Introduction

The purpose of this paper was to trace the historical background of Distance Education (DE) in West Africa and to examine the challenges. The history of DE in West Africa can be traced back to the 12th Century. The Timbuktu scholarship started as far back as the 12th Century and included jurisprudence, Islamic education as well as grammar (Suad, 1993). It also included Astronomy, Government, Philosophy and Ethics. In the 12th Century, the challenges of DE was the danger of attack from bandits, the attack from hostile empires, the rigorous hand-copying of hundreds of thousands of manuscripts and the extended months it took for learning materials to arrive. Today, the challenges of distance education in West Africa are the prohibitive cost of hardware, the lack of technical support and the language factor.

Purpose of Paper

1.) To examine the role of the 12th Century Timbuktian scholarship in distance education in West Africa

2.) To examine the role of misrepresentations in the history of DE in West Africa

3.) To identify the challenges of DE in West Africa and to make recommendations

Historical Background of Distance Education in West Africa

Timbuktu is located at the point where River Niger meets the North. This makes it a strategic trade route between West and North Africa. Retrieved from http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/The_Meanings_of_Timbuktu_-_Chapter_1_-_Re_discovering_Timbuktu.pdf

These manuscripts contained material comparable to philosophical questions entertained by the likes of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus ([Diagne, 2012]; The Library of Congress, 2012). The topics covered in the manuscripts range from Medicine, law, ethics, Islam and everyday living. http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mali/mali-exhibit.html The other universities were Jengayar Ber University and Sidi Yalaka University.

Review of Literature

Beyond Timbuktu, very few people are aware of the Timbuktian scholarship that existed before the European era. Popular sayings like "As far as Timbuktu" have unconsciously framed in the minds of people on the other side of the continent that Timbuktu is either a myth or a far away place in the desert. Historians have wrongly concluded that Africa has no written tradition; that they have only oral history. More recently, this misconception was proved to be wrong by the discovery of the manuscripts of Ahmad Baba in Timbuktu. As recently as 1903, a famous British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said "Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness." http://www.digitalhistory.uah.edu/endearing_history/1492-1492_timbuktu.cfm

Hagel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher who concluded that West Africa had no history before the colonization of Africa by Europe. His writings influenced many scholars who wrongly concluded that West Africa did not have any relevance in history before the colonization of Africa. After Hagel, there was the ethnological paradigm where historians were influenced by the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939) a French scholar whose published work titled "How Native Think" influential future historians to think that West Africans could not think logically as their European counterparts. By the 12th Century, three universities already existed in Timbuktu.

Sankore University /University of Timbuktu- The levels of study graduated from a primary level (mastery of the Arabic Language and the memorization of the Quran), a secondary level (mastery of trade school and business ethics. The subjects studied included grammar, mathematics, geography, history, physics, astronomy, chemistry alongside more advanced learning of the Q'ur'an). A third level answered religious and philosophical questions that were debatable and moved to a fourth level. At the fourth level they included grammar, mathematics, geography, history, physics, astronomy, chemistry alongside more advanced learning of the Q'ur'an).

3.) The universities should not totally rely on the internet for DE. They should consolidate using African countries are faced with the prohibitive cost of hardware, the use of a common language, the reliance on foreign aid and lack of technical support.

Challenges and Recommendations

1.) Today, many West African countries offer distance education and they face common problems. While they are no longer faced with laborious hand-copying of materials, the West African countries are faced with the prohibitive cost of hardware, the use of a common language, the reliance on foreign aid and lack of technical support.

2.) The education of nomadic children through mobile learning should be strengthened.

3.) The universities should not totally rely on the internet for DE. They should consolidate using the postal system, the television, radio, text messages and meeting face to face for very short periods in the semester.