

Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region

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INTRODUCTION

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) recognises education and skills development as an important and integral part of regional economic integration. Consequently policy frameworks and strategies have been developed to promote regionally integrated and harmonized education and training systems, which can be credited for the considerable progress in education and training provision the region has made over the years, particularly at primary education level.

However, the region still faces a wide range of educational challenges. SADC Member States have therefore adopted open and distance learning (ODL) as a means of addressing some of these challenges. In spite of evident growth across sub-sectors throughout the region, ODL faces many challenges, which have necessitated the development and implementation of a Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Project.

This paper provides some background to the implementation of the project. It highlights the nature and scope of ODL provision in the SADC region, presents the rationale for the project and describes its key components and activities. The paper also outlines achievements to date and discusses some challenges associated with project implementation. Lessons learned are outlined.

BACKGROUND

One of the objectives of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is to achieve development and economic growth, alleviate poverty, enhance the quality of life of the people of Southern Africa, and support its socially disadvantaged through deeper regional integration.

SADC has, therefore, committed itself to, among other things, promoting the development of human resources as a means of achieving its objectives. In this regard education and skills development has been identified, as an area of cooperation necessary for developing knowledge, attitudes, appropriate and relevant skills and human capacities necessary to promote investment, efficiency and competitiveness (SADC Secretariat, 2007).

Accordingly, strategies for scaling up education and training provision in the region, have been developed by the SADC Secretariat, one of which is the adoption of open and distance learning (ODL), which is being promoted through among avenues, the implementation of a Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) project.

Purpose and Objectives of SADC

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) was formed in 1980 as a loose alliance of nine (9) majority-ruled States in Southern Africa known as the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), with the main aim of coordinating development projects in order to lessen economic dependence on the then apartheid South Africa. In 19992, it was transformed into a Development Community (SADC).

The SADC vision is one of a common future within a regional community that will ensure economic well-being, promote the improvement of standards of living and quality of life, freedom and social justice, as well as help establish and maintain peace and security for the peoples of southern Africa. Therefore SADC is committed to, among other things:

- harmonising political and socio-economic policies and plans of Member States;
- mobilising the peoples of the region and their institutions to take initiatives to develop economic, social and cultural ties across the region, and to participate fully in the implementation of the programmes and projects of SADC; and
- creating appropriate institutions and mechanisms for the mobilisation of requisite resources for the implementation of the programmes and operations of SADC and its institutions.

Policy Context

The SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) gives strategic direction and focus to future SADC programmes. It provides strategic objectives, priorities and targets to be achieved by the Region in 2015. The social and human development intervention of the RISDP focuses on, among other things, developing and sustaining human capabilities through increased access of the population to quality and appropriate education and training in all Member States.

In 2000, SADC adopted a Protocol on Education and Training to promote a regionally integrated and harmonised education system, particularly with regard to issues pertaining to access, equity, relevance and quality of education. The Protocol also aims at fostering regional integration and identity through promoting the values, history and languages of the region in the education system.

Key principles and objectives of the Protocol emphasise regional approaches to educational development through the development of common systems, specifically policy making capacity building and regional policy frameworks, information and resource pooling, harnessing of regional expertise, and avoidance of duplication. The protocol recognises the important role of open and distance learning in improving access to, and reducing the inequalities in the acquisition of, education and training and reducing the cost education by maximising on the economies of scale offered by open and distance learning.

The SADC Secretariat has developed a Regional Education and Training Implementation Plan, RETIP, (2007 -2015), which aligns the SADC Protocol on Education and Training to a number of international and continental frameworks to which SADC Member States are committed, including the African Union Second Decade of Education Plan of Action, to guide education development in the region. One of the goals and strategic interventions of the priority areas of the RETIP is to improve the quality, delivery and effective deployment of ODL in order to improve access to quality education and training in the region, in line with the Protocol on education and training.

Open and Distance Learning Context

ODL has been deployed within the Region over the last five decades. Some Member States have used open and distance learning methods to implement large-scale programmes very successfully – particularly in the area of primary teacher training. There is evidence of growing ODL practice across a range of educational sub-sectors throughout the region. The main areas of operation have been in higher education, teacher education, technical and vocational education, secondary education, non formal education and adult basic education and training (ADB, 2005).

There are a number of developments in ODL in the region, which show commitment and efforts of governments and institutions to diversify ODL offerings to meet the ever increasing and diverse learning needs of children, youth and adults as well as to improve the quality of programmes as a means of contributing to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

However, despite the important role of ODL in promoting socio – economic development in the SADC region in general and improving access to, and promoting the quality of, education and training in particular there are a number of issues and challenges that need to be

addressed especially in the context of the SADC ODL project. Limiting factors include weak institutional and human resource capacities.

The implementation of the SADC capacity building in ODL project therefore provides a strategic framework for scaling up education and training provision in the region, through efficient and effective deployment of this mode of education delivery across the region.

THE PROJECT

The SADC Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning Project was launched in 2006, but implementation commenced in 2008. It is a five year project, funded by the African Development Bank (ADB). It is being implemented in nine (9) SADC Member States that are classified as African Development Fund (ADF) countries, namely Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Rationale

The potential of ODL has not been fully realised at all levels of education and training systems across the region because of an ad-hoc and fragmented approach at both the planning and implementation stages, and insufficient capacity at institutional and individual levels. For a variety of reasons ODL has not been sufficiently integrated into the education sector policy and the development dialogue (African Development Fund, 2006).

The development of the project took into consideration the established need to address prejudices and misconceptions about ODL, which need to be addressed through advocacy and awareness raising. It was also realised that regional co-ordinating mechanisms for policy harmonisation and strategic planning would contribute to more effective deployment of ODL and encourage sharing of resources and regional programme development (African Development Fund, 2006).

In the past, capacity building for the design, implementation and evaluation of ODL has tended to focus on sub-systems rather than addressing the requirements of developing effective systems and institutions comprehensively. Similarly it has often not sufficiently addressed the specific needs of the different target groups and designed programmes accordingly (African Development Fund, 2006).

The project provides a framework for building capacity for regional training institutions to offer education and training programmes in critical and specialised areas and thereby increasing the stock of trained personnel in the Region as provided for in the SADC Protocol on education and training.

Purpose

The project has been designed to support integration, harmonisation and maximisation of resources and is expected to support regional standardisation of both quality and outputs. It provides an opportunity to extend and develop the Region's capacity for the effective utilisation of ODL. The SADC Region will benefit from an integrated approach to capacity development in the use of ODL.

The main purpose of the project is, therefore, to contribute to the development and deployment of effective, harmonized ODL, to increase access to quality education and training and support regional integration across SADC (African Development Fund 2006). It aims to build capacity and strengthen commitment and understanding at multiple levels – at systemic, institutional/organisational and at individual level. It focuses on building regional and national capacity in ODL to enable its effective deployment in addressing the educational challenges of the Region. Ultimately the project is expected to build the technical capacity of institutions and individuals to design, implement, monitor and evaluate ODL programmes (African Development Fund 2006).

Components

The project has two components. Component 1 is ODL Regional Policy Development and Strategic Planning whose outcome is increased and more strategic deployment of ODL within and across the SADC Region. Thus the project provides for the development of a regional ODL policy and strategic framework and national ODL policies; an Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Strategy aimed at promoting understanding of the concept, practice and benefits of ODL amongst a wider key stakeholder group, at regional and national levels; a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy (GMS) to facilitate gender mainstreaming in ODL in the region and a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework whose expected output is improved management and quality of ODL the region.

Component 2 is Regional Capacity Building for Open and Distance learning whose expected outcome is the strengthening of the design and implementation of ODL programmes. Under this component the project provides for the development of technical skills and enhancement of ODL knowledge through training workshops in nine key ODL skills areas, that is, ODL curriculum planning and material development; ODL financing, budgeting and costing; Student support, assessment and accreditation in ODL; eLearning; ODL management, administration and marketing; Quality Assurance in ODL; Research skills in ODL application (including policy research); Strategic planning and management of ODL; Monitoring and evaluation in ODL. These will be hosted Centres of Specialisation (CoS), which will take a lead role in the development of capacity across SADC in the design and implementation of ODL courses.

The CoS will be enhancing information and resource sharing across the Region and establishing networks of ODL practitioners. This will be achieved through the design and development of a data-base and other information sharing facilities. Thus a Knowledge Management System (KMS) is being developed to support the delivery of ODL across the region through enhanced sharing of information, best practice and resources; collaboration, across the Region, and establishing networks of ODL institutions and practitioners (African Development Fund 2006).

Formal, long term training programmes, at certificate, diploma and master's degree levels will be offered by regional institutions which have been selected through the SADC bidding process. Both types of training will develop the capacity of educational institutions within the SADC region to design and implement improved quality ODL programmes. They will develop the participants' knowledge and technical ability through information dissemination and sharing of best practice and lessons learnt. Issues of gender will be addressed throughout and those relating to HIV and AIDS will be addressed where appropriate. The implications for the deployment of ICT will also be considered in all workshops (African Development Fund 2006)

Beneficiaries

Although the project is being implemented in nine (9) SADC Member States that are classified as African Development Fund (ADF) the other Member States classified as ADB countries are participating in the management of the project and will benefit from policy and strategic frameworks that are being developed by the project for the entire SADC region. In addition bids for consultancies and for offering short and long term training programmes are open to individuals and institutions in both ADB and ADF countries.

The primary beneficiaries of the project will be those learners participating in, and deriving educational benefit, from ODL programmes in ADF countries. The secondary beneficiaries will be those people responsible for designing and implementing ODL in the Region such as decision-makers in national Ministries of Education and Training, institutional decision-makers, education/ODL practitioners, including, but not limited to, course and programme planners and managers, materials developers, content experts, lecturers and tutors, and administrators (African Development Fund 2006).

Management

Project implementation is managed through the existing SADC Secretariat structures. It is located in the Directorate of Human and Social Development and Special Programmes (SHD &SP), which is responsible for all education and training programmes. It has a lean staff compliment of a Project Coordinator, Project Advisor and a Secretary and shares the services of the finance staff, gender expert and monitoring and evaluation expert with another ADB supported project.

At Member State level, project activities are coordinated by the SADC Technical Committee on Open and Distance Learning (TCODL) members who are supported by national ODL committees (established under the purview of the project) or other national ODL coordinating structures.

The TCODL (comprising representatives from all Member States) steers the project. The project activities are part of the Secretariat's annual reports, on the execution of the Regional Education and Training Implementation Plan, to the SADC Ministers responsible for Education and Training who provide policy direction and approve policies on all education and training issues in the region.

Achievements

Under component 1, an Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Strategy, a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy and a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework have been developed. The development of a regional ODL policy has started, after SADC – wide studies on the status of education and training that were conducted to inform regional ODL policy development. Draft national ODL policies have been developed in three Member States.

Under Component 2 the notable achievements to date are that:

- Two CoS, namely the Open University of Tanzania (for teacher education) and the Malawi College of Distance Education (for secondary education) have been established.
- A total of 118 ODL practitioners (41% female) from seven Member States classified as ADF countries have participated in regional and continental ODL conferences as a means of facilitating sharing of best practice and networking
- Exchange of experiences through study tours has been facilitated and supported for five member delegations from six Member States.
- An assessment of the capacities of public ODL institutions has been conducted in 12 Member States and an assessment of training needs of ODL practitioners in all the nine ADF countries has been done.
- National ODL Committees to facilitate the implementation of project activities in ADF countries and to mainstream the SADC ODL project activities into national and institutional structures and programmes have been formed and inducted.
- Institutions to offer formal training in ODL at Certificate, Diploma and Master's degree levels have been selected
- A firm has been selected to develop a Knowledge Management System (KMS)

Challenges

Challenges experienced include the following

- delays (at times) in the approval of project activities by the ADB through the issuance of "No Objection" system;
- low participation of some beneficiary Member States in the project activities – the project is yet to be integrated into national ODL operational structures and management systems in a number of Member States;

- delays in the submission of work-plans to the SADC Secretariat, by some Member States, for financial support;
- occasional communication difficulties between the project office and some Member States; and
- the project document is too prescriptive in some areas, which does not make it easy to adapt to the changing economic and ICT environment in the region/

Lessons learned

The main lessons drawn from the project are that:

- the development of a project of this magnitude requires extensive consultations with key stakeholders and is better initiated by the beneficiaries
- a multifaceted approach to capacity development in ODL is essential for promoting collective commitment to the project, that is, the provision of policy frameworks; development of relevant skills and knowledge; establishment of appropriate institutional structures; and advocacy strategy,
- The integration of a project of this nature into existing institutional management and decision making structures is important for enhancing ownership and accountability, at both regional and national level.

CONCLUSION

The project is a good example of a south – to- south cooperation, facilitating education systems and institutions in the region to work together more effectively and efficiently, within the context of the SADC education and training policy environment. Its sustainability will depend on how Member States will integrate its activities into their national ODL operational structures and management systems.

References

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