Professional Development of teachers through open and distance learning: The case of the University of Buea Distance Education (DED) programme

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning is relatively new to Cameroon’s educational system; though many countries are adopting it as a way of widening access to education and improving the academic and pedagogic qualification of their teachers. The quality of any educational system can never rise above the quality of its teachers. Faced with new challenges and global trends in education, and at the same time wanting to meet up the “Education for all” slogan, the Cameroon government through the University of Buea opted to introduce Open and Distance Learning programmes for nursery and primary school teachers. This paper discusses some of the difficulties surrounding grade one teacher education in Cameroon and examines the global need for qualified teachers as a pre-requisite for achieving Education for All goal. Thereafter, it discusses the use of ODL by the University of Buea in bringing distance education to in-service primary school teachers across the country, the challenges faced and some of the strategies put in place to overcome them. The programme is delivered through learning centres located in some five major cities of Cameroon and managed by Learning Centre Coordinators. Learning materials are entirely print-based and getting them to the learning centres is a major challenge. Limited number of qualified staff in learning centres further makes the teaching/learning process more challenging. Additionally, most learners still do not have the skills to use information and communication technologies in accessing the content. However, some of the strategies adopted by the University of Buea, as the programme coordination unit in delivering the course content to learning centres is by public transportation. During holidays lecturers come from the Faculty of Education of the University of Buea to provide support to learners via lectures in the learning centres. In 2012, the first batch of students graduated with a Bachelor of Education Degree after four years of studies. As a result many more students are enrolling in the programme.
Introduction

Within the last ten years, the world has witnessed tremendous changes driven by Information and Communication Technology which is permeating every aspect of societal life (Partnership for 21st Century, 2009). Educational systems around the world are constantly challenged to map out strategies that can be used to effectively prepare citizens to adequately participate in today's knowledge economy. Ndongfack (nd) uphold that the effective participation of citizens in today's knowledge economy will necessitate quality teachers to endow learners with 21st century skills. McDonald (2009) concur with the view and adds that stakeholders often have naive expectations about the ease with which educational change can occur, not understanding that the most significant changes are those that build teacher capacity and professional culture. Within Sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroon is one of the countries that have not yet fully embraced the use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in widening access to education. However a few initiatives are on the way to adopt the approach in meeting teachers' needs. One of such initiatives is the use of ODL by the University of Buea, Cameroon in the upgrading of nursery and primary school teachers qualification. This initiative is in response to the failing standards of pupils' learning outcomes and unqualified teachers outlined in the 2006 Republic of Cameroon Education Sector Strategy Paper. This paper discusses some of the difficulties surrounding Grade One teacher education in Cameroon and examines the global need for qualified teachers as a pre-requisite for achieving Education for All goals. Thereafter, it discusses the use of ODL by the University of Buea in bringing distance education to in-service primary school teachers across the country, the challenges faced and some of the strategies put in place to overcome them.

Grade One Teacher Education in Cameroon

The issue of unqualified teachers is a huge problem as even those branded as "qualified" do not seem to deliver quality teaching and learning in their classrooms (Education Sector Strategy Paper, 2006). The educational system is challenged by high repetition rate, poor performance in language and mathematics. The problem of language and mathematics is more disturbing given that a recent study revealed that 49% of pupils in public schools have difficulties to read while 26.6% cannot make an attempt to pronounce a word or a syllable (Republic of Cameroon, 2011). This failure rate was partly due to the poor quality of Grade One Teacher Education. According to the Republic of Cameroon (2010), teacher training has been an enormous problem in Cameroon given that there is no harmonised entry qualification or training duration (The course content is the same but the entry qualifications and duration are not). Holders of Ordinary Level Certificate (five years of Secondary Education) spend three years in the pre-service programme; holders of “Probatoire” certificate (six years of Secondary Education) spend two years in the pre-service programme; while holders of Advanced Level certificate (seven years of Secondary Education) spend one year in the pre-service programme. Upon graduation and recruitment a handful of the teachers are sent to rural areas. With limited in-service training opportunities, most of them do not perform well in their classrooms as seen in the performance of their pupils (Ndongfack, nd). The teachers who see the teaching profession as challenging and are keen in upgrading their qualifications do not like teaching in rural schools. To meet the needs of this category of teachers, the University of Buea decided to put in place a distance learning programme to upgrade their qualifications to a Bachelor Degree level after four years of schooling. The programme is largely perceived as a sign of relief because it widens access to in-service training for teachers since many of them are in the rural areas with no opportunities to further their education while remaining in their classrooms. Additionally, it falls in line with one of UNESCO's recommendation for the achievement of universal education.

Global Need for Qualified Teachers

UNESCO (2008) estimated that “some 10 million teachers must be recruited and trained in less than a decade” in order to achieve universal primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa. This figure is alarming so much such that if nothing is done urgently, many countries will continue to face teacher training and qualification problems. Looking at the precarious situation from a keener point of view, Sir Daniel in Danaher and Umar (2010) think that because of the colossal number of teachers, even if various countries succeed in recruiting, “it will certainly not be possible to train them using the
traditional methods of institutional pre-service education. Open and distance learning must be
harnessed to the task since several research reports have indicated that it offers training of consistent
quality to large numbers at low cost” (Sir Daniel in Danaher & Umar, 2010). Besides, UNESCO (2004)
argues that among the indicators of quality education, the top priority is trained teachers. Taking from
the experience of Cameroon, where the entry qualification and training duration for primary and
nursery school teachers are still not harmonised, one will be tempted to agree with Daniel (2010) who
declares; “I have noted that teacher education is a ‘confused’ mess in many parts of the world”. The Faculty of Education of the University of Buea via the Department of Curriculum Studies and
Teaching opened its doors in 2008 to practising teachers to earn a Degree in Education.

**Aim and Structure of the Distance Learning Education Programme of the University of Buea**

The major objective of the University of Buea for the distance and open learning programme is to
enhance pedagogic skills of in-service or practising teachers and equally broaden their scope in the
Sciences of Education

The National Coordinator of the Programme, a lecturer at the Faculty of Education in the University of
Buea coordinates activities in all the centres via Centre Managers. For now there are five learning
centres in five major cities in Cameroon namely Yaounde, Bamenda, Kumba, Buea and Maroua. These centres are run by Centre Managers. Tutors are recruited to teach in the five learning centres
during programmed weekends and for four days during the holiday periods. This means teachers do
not have to abandon learners in class when they have to receive lectures on site or when they have to
write examinations. The schedule for each academic year is usually given out to both the tutors and
the students at the beginning of the year in order to enable the students to do research in the various
subject areas as well as do assignments and send them to the Tutors in the Centres on time. During
the academic year, most of the learning is done via assignments and extensive reading. Students do
assignments and type and print them labelling the cover page following the format prescribed by the
programme. They are expected to hand in all assignments in person to the Centre Managers. Assignments constitute continuous assessment while there is a period set aside for semester
examinations. Assignment and examination scripts are usually marked and returned to the students
and marked published in various centres. The Centre Managers have the following as their key
responsibilities:

- Reminding students, through phone calls and emails, on deadlines for submission of
  assignments and other activities in the programme.
- Collecting assignments and distributing them to the respective tutors for marking.
- Informing and reminding tutors of customary activities as well as passing on any available
  information from the hierarchy to them.

A bird’s view of the Distance Learning Programme’s curriculum shows that subjects taught can be
grouped into Languages, social studies, science and technology, physical education, art, psychology,
pedagogy, didactics and special education needs (2012/2013 schedule)

**Description of Course Participants**

Students who enrol into the Distance Learning Programme are Grade One Teachers teaching either
in the primary or nursery schools. Being labelled as a Grade One teacher entails that one must have
completed a Teacher Training Course from any of the authorised Teacher Training Colleges owned
either by the government or the private sector. Some of the Grade One Certificate holders did a one
year training programme, others two years and yet another category did a three year training
programme depending on entry qualifications as hinted earlier. The higher the entry qualification, that
is the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level, the lesser the years of training. These
students leave the teacher training colleges and are sent to various schools in both rural and urban
areas, and with new pedagogic trends that come up every other year, they need to stay abreast via
in-service training programmes. The country has witnessed a sharp fall in standards of education and
one of the causes seem to be the educational qualification of the teachers.
Achievements and challenges faced by the programme

Following from an interview with the Centre Manager of the Yaounde Centre, some major achievements and challenges were highlighted as follows:

Achievements

The achievements can so far be counted but they are cherished beyond leaps and bounds. The major achievements have been:

- The first batch of students has graduated.
- There has been a lot of attitudinal change in teachers who are now motivated to improve on their academic and professional status.
- Primary school teachers have identified themselves and can now boast of carrying out research work.
- Some teachers who were hitherto not interested in computer applications have on their own accord decided to step up by acquiring some computer skills.

Challenges

The challenges are enormous but hope has not been lost. They include the following:

- The Centres lack libraries and ICT tools to serve as avenues for extensive research and thus students have a limited scope of knowledge in some courses.
- Students’ assignments do not get to them on time because some of them are in enclave areas and this affects deadlines and the plan of action.
- Students hardly respect deadlines even when assignments are given within time as there are no accompanying measures in force to discourage such laxity.
- The courses do not as yet accommodate recent reforms in the Nursery and Primary education sector including extensive information on contemporary issues like gender based classroom practices, peace education, conflict and disaster prevention, climate change etc.
- The running of the programme is still basically print-based, learning materials are entirely print-based and getting them to the learning centres is a major challenge.
- Limited number of qualified teaching staff.
- The financial burden is enormous on the teachers.
- Inadequate sensitisation.

Strategies to overcome the challenges

- The idea of putting in place mini libraries in the various centres to provide students with research facilities.
- Rental space has been rented by programme facilitators to serve as offices for various centre managers and plans are underway to put internet facilities at least for the benefit of the tutors and centre managers.
- Punitive measures like not receiving scripts after deadlines have been put in place to check lax students who do not send in their assignments on time.
- PhD holders are being displaced to various centres to teach, meanwhile only holders of at least a Masters Degree in Education are recruited as tutors.

Conclusion

There is no better way of putting the concept of Open and Distance learning than Jojobsdottir, Mckeown and Haven (2010) have put; “Increasingly students are enrolling in DE[Distance Education] programmes not overcome need (or distance), but for the convenience -- to fit study in with their work, family, or lifestyle commitments. The Cameroon Government’s initiative manifested via the University of Buea to engage practising teachers in “on the job” print-based in-service training is therefore a laudable one. This has been the giant stride to improving teacher training in the country via open and distance learning. Even though it is basically paper or print based for now, there is hope that since as they say Rome was not built in a day, with time it would provide more modern technological or better
still online services. Nevertheless, teachers have been able to improve on their statuses by being part of this programme. The efforts of the teachers who have already enrolled in the programme have gone a long way to confirm the adage that “A teacher who ceases to learn, should cease to teach”. Since learning is obviously a lifelong process and if all teachers at all levels of education can have the opportunity to improve on their didactic and pedagogic skills in this ever changing world without abandoning learners in the classrooms, it would be a very good thing.
References


Republic of Cameroon, Ministry of Basic Education, (Department of Projects and Cooperation) (2010), Grade One Teacher Education Assessment Report.

