

Sub-Theme: Efficiency and Effectiveness

Title: **The Potential of Open and Distance Learning in Enhancing the Provision of Psychosocial Support: A Case Study at NAMCOL**

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Abstract

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) is a state funded educational institution which provides educational opportunities for adults and out-of-school youth. NAMCOL enables those who cannot or do not wish to attend conventional school to study for either the Secondary level or the Tertiary level programmes through Open and Distance Learning (ODL). In 2010, NAMCOL introduced the Certificate in Community Based Work with Children and Youth (CWCY). Since the introduction of CWCY, 250 students have enrolled for the programme and about 50% have completed the programme successfully.

This study was aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the programme delivery through ODL by determining the impact of this certificate on the provision of psychosocial support.

1. Background of the Study

1.1 Rationale of the Certificate in Community Based Work with Children and Youth (CWCY)

The CWCY programme was developed by Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) in conjunction with academicians from the University of KwaZulu Natal, after its findings that there was a need to train the volunteers and entry level staff working with the many orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in Eastern and Southern Africa. Research which was undertaken by REPSSI with UNICEF found that there were hundreds of different workshops, seminars and courses on the broad theme of psychosocial support, but not an accredited academic course through distance education (REPSSI, 2010). REPSSI created an opportunity for those people working with OVC to develop professional skills and knowledge through a formal, accredited academic distance learning programme. The main objectives of this Certificate in Community Based Work with Children and Youth are to:

- describe the key trends and approaches in the psychosocial care and support of children at risk;
- introduce the students to current theories of psychosocial care and support of children;
- introduce practical skills for working with communities, families, youth and children at risk; and
- promote the development of safe communities which uphold the rights of children and acknowledge the key role of the child's own participation in developing socially and emotionally adaptive responses.

The CWCY programme is delivered through supported open and distance learning in ten countries in Southern and Eastern Africa. Similarly, according to the Ministry of Gender and Social Services (2009)

there are hundreds of volunteers and community members working with OVC in Namibia. Since this programme is designed to enhance the effectiveness of graduates working with children at risk, the Ministry of Gender and Social Services, which is the custodian of children at risk, financially supported the students enrolled for this programme.

1.2 Structure of the Certificate Programme

The certificate is a 6-module programme which is offered over a minimum period of 18 months. The diagram below shows all the modules that the programme comprises.

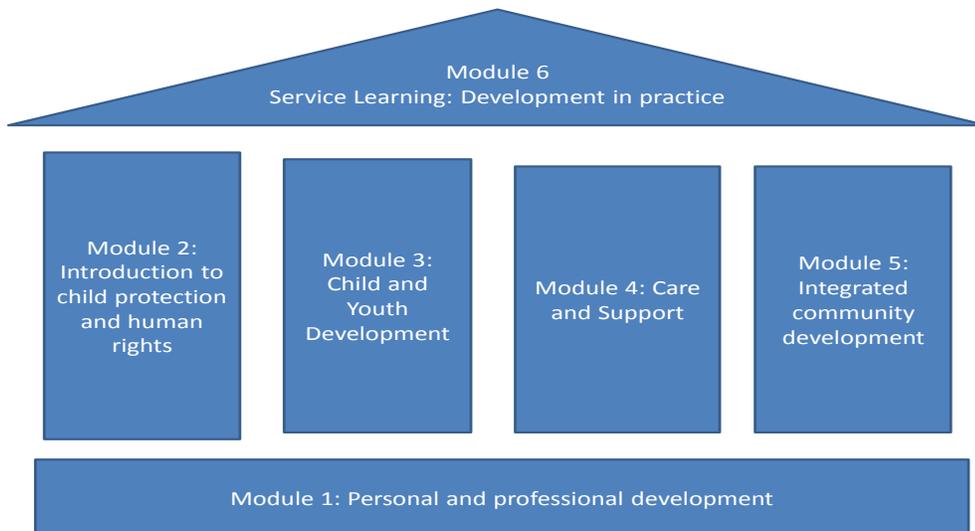


Figure 1: Six modules of the certificate programme

Source: REPSSI (2010)

Upon registration, students are issued with study materials and assigned to mentor groups facilitated preferably by qualified social workers who act as mentors within the region where the students reside. Students meet with the mentor every fourth Saturday and the mentor facilitates discussions guided by a standard outline to ensure uniformity across the programme. Students are required to have gone through the study guides in preparation for the mentor sessions. The main objective of the mentor sessions is to provide opportunities for discussion, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas and resources related to children and youth. This further encourages the establishment of ‘communities of practice’ where like-minded people collaborate and share experiences (Killian, 2012). In this case, students share practices related to psychosocial support.

This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of the CWCY programme in terms of empowering the graduates and whether the programme has improved the provision of psychosocial support in the Orphans and Vulnerable Children’s homes and schools where these graduates are employed. According to Kirkpatrick (1994), the evaluation of a training programme helps to improve the current and future programmes and guide in deciding whether to continue offering the programme or not. There are a few studies done on the entirety of a programme, especially with the focus on the practice of the graduates (Stols, Olivier, & Grayson, 2007). This study aimed to make a contribution towards that.

The paper presents the findings of the study on the following areas:

1. Accessibility of the CWCY programme and completion rates;
2. Learner satisfaction with the CWCY programme and services;
3. The quality of the CWCY programme as it relates to its impact.

1.3 Methodology

The qualitative approach was more appropriate for this study as its purpose was to engage information-rich participants so as to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of the CWCY in empowering the graduates and thus enhancing the provision of psychosocial support as perceived by the graduates and their supervisors at the workplace. Qualitative methods in this study included interviews of graduates and supervisors as well as observations of the psychosocial support activities and environment. Desktop research was also done, which included the study of reports related to the CWCY programme.

1.4 Population of the Study

The population of this study was defined as all the students who were enrolled for the CWCY programme and graduated during 2010-2015. According to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009), there are no definite rules that specify the correct number of participants in qualitative research. They further state that qualitative research can be carried out with one or as many as 60 participants. A purposeful criterion sampling method was used for this study to select graduates of the CWCY programme who work with OVC in Windhoek and their supervisors.

A data file of learners who had registered for the CWCY programme with NAMCOL since the inception of the programme was availed for the study. Eight graduates and two supervisors were interviewed. Observation was done at the Windhoek-based children's home. The Windhoek-based graduates were purposively selected for the study, based on proximity to the researcher as they could be reached with minimum challenges. In addition, reports were studied to gather more information related to the study.

2. Findings and Discussions

2.1 Demographic Profile of Students on the CWCY Programme

The demographic profile of the enrolled students revealed that the majority were in the northern and central parts of the country. More female students enrolled for this programme than male students (see Figure 1), which follows the trend in all the other tertiary level programmes at NAMCOL (NAMCOL, 2015-2016). Most students who enrolled for the CWCY programme were aged between 30 and 40 years and their working experience with children at risk ranged from 1-14 years.

All the enrolled students provided their mobile numbers, which implies that they had access to mobile technology, but only 20% had access to Internet (NAMCOL, 2010-2016). Therefore, the college provided print-based study materials such as study guides and tutorial letters to students. The college used the mobile technology in the form of bulk *sms* text messaging mainly for administrative purposes and communicating information.

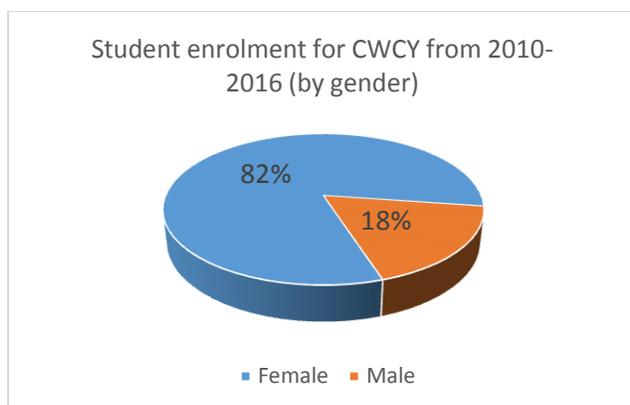


Figure 2: Percentages of students registered for CWCY by gender

Five (62.5%) of the eight graduates who participated in the interviews responded that they became aware of CWCY from their employer who invited them to enrol for the programme with NAMCOL. They all worked as house mothers and they each stayed in a house with 7-9 OVC in a family setup where they were responsible for the total support of the children - be it physical, emotional, or psychological wellbeing - under the authority of the Ministry of Gender and Social Services. Their highest qualifications prior to CWCY was the senior secondary level certificate.

Two (25%) of the respondents were teachers at primary schools and the other one (12.5%) was an administrator who learnt about the programme from the print media. Three (37.5%) respondents had other academic qualifications ranging from diploma to undergraduate degree.

Almost all students registered for the CWCY programme in the 2010 (100%) and 2012 (98%) academic years were actively involved in working with children and youth at risk (NAMCOL, 2010-2016), whereas most of those registered in 2015 were not actively involved in the provision of psychosocial support but registered with the hope to secure employment after having obtained the qualification.

Two line supervisors agreed to be interviewed, one of them worked with the 5 graduates and the other was the school principal of one of the teacher-graduates. All supervisors had worked with the graduates for more than six years.

2.2 Reasons for Studying with NAMCOL

Participants were asked to give reasons why they opted to study with NAMCOL. Each graduate-participant gave a reason. The responses are reduced to statements in Table 1, with the frequency, indicating how many times they were mentioned.

Table 1: Main reasons for studying with NAMCOL

Reason (N=8)	Frequency
I had to study by distance because I was working.	8
Employer advised me to enrol and paid for my studies.	5
Only NAMCOL offered this programme by distance.	6
Programme fee was reasonable.	5
This programme was related to my work and I needed a certificate.	6

The ability to study by distance while working was a strong reason why all participants (100%) opted to study with NAMCOL. All the participants (100%) highlighted that they did not want to leave their jobs to go for full-time studies, because they needed to earn an income in order to support their families. Therefore, when they became aware of this programme which is related to their work and is offered by distance, they decided to enrol.

In addition, the entry requirement was regarded as not too high and therefore many (87.5%) could be admitted. The fee, which would have been a barrier for many, was found to be affordable. Thirty percent of the students on this programme were either sponsored by their employer or received a scholarship from REPSSI (NAMCOL, 2015). This support widened access by ensuring that more students accessed the programme.

2.3 Completion Rate

A total of 120 students completed this programme, of which 20 (17%) lived in and around Windhoek, Khomas Region. The table below gives a summary of the student enrolment and completion rate.

Table 2: Completion rates of CWCY students at NAMCOL

Year	Students who enrolled	Gender		Students who completed/graduated	% of total who completed	Gender	
		Male	Female			Male	Female
2010	77	15	62	42	54.50%	9.5%	90.5%
2012	67	14	53	51	76.10%	4%	96%
2015	74	10	64	27	36.50%	33.3%	66.7%
2016	30	5	25	to complete in 2017	-	-	-

Source: NAMCOL (2016)

According to Table 2, most students who enrolled during 2010 and 2012 graduated. This could be attributed to the fact that the majority of the students were actively involved in psychosocial support and their studies were funded either by their employers or by REPSSI. In contrast, the majority of the students who enrolled in 2015 did not graduate. This could be attributed to the fact that 48% of the students were employed in a different sector and were only involved in psychosocial support on a part-time basis.

2.4 Student Satisfaction with the CWCY Programme and NAMCOL Services

Seven of the graduate-participants (87.5%) viewed the introduction the CWCY programme favourably and they stated that the programme met their expectations. However one (12.5%) respondent was not satisfied with the programme delivery. The quotes in Table 3 reflect the statements made by the graduate-participants on their experiences while studying:

Table 3: Experiences of students with NAMCOL

<p>Overall programme Studying while working was very tough. I feel I was very lucky to get a chance to enrol for this programme; it improved my life. I appreciate this study because I learnt a skill how to be a good helper.</p> <p>Study materials Study materials were distributed during registration. The study guide must have more exercises. Students need more time for discussions and interaction. Study guide was easy to read and understand.</p> <p>Contact sessions The group work during the mentor sessions helped me to talk with confidence. Time allocated for mentor sessions was not really sufficient. The mentors were helpful in explaining subject content. Attending mentor sessions helped to understand the subject content. I suggest there must be contact sessions every week. Travelling to mentor sessions is costly. Sessions to be attended were too many and we suffered with transport costs.</p> <p>Communication Messages were sent by <i>sms</i> to our cell phones. Classes were moved and we did not get information.</p> <p>General I learnt new ways and skills from my peers during the class. Examination questions were difficult. I suggest there must be contact sessions every week. Sometimes they take very long to return our marked assignments. Telephone calls were mostly just ringing and not responded to. Most staff members were very helpful.</p>

Overall, the graduates reported that they were pleased with the services provided, such as the mentor sessions, the new skills which they acquired and the method of communication (via *sms*). However, they also highlighted a number of challenges related to their studies with NAMCOL, such as delayed return of marked assignments and the cost of travelling to attend sessions.

A number of graduate-participants (62.5%) expressed the need for NAMCOL to provide students with psychosocial support, because at times they got discouraged and were at the verge of dropping out. They expressed a need for some motivation as well as follow ups on how students are progressing.

2.5 The Impact of Studying CWCY by Distance

Feedback from the participants showed that the graduate-participants greatly benefitted from the CWCY programme as presented in the themes below.

2.5.1 Personal Development

Two (25%) of the graduate-respondents were pursuing further studies by distance. One of them enrolled for the Diploma in Youth Development Work (doing final year) and her comment was: "... I want to learn more about children and youth matters in order to be able to help them better".

Three graduates (37.5%) expressed their desire to become qualified social workers. However they were unable to study towards that by distance and therefore requested NAMCOL to introduce the diploma and degree in psychosocial support.

2.5.2 Providing Psychosocial Support to OVC

All the graduate-respondents attested to improvement in their dealing with the children and youth in adversity and some of their expressions were as follows:

"Whatever I learned in the book and mentor session I could practice it immediately as a house mother to 9 OVC, which is my job. The programme content made my life so much easier, for example I learned how to approach a child who was refusing to take his anti-retroviral medications."

"Wow moment was the topic on Ubuntu. The topic made me understand and realize that what happens to someone else's child can also happen to my child and therefore we have to help one another".

"When you work with many children you do get frustrated and the certificate programme has given me some tools which I can use to help a child engage with others, help them build their confidence, help them articulate their feelings and how to handle a bereaved child; empathy."

"I never knew that understanding human rights was very important in my work with the OVC. This programme exposed me to children's rights, right-based responses and the Child Protection Bill and ... strive to implement and be an activist for the OVC."

In addition, the supervisors who participated in the study confirmed that they observed a difference in most (80%) of the graduates on how they dealt with the children and youth. During their meetings, the supervisor could detect that some of the advices on how to approach certain issues were influenced by their engagement in the CWCY programme. The supervisor said the graduates suggested improvement strategies for the provision of psychosocial support. Graduates developed new programmes to run them for the betterment of the children's homes and they shared with other colleagues who had not enrolled for the CWCY programme.

One supervisor who supervised four of the graduates, however, stated that one of the graduates did not show much improvement on how she dealt with the OVC and that this could be attributed to her character and goals in life.

It is evident that the graduates benefitted from the studies as attested by the views of both supervisors and graduates. The supervisor indicated that graduates introduced new programmes and ideas and they shared ideas with their colleagues to improve the provision of psychosocial support. It was confirmed that the graduates translated the theory into practice. For example, they observed the child-rights in the way they handled children's cases.

In addition, the expression of the graduate-participants affirmed that ODL makes a significant contribution in the provision of professional skills and knowledge. They suggested that ODL creates a platform for in-service training where students acquire requisite knowledge and skills that enhance their productivity and competencies at the work place.

2.6 Areas of Improvement

The following were the suggestions by the graduate-participants for improvement of the programme.

- The students indicated that they needed guidance on self-study and how to succeed as distance education learners.
- Staff members should be trained to treat adult learners differently from those students who have just left school.
- There seems to be a communication gap between registration and finance offices and students end up being sent back and forth to produce proof of payment for studies.
- The college should improve on the turn-around cycle of the assignments.
- All the tutors should write guiding comments which will help the students understand why they performed poorly in the assignments.
- The College should establish a help desk with someone who will attend to telephone queries on a full-time basis.

2.7 Limitation of the Study

The study did not include the views of the children who are recipients of psychosocial support from the graduates. The findings of the study cannot be generalized because it did not include all the graduates from the programme and their work environment.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, I concur with the utterance once made that ODL trained community workers, such as the care givers and teachers, are much better than those trained on campus, face to face (Bisanda, 2016). When a student (psychosocial support provider) learns of a new concept or approach, or learns new skills, the ODL student will immediately put it into practice in his/her work environment, thereby gradually improving his/her performance/skills at work. This was confirmed by the graduate-participants. Unlike the face-to-face student who will wait to complete his/her studies after some years to implement the skills or knowledge learned. The face-to-face student is likely to forget what she/he learned by the time he/she enters practice. The findings of the study have demonstrated that ODL has enhanced the provision of psychosocial support through the introduction of the CWCY programme.

Furthermore, continuous evaluation of programmes in their totality is of vital importance to improve the programmes and how they are offered, and to establish whether they meet the expectations of the stakeholders.

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