much as U.S.$20,000 in Africa. Regional institutions such as the AAU need to lobby vigorously on behalf of higher education institutions by exerting pressure on governments—for instance, by demanding preferential treatment for educational and research institutions. In Senegal, for instance, telecommunications services for educational institutions cost half the regular price due largely to lobbying. The consortium initiative could be effectively extended to other activities such as acquisitions of subscriptions, books, on-line databases, and lab equipment.

Institutional Memory: Pushing the Knowledge Frontiers
It is very encouraging that conferences on higher education in Africa are now commonplace. What should be religiously fostered, however, is the tracking and publication of conference papers promptly and ensuring their wide distribution. We need to capture and disseminate "institutional memory," not simply to address the challenge of "reinventing the wheel," but to push the frontiers of our knowledge of the continent's higher education system.

Selected materials from this conference will be published in the newly established journal, *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*. Hopefully, the participants and conference organizers will disseminate the lessons that were learned at the conference and allow the ideas to percolate up and down the line of administrative and management command in the respective countries and institutions.

Caveat Emptor
Change is a tricky matter, and its success or lack thereof is a complex handiwork of historical, social, economical, cultural, psychological, institutional, personal, and technical variables. Simply put, there is no one universal formula to effect change and innovation. While we strive to learn from things that worked, we also have to draw experience from things that simply failed although, we recognize that success and failure are not fully contagious.

As the Bank and other funding institutions reaffirm their commitment to higher education development after many years of neglect, expectations appear to be running high in Africa. It is, however, prudent to exercise caution in the face of this gathering euphoria in case the outcome does not live up to expectations. None of the stakeholders can afford a backlash for the second time round that may have severe consequences on the development of higher education on the continent.

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The African Virtual University— Developments and Critique
Moses O. Oketch

Moses O. Oketch is research assistant professor of public policy and education, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203, USA. E-mail: moses.o.oketch@vanderbilt.edu.

Initiatives supported by information and communications technologies (ICTs) form an increasingly important component of donor-funded development projects. One such project is the African Virtual University (AVU), established by the World Bank in 1997. AVU's mission is to bridge the digital divide and knowledge gap between Africa and the rest of the world by dramatically increasing access to "global" educational resources throughout Africa. AVU reports indicate that over 27,000 African students and professionals have participated in its semester-long courses and executive business seminars since its inception in 1997. A total of 31 learning centers have been established in 17 African nations and over 3,000 hours of courses and seminars delivered, obtained from leading universities such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the United States and Curtin University in Australia. In fact, there is no doubt that ICT-based distance education seems a reasonable approach to complementing domestic capacity in African institutions in programs such as engineering, science, and management.

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Unclear Long-Term Benefits
In spite of the impressive numbers and the prestige attached to overseas universities, in retrospect, the World Bank and others involved in the planning of the AVU seem not to have recognized the contextual complexity of establishing a virtual university in Africa. Even more important is whether Africa is ready and in need of such a university. Consequently, AVU's long-term educational and socioeconomic potential has become unclear. Equally unclear is the intergovernmental policy framework under which the AVU should operate and even more so whether it can be regulated at all. It is not evident that those involved in the planning of AVU knew how best to use tech-

nology to expand access to tertiary education in 1997, nor indeed today, because the project seems to be an overly ambitious one that is approaching its demise.

At its inception, AVU appeared to be a timely project for a region of the world that is known more for its bountiful natural resources and large labor pools and is often described by development partners as a land rich in potential but whose population lacks adequate education and training. Considering that only 3.8 percent of Africa's college-age group gets absorbed into tertiary education, AVU seemed to be a panacea to meeting the demand for higher education. However, going into its sixth year, AVU has scaled back on its original plan of becoming a fully fledged international virtual university. Instead, it is now an institution that operates conspicuously as a nongovernmental organization. There is even concern that AVU is slowly sliding onto the shelves of IT transfer projects in developing countries that have resulted in scanty success, or a frustrating case of a transfer that has failed to fulfill its initial promise. Critics have argued that AVU is no different from other World Bank education projects that may only realize minimal success when they are considered successful, but often yielding no benefits to the people the projects were intended to help. Others dismiss AVU as being useless in solving Africa's education problems and ill-conceived to expand access. Still, there are those who contend that AVU is unique, ambitious, and that it has shown a great deal of success, and only requires some adjustment. Among them are AVU center coordinators who have praised it as a means of "feeding hungry minds in Africa" and offering the best way forward to integrating technology in Africa's higher education. To be sure, both polarized groups have a point. For the critics, the issues are potent: did African countries buy into AVU blindly without considering the likely long-term benefits? Could it be possible that the funds used in establishing AVU would be better utilized to revitalize the familiar but deteriorating conditions at the state universities? Or, is AVU the roadmap that will launch Africa's higher education into the information and technology world? The vast literature suggests that AVU is already a frustrated project being pushed to the periphery. One piece of evidence in support this view is the absence of its mention in many of the development plans and economic survey reports of the countries involved, such as Kenya.

Accreditation and Other Issues
The issue of accreditation is important. It has been important in the dissemination of distance education in the U.S. higher education system. Since a lot of people in Africa have degrees from European, American, or even Australian universities, giving a degree from a university in an OECD country may be acceptable. It is of course essential that education given to Africans be relevant to the needs of their countries and circumstances, and local accreditation can be a means of ensuring this is the case. It is possible that bad national universities may try to stay in business by enforcing their monopoly on education and by denying accreditation to international Open University alternative institutions that are very good. Such multinational virtual universities may fill an important niche. But there is also reason to doubt that the niche is in teaching freshman science courses (as intended by the AVU curriculum). True, there are a lot of specialties in science, engineering, and management that are needed in Africa but for which most African countries lack sufficient student demand to provide good, affordable training. There seem to be several alternatives: not to provide the training; spend too much and provide training nationally to classes that are too small; send students abroad, who may never return; or use multinational, distance education. The last seems potentially a better solution, but not in the current AVU design. Even culturally, AVU has failed to "fit in." While having students sit in a room with an African teaching assistant to listen to a canned or broadcast lecture overcomes some cultural problems such as accent, it seems inconvenient and expensive arrangement for students.

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While AVU was established to improve access in the fields of science, engineering, and business, the more critical question is whether a significant number of young Africans yearning for tertiary education could be educated, or better educated, or more affordably educated by the AVU than without it. Can the AVU walk a path of balancing high-quality programs and affordability? In the long run, it is education that counts, not the use of ICT. It is worrisome that Africans may be captured by the glamor of the technology, without knowing whether any technology offers a cost-effective alternative to avoid current educational problems. Africans should have access to the most cost-effective technology for specific educational purposes. In its present form, AVU is not well suited to meet its outlined objectives.

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