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**Managing Student Transition from Conventional to Open Schooling:
A Case Study of Namibia.**

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ABSTRACT

The provision of school equivalency programme through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has gained momentum in the 21st century through the establishment of open schools. The latter have now become the model of choice for young people and adults who do not want to pursue their secondary education journey through the conventional delivery system. Moreover, shrinking financial resources have made it impossible for governments, especially in the developing world to expand education through the conventional system. Although open schools have made progress in increasing access, low throughput rates and high dropout rates remain the key challenges.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of learners when migrating from the conventional school system to ODL in general, and to the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) in particular. The study mainly focused on the senior secondary learners who transferred from the formal schools to NAMCOL to upgrade their grades.

Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance and Tinto's (1997a) theory of academic and social integration were used as the reference theoretical framework. A multi method research design was applied in data collection. The results of the study identified a gap between the learners' expectations and the high ODL expectations and its demands. The learners who participated in the study displayed a marginal understanding of the ODL mode of delivery. The study established certain factors that impede or accelerate the integration process and also identified technology mediated services as well as capacity building for staff as measures to facilitate learner integration in the ODL mode of delivery. The study reaffirms that meeting learners' academic, social and psychological needs are important for successful learner integration. The findings have implications for policy makers, ODL practitioners and learners on the development of the most effective measures of increasing learner integration into open schools.

Keywords: Learner Integration, Open Schools, Open and Distance Learning, Conventional School System, NAMCOL

Introduction

The demand to expand access to education at all levels was immense with Namibia's independence in 1990 in order to address the imbalances of the colonial past during which education was not accessible to every citizen. The increasing demand for education through the conventional system was not adequate, hence distance education was viewed as the most practical way to address the education gap, including redressing gender imbalances, increasing access and enhancing quality in a cost-effective manner because this mode of education delivery has the potential to reach many more learners compared to the conventional system.

To bridge the education gap at all levels in Namibia, the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) was established in 1997 through government legislation and became fully operational as a semi-autonomous institution in April 1998. NAMCOL's mandate is to upgrade the educational levels of adults and out-of-school youth through open and distance learning (ODL) programmes in the areas of professional, vocational and general education (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 1997). The secondary education programme (SEP) is offered to enable those that were denied the opportunity for education at this level to pursue the Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) and the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC). Moreover, the College offers a range of tertiary programmes as well as technical, vocational education and training programmes. The College offers both complementary and alternative curriculum for its pre-tertiary programmes. As a complementary system, a standardised national curriculum is followed in conventional schools and at NAMCOL, allowing learners to write the same examinations as their school-based counterparts.

Purpose and significance of the study

The purpose of this study was to establish how learners cope with the transition from conventional to the distance mode of learning. The study therefore explored the experiences and perceptions of learners during the transition period from the conventional schooling to open and distance learning and sought to establish whether this change influences learners' adaptation to the new learning environment.

This study intends to contribute to the knowledge base of ODL because most ODL institutions are confronted with the challenge of low pass rates and this can be attributed to many factors. The outcome of this study is also of significant value to administrators and policy makers at government level as it will enable them to develop policies and guidelines for ODL in general and for open schools specifically to support the provision of ODL. Additionally, the findings of the study may enable open schools to reconsider some institutional policies and strategies to help learners cope better with the challenges of transition.

Statement of the problem

A high percentage of learners joining NAMCOL for the SEP are those who did not meet the minimum requirements to be integrated into the formal system or to pursue further studies at the institutions of higher learning. Over the years, the growth of NAMCOL has been phenomenal, however the College experienced a relatively large proportion of learners scoring low passing grades (D-G grades) and recorded a higher number of ungraded entries (failures). Although NAMCOL serves as a 'safety net' for those learners who do not succeed in the conventional system, this important role tends to be overshadowed by the lower learner pass rates. This study, therefore was driven by the notion that change in the learning environment might be one of the factors having the greatest impact on learners' ability to integrate into the new distance education learning environment. The new learning environment of ODL expects the learners to acquire independent learning skills and demonstrate the capacity to cope with self-directed learning. In most cases learners lack the required learning skills for distance education because they are accustomed to depending on someone from early childhood and throughout their school career. During their years of schooling, these learners became used to a typical classroom environment known for its regular dialogue and interaction amongst teachers and learners, and learners amongst learners. They are conditioned to respond in a certain way because of their previous learning experiences of dependence on the teacher. The distance learning environment becomes a new and an unknown environment where both the students and teachers perform completely different roles. Beldarrain (2006) refers to the change in learning mode from conventional to open and distance learning as a radical shift in both instructional design and pedagogy.

It was therefore vital through this study to understand learners' experiences and perceptions in the change of learning mode to be able to develop appropriate learner support models that may lead to improved learner retention and pass rates.

Objectives of the study

The principal objective of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of the learners during the transition period from the traditional classroom mode of delivery to the open and distance learning mode. Amongst others, the study aimed to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To explore the experiences of learners during the transition process.
- To establish how learners, adjust and adapt to the distance mode of learning.
- To determine the period/stage when learners fully integrate into the ODL delivery mode.
- To establish the strategies that should be put in place to enhance learner integration into distance learning.

Research design and methodology

The research design is a case study because of the researcher's interest to explore what the students have to say about their experiences or perceptions when transferring from one mode of delivery to another. The population selected for this study mainly comprised NSSC learners who are transferring from the conventional schools to NAMCOL to improve their grades in order to advance to the next level of their education career or seek employment. The other category of the population consisted of tutors, heads of Tutorial Centres and regional Area Coordinators. The main participants (the learners) included: those who had the benefit of attending weekly tutorials; those who only attended face-to-face support sessions during school holidays because of work, family and other commitments; and those learners who successfully completed their studies with NAMCOL in 2013. These graduates were selected because of their personal experience of success since the researcher was also interested in establishing how learners adapt to the new mode of learning. The participants were purposefully selected from four Tutorial Centres and regional offices in the NAMCOL's southern and northern regions.

The research applied a multi method design by blending and integrating both the quantitative and qualitative data collection methods in order to augment each other. The instruments used to collect data were questionnaires, interviews and document review. The first phase of data collection included the questionnaire that was administered to collect the initial data and the key issues which emanated from the findings of the quantitative approach were used to collect data through the semi-structured interviews. A questionnaire was administered to 250 learners who were on the programme (n=250) from the total number of more than 25 000 students registered in 2015 while 10 former students (n=10) completed the same questionnaire. The second questionnaire was administered to 28 heads of Tutorial Centres, tutors and Area Coordinators (n=28). The second phase of the data collection which was more qualitative in nature and comprised 22 individual semi-structured interviews (n=22) of which 14 (n=14) were for the three different categories of learners while 8 interviews (n=8) were conducted for the Area Coordinators (n=2), heads of Tutorial Centres (n=2) and tutors (n=4). Additionally, two focus group discussions were held with students at the two Study Centres one in each region. The final phase of the data collection process included the review of some key documents, such as monitoring and evaluation reports, attendance registers and previous research studies.

Theoretical framework

The study has identified two theories that are of direct relevance, namely Tinto's theory of social and academic integration and Michael Moore's theory of transactional distance (Moore 2013; Tinto 1997b). Tinto's theory of social and academic integration provides a comprehensive framework to address the objective of students' integration into the distance learning environment. On the other hand, Michael Moore's theory of transactional distance is relevant in addressing the objectives that relate to learners' experiences when transferring from the traditional classroom mode of delivery to ODL, and in particular to an open school environment. The study used Moore's variables of dialogue, structure and autonomy to determine the level to which the learners react to these variables.

Literature review

The literature reviewed has shown a substantial amount of work done on student transition from high school to the university. Less research was done to examine the experiences of learners during the transition from the conventional to ODL school-level programmes. There is generally little research done on ODL at school level, remarks Sir John Daniel (Latchem, 2012). Brindley (1995a) states that research in ODL mainly focuses on access

and learner support with less attention given to research on learner experiences. Because of the limited research in the area, the review of literature mainly focussed on transition from high school to higher education, which is relevant for this investigation, as experiences relating to transition at any level of education are unavoidable.

The change in learning environment

Learners joining NAMCOL from the conventional system have acquired particular study habits in schools, which may be difficult to lose. They join the institution with certain expectations of the institution and its staff. Thus, they may cherish unrealistic expectations of a distance learning environment. One such expectation is the traditional form of teaching and interaction (Taylor, 2010). Parents and the general public also demand that NAMCOL should increase its contact sessions, because of the general perception that more contact sessions will lead to improved results. The fact that learners prefer the conventional face-to-face mode of learning shows a tension that exists between students' expectations and the distance education mode of delivery pursued by the College. This has great potential to constrain the transition process.

Dzakiria (2005) claims that the new approach to learning can either be accepted by students to enhance learning or impede learning. Rekkedal as cited by Galusha (1998) maintained that students with prior learning experience in distance education are more likely to continue with their studies than those with exclusively conventional experience because the former have developed the skills to cope with distance learning problems. Additionally, Morgan (2013), and Simonson et al. (2003) are of the same view that prior learning experience impacts on the current situation and some students engaging in distance learning for the first time may show some discomfort. A study on students' educational attitudes on transition to post-secondary education by Elffers and Oort (2013) reveals that students who do not succeed are more skeptical about the prospects of the second opportunity. The findings of Elffers and Oort (2013) are relevant to NAMCOL learners since the majority of learners who enrol for ODL courses did not succeed in passing their exams during the first attempt in the conventional system and might also be pessimistic about succeeding through ODL where the teacher is not always present to assist.

Student integration

Students' integration into a new learning environment can be linked to academic and social factors. Other factors such as learner characteristics, persistence, commitment, learner academic background, perception, time management, personal, and emotional and cultural adjustment are all significant factors influencing the ability to manage the transition process. Brower (1992) sees integration as the outcome of interactions between students and the college environments. The first year at college is very crucial for students because it serves as a foundation for the years that will follow in a student's education career (Woosley & Miller, 2009). The same can be said about the first experience at a distance learning environment for someone coming from the traditional classroom setting. Tinto (1997b) posits that "students are more likely to persist when they are either academically or socially integrated or they can even be more likely to persist when both forms of integration occur". The model suggests that for learners to fully integrate into the institution, they progress through three phases, namely; separation, transition and incorporation (Tinto, 1997b).

Bean (1990) also suggests that past academic performance and socioeconomic status are variables that influence the interaction of students with an institution. Richardson and Long (2003) indicate that engagement or disengagement with an institution depends largely on the interactions with teaching staff or fellow learners (p.224). Personal engagement can narrow the distance between the student and the teacher (McGivney, 2004; Moore, 1993; Richardson, 2003). It is therefore important for institutions at early stages to engage students by providing opportunities for them to fully integrate into the institutional culture.

Managing the student transition process

Initially ODL institutions' focus was to increase access. Of late, institutions have the mammoth task of retaining students and ensuring good success rates. To achieve this, ODL institutions should understand and manage the expectations of students entering this new environment and ensure that they are fully integrated into the system. Transition to the next level in one's educational career, whether from primary to secondary, secondary to tertiary or from any mainstream of education to open and distance learning can be associated with uncertainty, fear of the unknown, lack of confidence and anxiety that may have a detrimental effect on students if not adequately addressed. Locks, Hurtado, Bowman and Oseguera (2008) refer to such transition as a psychological adjustment process since it focuses on factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, attachment and a sense of belonging. Institutions spend resources in attracting new students without realising that further resources (human, financial and time) are needed to ensure that new intakes are supported. Locks, Hurtado, Bowman and Oseguera (ibid) reaffirmed the importance of institutions investing resources to support and develop programmes that facilitate meaningful social integration of newly enrolled students. Literature proposes various transition models to ensure that students fully integrate into the new environment. One such model is Tinto's student integration model which

suggests that individuals come to a learning environment with a wide range of interacting personal and social attributes. These attributes as well as institutional practices have a great impact on retention rates as well as academic performance. Tinto as cited by Mdakane (2011) reflects on several conditions that facilitate students' retention and success, such as high expectation set by the institution, provision of information on institutional arrangements, provision of academic, social and personal support, involvement of students as valued members of the institution, and creation of conducive learning environments for students to experience success (p.40-41). Other researchers also advocate peer mentoring as an effective and viable component for student social integration and academic success (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Heirdsfield, Walker, & Walsh, 2008). Early engagement of students through orientation workshops were identified by some researchers as helping students cope and adjust to the new environment (Brindley, 1995a; Darlaston-Jones et al., 2001; Dzakiria, 2005; Perry & Allard, 2009; Terenzini et al., 1994). The role learner support plays in assisting learners adjust to a new environment by bridging the gap of loneliness and isolation is also emphasised by some researchers (Nichos, 2010; Potter, 2013).

Findings

Change in the learning environment

The study showed that a great majority of learners (86%) lacked the understanding of the distance learning mode because 96% of the learner participants indicated that they migrated from the formal schools. This finding is also congruent with the learners' age distribution of between 18-24 (81%), which is normally an age category of learners who have finished high school. On the contrary, the qualitative data showed that some learners valued the flexibility of the ODL delivery mode, its level of independent learning, and the fact that it embraces technology. To some extent this finding supports the views advanced by Tinto (1997b) that students' diverse background and prior learning experience could determine their commitment to the institution and the goals they have set for themselves and their studies.

Additionally, diverse views were presented by the participants through quantitative and qualitative data in terms of the experiences and perceptions of learners during the transition period. Some learners had a positive learning experience while others experienced the learning process negatively. The results of the study showed that many learners (63%) experienced the new learning environment of ODL negatively as they cited the complexity of studying at distance and the highly demanding workload as some unpleasant learning experiences. The observation by the learners was partly corroborated by some staff members (36%) who indicated that learners experienced a positive learning experience as they had the desire to study through ODL. The learners' engagement with tutors and peers were viewed as positive learning experiences; however, both the learners and staff gave mixed reactions on the level of independent learning. To some, independent learning was viewed as a positive learning experience while others found it an impeding factor because of their inability to study independently. This finding showed a mismatch between the learners' expectations and the high demand of distance learning and its expectations. In this study, it appears from the finding that learners prefer a situation characterised by a high degree of dialogue because of the discomfort associated to study independently. This finding validates Moore's view that less autonomous learners are likely to prefer a high degree of dialogue with their teachers and fellow learners (Moore, 2013).

Student integration

Academic integration

The quantitative data showed that the majority of the learners (86%) preferred regular face-to-face interactions, while many (77%) indicated that they are coping well with assignments, and another 72% showed that they relied heavily on the direct support of tutors. Some learners (53%) claimed that they could not cope on their own and indicated that they struggle to balance study time and other commitments as was revealed by 56% of the participants. The observations from the learners was supported by the majority (84%) of staff participants who indicated learners' inability to cope on their own without the support of tutors. The qualitative data supported the views expressed by both the learners and staff in the quantitative data that learners prefer a method of delivery characterised by direct interactions between the learners and tutors. The results of the study showed learners' immaturity and unpreparedness to adjust and adopt to the new distance learning mode. These findings further showed the tension that exists between the learners' expectations and the principles of self-directed and self-determined learning that underpins the ODL mode.

However, there was a huge discrepancy between the participant's remarks on the assignments and the actual trend in the submission thereof. Although many learners (77%) stated that they coped well with the assignments, the

real data from learner record management system showed a completely different picture of an average submission rate of 42%. This finding contradicts the view expressed by learners in the qualitative data that they handled the learning resources comfortably.

Social integration

Social integration focuses on learner engagement with peers and other connections outside the academic life. Quantitatively, most learners (82%) felt that they had established strong interpersonal relationships with peers. The same view was expressed by many staff members (72%). Learner interaction with tutors outside the learning environment was rated high by 78% of the learners. This observation was supported by 71% of staff participants. Moreover, many learners (76%) felt that they received sufficient support from the family, friends, employers and co-workers, however the findings from the qualitative data indicated that support from external forces outside the learning mode was lacking.

The qualitative data confirmed the finding in the quantitative data on the critical role tutors play outside the scope of the engagement contract. The qualitative data showed that tutors were at the disposal of the learners to the extent that they availed their contact numbers to be contacted anytime. Additionally, the qualitative data recognised the learner engagement with their counterparts where they contribute actively to their own learning and where they are equal partners in the learning process. The lack of support from parents, family and community was cited as a barrier affecting the full integration of the learners into the ODL mode of delivery. The findings show that learners do not only depend on academic systems to persist and achieve academic success but also need some form of social interactions.

Tinto (1975) posits that students do not only need to integrate academically but also socially through interactions with others operating in the same environment. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative data show that learners need to experience informal and formal systems in order to integrate socially in the ODL mode of delivery. The participants in this study reported positive social integration due to efforts made to form new relationships in a new environment and learning space.

Learner transition stages

On the objective that relates to the stages learners go through before they fully integrate into the ODL learning mode, the study found that 42% and 44% felt they had adjusted well during the first and second terms, respectively and only 6% indicated that they had adjusted in the third term. The results of the study showed that learner settlement in an ODL system occurs at different stages depending on learners' individual characteristics and prior learning experiences. Tinto avows that full integration requires the learner to pass through three sequential stages, viz. separation, transition and incorporation (Tinto, 1997b). This study supports Tinto's model on the three phases learners go through. In the context of this study, learners were divorced from the previous associations in formal schools (separation). At this stage, there was disconnection between the teachers and peers and the learners had to start making new connections. They experienced isolation and they lacked the ability and experience to study through this distance learning mode. During the second phase (transition), learners started making connections with teachers and fellow learners. They appreciated the engagement with tutors and learners, and started understanding the ODL system. In the final phase (incorporation), they communicated freely with others and tutors, participated with confidence in the learning process and they integrated fully into the ODL mode. The findings showed that learners pass through the stage of incorporation in the first and second terms. The findings imply that adjustment in the first term could be attributed to some learners' prior ODL experience as well as to a positive attitude to the new environment of ODL. The adjustment in the third term validates Tinto's view that learner adjustment is a longitudinal process (Tinto, 1997b).

Strategies to manage transition in ODL

This theme was meant to explore the possible strategies to manage learner transition in an ODL environment. Both the quantitative and qualitative data revealed key interventions of importance for ODL institutions in general, and open schools in particular, to enable learners to manage the transition process effectively and efficiently. Quantitatively, the most significant were the provision of face-to-face tutorials, establishment of full-time Tutorial Centres and provision of additional learning resources to help learners manage the transition in ODL. This was stated by 17.2%, 17% and 16.6% of the learners, respectively. In addition, the introduction of extra-mural activities (10.4%), creation of discussion platforms (10%), strengthening the supervision and monitoring at Tutorial Centres (9.7%), and the implementation of technology mediated services (9.3%) were also found to be useful to assist learners during the transition phase.

Similarly, the qualitative data identified strategies that open schools in general and NAMCOL in particular to manage learner expectations that could ultimately facilitate a smooth transition process. Both the learners and

staff felt strongly that NAMCOL should have a separate, dedicated cadre of staff to render effective support to learners through some forms of face-to-face interactions. Other interventions proposed include immediate feedback on assessment activities, series of motivational talks, English language tutorials and the use of information and communication technologies. A similarity throughout this study and which also emerged as a fundamental transition strategy centred on the high value the learners and staff placed on the interpersonal relationships between the learners and tutors. The results of the study also relate to the three forms of interactions, namely tutor-learner, learner-learner and learner-content interactions as identified by Moore.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study have several implications for practice amongst ODL institutions in particular open schools. ODL practitioners could use this study to further explore and identify the needs of the learners in a particular learning context in order to design commensurate transition programmes and strategies. Open schools should use the results of this study to put systems in place that will enable them to understand, appreciate and manage the high expectations of the learners when introducing the new delivery mode. Furthermore, open schools may consider developing a special guide (booklet) that deals exclusively with learner integration into an ODL system for learners from conventional schools.

Conclusion

The study proposed a transition management model as a critical component that institutions should institute to enable learners to integrate academically, socially, culturally and psychologically within the institution. The study showed that learners' prior learning experiences, personal background and other personal attributes could possibly influence their expectations of the institution and their personal goal commitment. The different attributes the learners came with had an impact on how and when they experienced learning in the new mode of delivery. The study also showed that those learners that entered the institution with a positive mindset and who were goal oriented were more likely to easily integrate into the ODL mode of delivery compared to the learners who were reluctant to make a paradigm shift to the distance learning mode.

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