

UVic knowl**EDGE**

Online child development education for Africa

By Hannah Hickey

Abeba Habtom is pursuing a master's degree in child and youth care from UVic, but she may never set foot on campus. An official in the Eritrean government, she is one of 27 mid-career professionals from ten sub-Saharan African countries participating in the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU). Armed with their UVic education, and the networks they are forging, the participants are working to change the face of early childhood development in Africa.

The ECDVU is the brainchild of UVic's Dr. Alan Pence (School of Child & Youth Care), who, in the late 1990s, ran a series of successful international seminars on early childhood development. Three were held in Africa and generated an overwhelmingly positive response and repeated requests for a longer-term, more intensive program.

Thus was born the idea for this unique master's degree program, which is being funded by UNICEF, the World Bank, CIDA, and a host of other organizations. "To the best of my knowledge, this is the only program of its kind in the world," says Pence. It is delivered

primarily over the Internet. Students communicate with professors and with one another via the Web and submit assignments electronically. Four times over the three-year

program everyone meets for two weeks of face-to-face discussion and exchange.

Home base is a crowded, out-of-the-way office on campus,

where administrative staff Lynette Jackson and Sarah Fleury keep track of assignments and course materials and provide technical assistance to students. Technical support is also provided by Veronica Ngigi, a UVic computer science graduate student from Kenya. In 2001, Ngigi visited almost all of the participants in the

ECDVU participants meeting in Ghana

ECDVU to help them get started. "What really jumped out at me with most of the students is the level of commitment they have to their communities," says Ngigi.

The students are mainly involved in program and policy work with governments or nongovernmental organizations. They work to ensure that African children grow up with proper health care and education, despite such problems as widespread poverty and growing numbers of AIDS orphans.

Through the ECDVU, they share their experiences, discuss ideas, and build a network of professional contacts. Pence and a panel of UVic, African and international ECD specialists help bring a variety of experiences and perspectives to the group.

The ECDVU uses a "generative curriculum" approach. Developed by Pence in his work with First Nations communities, this approach emphasizes community-involving, learner-centered education. One of the goals is to create a new body of work, specific to the culture and environment, by drawing on the knowledge of the participants and recording ideas to pass on to future students.

"There are many good ideas, from many different places, some from the West and some local," says Pence. "My job is to create an environment that allows a creative interaction of ideas from many sources and locations."

Pence, Fleury and Ngigi



Diana Nethercott photo

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- Alan Pence also initiated the First Nations Partnership Program (www.fnpp.org), now led by UVic's Dr. Jessica Ball. Since 1989, they have worked with eight First Nations groups to develop and deliver community-based training in early childhood education.

- More information on the Early Childhood Development Virtual University is available at www.ecdvu.org, where you will find course listings, student feedback, and even completed assignments. One of the ECDVU's goals is to increase the available literature on early childhood development in Africa.



www.uvic.ca

This article was written by Hannah Hickey, graduate student in Earth & Ocean Sciences, as a participant in the UVic SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge).



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