been able to invest in higher education to allow students to continue on to secondary school much less university (UNESC, 2009). The greatest challenges include:

- severe teacher shortage, particularly female teachers;
- teachers untrained in the new curriculum and pedagogy;
- no policy for pre-service or in-service education;
- lack of space in existing schools or absence of classes;
- lack of strategies and actions that address poor female participation in school;
- students without textbooks;
- limited information technology and ability to analyze data;
- heavy financial burden on rural communities that host community schools;
- limited MOE financial and human resources, particularly in rural areas (from USAID Country Strategy report, 2002).

At the tertiary level, the student/teacher ratio can reach 1000 to 1 with little access to computers. Students graduate and are frustrated by not being able to get jobs. These are challenges that require immediate attention for the stability of Mali.

The recent contexts of the need are the disruptive teacher and student strike events in Malian history (1979-80, 1991 led to the coup, 1993-4, 1997-8, and 2008) that have come out of the University of Bamako. Student and faculty demonstrations and strikes are common. Students do not get money for school, so they riot; faculty are not paid, so they quit teaching and go on strike, which upsets the students and puts a stop to developing education at the university. With 80% of the population living in the outer regions, "brain drain," the trend of students migrating to the capital for education and never returning, as well as graduates leaving the country for higher education and better jobs is a real concern.

Capacity building is critical to development. NGOs and local businesses need local human resources to carry out projects and optimize their objectives. Accountants are needed for

accurate reporting, and computer maintenance workers are needed to keep offices functioning. Workers that have integrity and know the local options for responses to meet local need are desperately required.

Raising a middle class is vital to a nation's development, and this cannot happen without adequate educational alternatives. There is evidence that, as connections are made between the technology and daily life, Malians will see benefits of the technology to connect with others, meet needs, and achieve goals (Glander-Dolo, 2010). With focus on community and user-centered needs, sustainable educational options are possible. Blending user needs and goals with innovative technology, great leaps can be made in education and training skilled workers. One possible solution is the community college model of North America.

Première Université Régionale du Mali - Education Distance (Prem-U) is a model by Global PlanIt endeavoring to assist Mali in raising a middle class that can contribute to its own growth and productivity. Community colleges create a stronger support system for students, share resources between disciplines (to reduce duplication and multiply access), allow flexible schedules and program options. Utilizing local resources to sustainably serve local need, Prem-U will provide Malian people viable tools and skills to successfully negotiate this ever-evolving world, and to give power, skills, and knowledge management tools to Malians in order for them to run their own businesses and grow their country.

Most education programs are focused on primary education at the detriment of secondary. Some higher education development initiatives have not included a tuition model, yet built big buildings that require costly maintenance, and are established outside of the current community considerations (Kettlewell, 2007). Still others do not ensure employment after their education. Many are located in capital cities further encouraging migration. Most are English based programs in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa.

Prem-U would be the participatory action project focusing on the student and community needs using innovative technology for sustainable education. Ongoing questions that arise serve to stimulate original approaches and design. Partnerships bring in fresh, innovative thinking to old inquiries. Mali's move to meet Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2009) and to decentralize their education system has created many opportunities for innovation. The time for new ways to implement growth and development has come.

Initially the students targeted will be those who can bring financial backing from their company or nongovernment organization (NGO). Then the entrepreneur such as artists, tour guides, and the small business person will benefit from courses offered through micro-loan programs. The gifted high school students and those seeking vocational certificates can use the services with the help of scholarships. Prem-U will also support the Ministry of Education in servicing teacher training and continuing education. These students will come from outlying areas, especially those whose jobs and/or families keep them in the outer regions of the country.

The implementation integrates many community partners and supports the private sector. Cooperation with the University of Bamako and African Virtual University will help with curriculum development. NGOs such as Geek Corps & 3DSquared offer hardware and scholarships. The local internet cooperative, Afriklinks with its telecentres, can serve as learning labs. An association of local leaders will advise and evaluate. Prem-U strives to serve community needs in a low-cost, sustainable fashion.

Challenges are both technological and logistical. Limited bandwidth and trained workers with technical and administrative skills requires rethinking human resources, tuition, classroom space and access, language, and textbooks.

1. Costs

- Tuition model - Policies regarding admittance and attendance would need to be established to reflect who is responsible for paying the tuition. If an employing agency sends their employees for training, minimal competencies would be required. Individuals paying their own tuition or on micro-loan funds would have to pass not only the minimal competencies, but also be successful in the introductory course(s) in order to continue. A further goal would include working with the secondary schools for potential students and grant recipients. Partnering with local secondary schools will allow us to choose 'Students of Promise' or 'Stars of our Future' in a scholarship program. These would be students that are not able to go on to University because of fit or finances but have passed the exam. Arrangements for graduates who start businesses that are successful to pay back into an Alumni Fund or name on a scholarship will also help on many levels.
- There is potential for running courses using the secondary school and teacher college facilities in the evenings to lower overhead.
- Texts would be created from modules offered by African Virtual University, free online resources, and developed in-country to be put on CDs and USB drives. An on-demand publishing program will exist at Prem-U. This is the direction many online schools are taking (University of Phoenix and African Virtual University).
- Self-sustaining enterprises such as shops and café's connected with the college will allow students to practice their skills and also publicize university successes. Museums, employment agency, and travel agencies could also be created as university extensions, internship sites, and money making enterprises.

2. Language

- There is a significant challenge to bring awareness and funding of francophone countries to English speaking countries such as the United States and Canada. Also as much of the internet resources are also in English, Prem-U will offer English courses and have a multilingual administrative staff to take advantage of these resources.

3. Access

- The base core classes are: English, accounting maths, basic computer, business entrepreneurship, and technical writing. With just these skills, a student can start a business.
- Using both initial ground courses to raise the education level, to assess individual needs, and to train the distance learning component, the needs of the incoming educational deficiencies and accommodating the student's local needs to continue working and supporting his/her family will be addressed. The distance learning component will comprise of a blend of correspondence course style and online/digital learning.
- The degrees and certificates are purposed toward marketable fields and determined by the local association through feedback from the community.
- These programs will be recognized by the appropriate Ministry of Education and ultimately seek U.S accreditation.

4. Human resources

- Organizational structure: An Association, like a parent-teacher association, would be established from each community and would include members representing finance, receiving institutions, secondary school teachers, and town leaders. This is the approach currently used in Mali. This association would act like a 'board of directors' and need instruction in group decision-making and participatory methods. All the association would exchange ideas online and at a yearly conference. The association for the community colleges is the link to the community and provides ongoing assessment and evaluation of effectiveness.
- Hiring qualified faculty and administrative staff requires seeking those with integrity, skills, vision, and connections in their fields of expertise. This is not a simple matter in Mali. However, there are those who prefer a solid working situation and feel ethically responsible to their community to help.

5. Utilizing local resources and knowledge

- The African universities network offer significant resources in different languages across the continent. The curriculum focuses on local needs, so local knowledge will be incorporated into all facets of development.
- Internships would accompany the degree and certificate programs, if the student is not already employed, and would be run through partnerships with local businesses.
- Partnering with telecentres and cyber cafes supports those enterprises and allows students access to computers and communication that most of them would not

otherwise have. By giving the students credit from their tuition at the telecentres, they can connect with faculty and send in assignments.

- Most students have cell phones and though they cannot afford minutes to call out, they can receive calls from the school and the faculty for free. As the telecommunications companies innovate, more potential exists for the use of the mobile phone.
- Technology exists and prices are lowering to enable poorer countries to deliver low-cost education. Geek Corps has created the Desert pc to withstand the rigorous climate conditions of Mali. The e-reader solutions have dropped in price and India is working on the \$35 computer. USB drives and compact discs can carry a significant amount of data very inexpensively and are accessible in-country. Ultimately providing a lease-to-buy system for mini-notebook computers would allow all students to have a computer.

Initially, Prem-U provides certificates and diplomas in technology maintenance, non-profit management, and teacher training. By creating technology maintenance and non-profit management programs, non-profit and government agencies can send their staff for further training. Critical needs of personnel and technology can be addressed, and serious issues such as green technologies and recycling computer parts will further be introduced into Malian operations. Teacher training programs in conjunction with the Ministry of Education goals can supplement the already stretched teacher education to encourage and enhance educational methods in the country. Additional training paths at Prem-U will include tourism and hotel management, agriculture and transportation, other mechanical skills, music enterprises, English as a Foreign Language, office management, and health. Ancillary programs will be included as funding from tuition and ongoing evaluation feedback is received from all involved participants.

The technology to support the school will be based in the Moodle content and student management system with a financial module added. Storage will use cloud computing with hard copy records of student progress for backup. Whenever possible, open source software solutions are used. Microsoft Office is taught as that is still the worldwide preferred software. For further student and faculty communication, such social network interfaces as Skype, Google chat, Facebook, and LinkedIn will be incorporated. All these solutions are low cost and multilingual.

Financing the program starts with grants, and the bulk of the funding would come from programs that are in place through the Ministry of Education and international NGOs. The Malian Diaspora is also needed to support such an endeavor. To perpetuate the community college, the microloan system would be established that would work through local existing systems, also partnerships with local NGOs would provide tuition for their students, work/study programs and alliances created with local businesses seeking qualified and skilled employees could offer many opportunities to attend. Partnerships with other countries might include

creating a research base for visiting scholars and teachers. Creative financing is essential for schools on any side of the oceans.

Marketing is critical but little attention is given to it in most development programs. Not only do students need to learn marketing skills, but the community college system would need to optimally utilize the resources as well. For Mali, the best approaches might include using radio stations, football stadiums, secondary schools, marketing in shops and public offices, and Internet café/ telecentres. Trinkets such as Bic pens with the college name rolled inside could be distributed at a fair, for example. A traveling booth could go from market to market both for advertising and for information circulation. Modeling marketing is one way of teaching that Prem-U will employ.

Potential problems for such a program can crop up in the hiring, enrollment, and implementation of the technology. There is bureaucratic red tape, funding challenges, and community buy-in to consider (citation). Organizations such as Higher Education for Development, Association of African Universities, and government agencies are attempting to present models and toolboxes of resources for startups such as this university concept. Information and communication technologies can offer tools for transparency and to create supportive networks.

Keeping the valuable past traditions, the desire is to integrate present technologies to create a future skilled workforce with vision at Prem-U. Adopting an 'organular' approach means organic development tapping local knowledge, integrated into the local community system, with modular options of deployment. Global PlanIt is not creating a village, but integrating into the village that exists in Mali and on the internet.

References

- Chiche, M. (2010). Country Desk Study: Mali. *Cambridge*. http://www.camb-ed.com/fasttrackinitiative/download/FTI_DS_Mali%28Feb2010x%29.pdf
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2009). *Ubiquitous Learning*. University of Illinois Press.
- Glander-Dolo, S.M. (2010). *Impact of telecentre tools on wellbeing and community: A case study and conceptual model of the Malian experience*. Doctoral dissertation. Fielding Graduate University. Retrieved from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=2187126681&Fmt=7&clientId=79356&RQT=309&VName=PQD>
- Kettlewell, G. (2007). The International Community College Town Center (ICCTC). *George Mason University*. Retrieved from <http://ipdp.gmu.edu/icctc/whatIsIcctc.html>
- Nisbet, E.C. (2008). Media use, democratic citizenship, and communication gaps in a developing democracy. *Intl Journal of Public Opinion Research*. 20(4): 454-482
doi:10.1093/ijpor/edn043
- UN Economic and Social Council. (2009). Note verbale dated 12 June 2009 from the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Mali to the United Nations addressed to the secretariat of the Economic and Social Council. DOC: E/2009/95. Geneva, July. Retrieved from <http://webapps01.un.org/nvpcms/uploads/09Mali-report.pdf>
- Further Reading: <http://www.sociolingo.com/2008/07/mali-teacher-strikes-may-mean-blank-school-year/#ixzz1A5yHR45M>