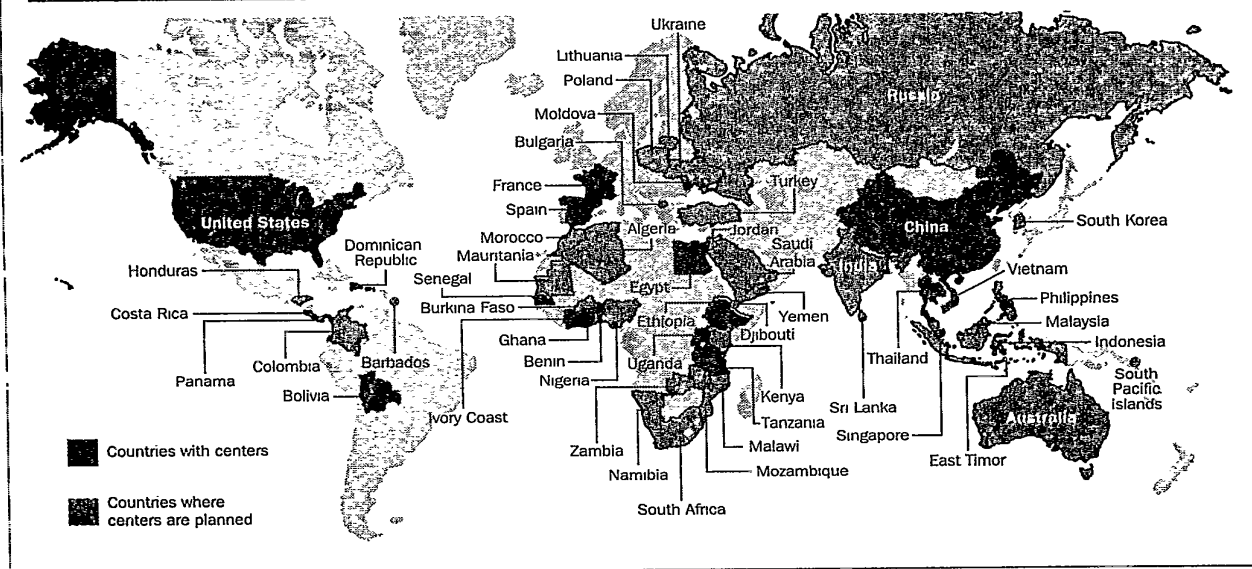


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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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The World Bank's Distance Learning Centers



SOURCE: WORLD BANK

World Bank Becomes a Player in Distance Education

It provides infrastructure in many countries that lack good telecommunications systems

BY DAN CARNEVALE

WHILE CONTINUING such traditional missions as doling out loans for hydroelectric dams in developing countries, the World Bank has also quietly become a prominent force in distance education.

The bank has spent \$20-million since 1997 to get its distance-education program started, and anticipates spending a total of \$10-million more in the next two years. It currently has 16 distance-learning centers in developing countries and plans to set up 20 more by the end of July. It has partnerships with some 200 universities and other institutions to provide content for courses enrolling as many as 150 students each.

The courses focus on skills that community leaders and government workers can use to improve their countries' economies. And although the bank has been reviled by critics who oppose what they say is its globalist approach and by others who complain about its inefficiencies, the bank's distance-education ventures don't seem to be making any enemies.

Indeed, many developing countries that want to begin distance-education programs have been turning to the bank recently. It has the experience and the resources, proponents say, to set up and deliver distance courses even in countries that don't have a telecommunications infrastructure compatible with satellite and online networks.

The bank delivers its courses to remote regions through what it calls Distance Learning Centers, which have cameras, computers, satellite equipment, and Internet capabilities. At the centers, instructors can broadcast courses, and students can use the facilities in centers halfway across the world to complete the courses. The distance-learning centers are owned and operated locally.

The World Bank was created in 1944 to help countries build up their economic and technological infrastructures and fight poverty, and it has long used education to help achieve its goals. The rationale is that education is crucial to running the various other programs for which the World Bank is loaning money.

SKILLS FOR BORROWERS

Officials created the World Bank Institute in 1956 to teach skills and concepts to key residents of countries that were borrowing money, and the World Bank began requiring that loans include requirements that countries have programs to train their citizens to use the money on various projects.

This approach presented some problems, however, as experts had to be flown around the world to set up classes, and even then couldn't teach more than 40 people at a time. Although the bank was spending a small fortune on transportation and living expenses, it was reaching only a

limited number of people. Bank officials did not start focusing on distance education until five years ago, when a new president, James D. Wolfensohn, took office.

Now instructors and students need only travel to the nearest center, and courses can be taken by as many as 150 people at a time. Students who take the courses miss a minimal amount of work, and they can apply what they learn in class in their jobs, and let the rest of the class know what works and what doesn't.

The countries participating in the distance-education programs include both those that are and are not receiving other aid from the World Bank. "The whole focus of distance learning is to increase our reach to a much larger group of people," says Joan Hubbard, a senior partner specialist at the World Bank Institute.

Soon after he took office, Mr. Wolfensohn created the Global Distance Learning Network, which took two years to create and began delivering courses this past September. He declined to be interviewed by *The Chronicle*.

The Global Distance Learning Network doesn't offer any degrees. Instead it gives certificates of completion of the more than 70 courses and seminars it offers on community and governmental improvements.

Another World Bank project in distance education that recently has been spun off into an independent institution is the Afri-

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can Virtual University (<http://www.avu.org>). It was set up to help narrow the knowledge gap and digital divide present in the continent's developing countries.

Only 2 percent of Africans eligible for college attend such an institution—the lowest rate in the world, says Shola Aboderin, acting manager of the African Virtual University liaison unit for the World Bank.

"We're not able to produce the manpower that we need for all our development needs," Ms. Aboderin says. "We had to really look at a different approach to higher education in Africa."

The idea for the African Virtual University arose in 1995, and the bank started offering courses in 1997. The bank organized the institution and contributed \$6-million to cover start-up costs, while European countries offered another \$7-million. Bank officials had to work through power failures and a lack of technology and manpower to set up shop in Africa.

'IT WILL MAKE A DENT'

In February, the World Bank made the virtual university an independent nonprofit institution. The university now operates 25 centers in 14 countries and has taught more than 12,000 students on topics ranging from computer science to business journalism. "It won't change the whole of Africa, but it will make a dent," Ms. Aboderin says.

In addition, professors from the United States and other industrialized nations who teach distance-education courses for the new institution are learning more about African culture and problems, bringing more attention to the region. The next goal for the African Virtual University is to offer degrees in October 2001.

The World Bank is also working on other projects, like a partnership with the Nature Conservancy, an environmental group, to provide distance courses in Latin

America for people who run nonprofit organizations.

The bank draws on experts from around the world to teach practical skills to people in the countries where the skills are needed most.

"Mr. Wolfensohn is focused on this being a knowledge bank," says Anna Stahmer, special adviser to the bank's director of distance learning and global outreach.

The content for all the courses comes from the World Bank Institute, United Nations agencies, and universities throughout the world. "They like to export their education," says John Middleton, the World Bank Institute's director of global learning. "We're a facilitator."

The bank taps many resources to find instructors. One course may have a team of six experts, all from different countries, Ms. Stahmer says. "A lot of the knowledge is in the developing countries, where people try to make things work," she says. "We have a lot of global perspectives on things."

Ms. Hubbard says the bank's distance-education system is popular among students in participating nations, which must apply and demonstrate that they need distance education. Some of the countries with programs are Ethiopia, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, and Vietnam. So far no nation that has applied has been turned down, Mr. Middleton says.

Officials say the bank approaches each request as a partnership with the country. The amount of distance-education help the bank provides depends on the country's needs. At times the bank provides guidance and organizational models while the countries finance the distance-education projects themselves, as in Vietnam and Singapore. Other countries need no-interest loans to venture into distance education.

The courses themselves are about running the government or organizing essential community activities. For example, one course is on how to reduce poverty while

maintaining a fiscally sound government. "It's not like taking Business 101," Ms. Hubbard says.

TEACHING OUT OF STUDIOS

Instructors can teach out of studios in any of the bank's distance-learning centers. The studios are set up like broadcast-news stations, with cameras pointing at anchor desks. In addition to broadcasting their lectures, the instructors can send course material via video and the Internet to other centers, where students watch on video and computer screens.

Students and their instructors interact through satellite feeds that give the classes the air of call-in television talk shows. The students can see and hear the instructors, but the instructors can usually only hear the students.

The centers generally hold about 30 students, and class sessions involve about two hours of instruction one day a week. Outside class, students may complete other exercises online, Ms. Hubbard says. Courses last between four and eight weeks. "It's extremely efficient learning," she says.

The bank works with the countries in determining where to set up the centers and how they are used.

The distance-education programs have not seemed to generate any resistance in participating countries, bank officials say. The programs go unmentioned in protests organized to criticize institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for contributing to commercialism and globalization.

But critics of the World Bank are dubious of the knowledge it is spreading through distance education. The World Bank teaches economic and developmental models that are dangerous to some African

countries, says Njoki Njehu, director of the 50 Years Is Enough Network, a group that seeks to promote alternatives to the bank.

The World Bank tends to teach African governments its own economic theories, which impose burdens on the nations, Ms. Njehu said. "Doing distance learning means a lot more people will have access to it," she says.

Allan H. Meltzer, a professor of political economics at Carnegie Mellon University, was the chairman of a federal commission assigned last year to evaluate seven worldwide financial institutions. The panel, known as the International Financial Institution Advisory Commission, evaluated 11 World Bank and found it had several shortcomings and inefficiencies. But no problems were brought up concerning the bank's education programs, Mr. Meltzer says.

One course at the World Bank Institute that shows particular promise, Ms. Hubbard says, is economic journalism. The course is designed to help journalists in developing nations become watchdogs by teaching reporting skills and economics.

SHARED DUTIES

Two World Bank Institute officials, Tim Carrington, the manager of economic-journalism training, and Eric Chinje, a senior communications officer, share duties in teaching the course. They bring guest speakers to a room at the bank's headquarters in Washington so their lectures can be broadcast to groups of students at about 10 distance-learning centers around the world.

A lecture one morning is about the spread of AIDS in Africa and how to report it. One of the guest speakers finishes her remarks, and

Mr. Carrington asks students to take two minutes to reflect on the lecture before asking questions. Bank instructors have found that the technique produces questions that are better thought out.

"We used to do this training when I'd get on a plane and go to them," Mr. Carrington says. "We reach a lot more people this way." Now a single lecture reaches about 150 students in Ghana, Tanzania, Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and other countries.

When the two minutes are up, the students pepper the lecturer with questions. Some are informational: How long will it be before a vaccine for H.I.V. is developed? But others are more probing: What ethical problems have arisen as drug companies have developed medicines to help AIDS victims?

The instructors answer the questions the best they can and then discuss how to humanize stories about AIDS for a stronger impact on readers. One of the guest speakers, Glaudine Mtshali, a health counselor at the South African Embassy, also takes time to tell the journalists that their reporting about the AIDS epidemic is crucial to bringing needed attention to finding appropriate treatments for the disease. "You have such an important role to play in this epidemic," she says. "One cannot speak on the matter unless you know what you're speaking about."

Mr. Chinje says the distance-education version of this course loses some of the spontaneity of face-to-face teaching, but the larger number of people that are reached—and the depth at which instructors can apply the material to real life by having the students use it immediately in their jobs—make up for it. "It's a great platform for sharing experiences," he says. ■