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## **Distance Education opens access to educational and career advancement: the case of Community Based Workers' Certificate programme at BOCODOL**

### ***A paper***

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### ***Abstract***

In its common usage in Education, the term access typically refers to the ways in which educational institutions through their policies strive to ensure that different sectors of the population have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. However, there is evidence that there are certain factors such as, race religion, and disability, past academic performance that may contribute to certain groups of people having less access to educational opportunities than others. This paper looks at the role played by Distance Education at the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), which is to continually open up access to some of disadvantaged groups of the Botswana society through its accredited programs. In particular the paper presents a case of the Certificate programme for Community Based Work with Children and Youth (CBWCY). This is a programme that has been designed for people who work with vulnerable children and youth at community level mainly on a voluntary basis and most of them without any formal qualification for the work. While the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) and UNICEF ESARO designed the programme, in Botswana it is offered by BOCODOL through Distance Education and in partnership with the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) in South Africa. Involvement by BOCODOL in this programme was a result of the realisation that the majority of the participants in the programme, despite their hard work and positive contributions to society, did not have formal qualifications on the basis of which they could develop a career in this field. This paper presents this case to share practical experiences and showcase a model that bears testimony to positive contribution by Distance education in Botswana in opening up access to educational opportunities for those who have been disadvantaged by their different life circumstances.

***Key Words: access, equality, opportunities, disadvantage, Distance and Open Learning***

## **Introduction**

Distance education or distance learning as it is sometimes called and lately, e-learning or online learning is the type of education whereby students and teachers in different places for all or most of the time that they learn and teach, (Moore and Kearsley 2005:1). Distance education is also a mode of teaching and learning which is designed to give options to those who would like to pursue their studies at whatever level. A somewhat appealing definition is provided by Ian Mugridge, who states that Distance education is: "a form of education in which there is normally a separation between teacher and learner and thus one in which other means the printed and written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing, for example are used to bridge the physical gap." (Mugridge 1991:2).

As an alternative to traditional, campus-based classes, distance education is known to make learning attainable for people from different walks of life. It allows its students to study on a more flexible basis which includes self-paced study, and doing so when and where one wants to. In its earliest form, distance education was learning which was mediated by mail. And therefore, it was for some time known as correspondence education which has now been significantly replaced by technology mediated learning. In today's world, there is, widespread use of computers, the internet, and other technology based facilities that have made distance learning easier and faster in the delivery of curricula online. It is perhaps for this reason that between 2000 and 2008, enrolment in distance education courses increased rapidly in almost every country in both developed and developing countries. Many private, public, non-profit and for-profit institutions worldwide now offer distance education courses from the most basic instruction through to the highest levels of degree and doctoral programs. For example, it is reported that in the United States in 2011, it was found that a third of all the students enrolled in postsecondary education had taken an accredited online course in a postsecondary institution. Therefore, enrolment for ODL courses is largely attributed to increased developments and the advances in technology.

However, the one common factor that remains between correspondence education and distance education these two is "distance" between the teacher and the learner. This aside, it is, necessary in this regard, to acknowledge the evident evolution in the way in which Distance Education is defined and practiced. There is evidence that while in its earlier conception Distance education gave prominence to "distance" in the spatial sense, the current focus is slanted to technology mediation of the teaching and learning processes. Bringing the two conceptions of Distance Education together Moore (1980 cited in... **Winner Dominic Chawinga and Paxton Andrew Zozie (2016)** sees distance education not just as a geographical separation but rather a pedagogical concept. That is to say while what is commonly or widely perceived as the main problem, is the geographical issue for the learner, in actual fact the pedagogical issue is equally important.

### **Distance and Open Learning (ODL) in Southern Africa – Botswana**

The Southern Africa Region through the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat, has developed instruments and frameworks aimed at driving the agenda of educational development, provision and development of Open and Distance Education in particular. Among these, are the Regional ODL Policy Framework and the Regional ODL Strategic Plan and Implementation framework. In both of these documents, SADC recognises the critical role of education in socio-economic development. It also acknowledges the existing inequalities in educational provision in the region, between men and women, boys and girls, those with special needs and other vulnerable population subgroups. And in view of these inequalities, in these documents, the region also emphasizes that education should be provided equitably among the social groups. In addition, the two instruments recognise that deployment of harmonised Open and Distance Learning is a viable strategy for increased access to quality education (SADC, 2012:2).

### **Issues of access and open access to education**

Evidently, one of the key concepts in the right to education is access: access to the means to fully develop as human beings as well as access to the means to gain skills, knowledge and credentials. Woodrow (2003), Andreshak-Berham (2003) and Johansson et al. (2005) cited in Morolong and Motswagosele (2007) note that 'access' was understood in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to address 'inclusion of the under-

represented in higher education' particularly mature students. Consequently the meaning was limited to high enrolment numbers but did not consider student profiles and socio-economic backgrounds. Critical considerations of retention, employability and progression within the chosen field of work were ignored. Johansson et al (2005) note that generally, participation in higher education seems to be regarded as sufficient if there is increase of enrolment numbers.

According to some authors, access should also be deemed to include 'widening of participation' with which it has been used interchangeably even though it seems to fall short of defining the type of participation that is predicted Woodrow (2003). It is further observed however, that the two, access and widening participation fail to identify the social groups and provide their profile with regard to variables such as gender, age, race, special needs, and other socio-cultural and economic characteristics. Bekhradnia (2003) cited in Morolong and Motswagosele explains the concept of access as including; the widening of opportunities to take part in education for all social groups that can benefit from higher education (p3). Evidently, widening participation and access as defined are elusive in terms of the requirements that determine eligibility to participate. Based on this critique, Woodrow (2003) advocates the usage of 'social inclusion/exclusion' in explaining the concept of access because it is more applicable to divergent and changing circumstances. The opposite of exclusion is inclusion or inclusive education.

### **Inclusive education**

Inclusive education is education that involves processes of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of the diverse learners through increased participation in learning, cultures and communities. The goal of Inclusive education is for the entire education system to facilitate learning environments where teachers and learners embrace and welcome the challenge and benefits of diversity. Within an inclusive education approach, learning environments are fostered where individual needs are met and every learner has an opportunity to succeed (UNESCO, 2006). The ultimate goal of inclusive education is to end all forms of discrimination that are found in educational provision and foster social cohesion and equality.

### **Distance education and issues of equality**

Concern about equal access to educational activities has been central to the purpose of Distance and Open Learning. For instance, as far back as the 1800 hundreds, the University of Chicago was referred to as "People's University because it provided access to higher education to students from less affluent backgrounds. Closer to home in the University of South Africa, formerly an examining and certification body, started to present distance education tuition in 1946. And up to today, a model for the Open Universities and Distance education institutions revolves around the issue of widening access to the highest standards of scholarship in higher education.

Promotion of equitable access to education and educational opportunities is a factor of the glaring inequalities that continue to plague education as one of the fundamental human rights. The big issue in this regard is not only about ensuring that educational opportunities are availed to those needing them but it is about equality of access to those opportunities. This is a complex and contested terrain in the debate about education within the EFA framework. Of particular interest in this discussion is the role of Open and Distance Learning in facilitating equal access. Amongst the many and various strategies and institutional structures that countries have developed and adopted to ensure that access to, participation in, and equality in the benefits that education systems offer, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has gained currency over the years as a viable strategy.

It is a commonly held view that distance learning can expand access to education and training for both the general populace and businesses. This is mainly because its flexible scheduling structure lessens the effects of the numerous time-constraints imposed by personal responsibilities and commitments on those who wish to study but are in full time employment. Capacity of the ODL mode to devolve the bulk of education and training activities off-site, alleviates institutional capacity constraints which often feature very strongly as a result of demands for physical infrastructure when the traditional modes of education are employed. It is further observed that with ODL the open access is also with regard to educational experts in the different fields of study and to other students from diverse geographical, social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds.

One of the most common views about how Distance education can be a viable vehicle in the promotion of equal access to educational and career opportunities is that, it is relatively cheaper than traditional/conventional education. Hulsman (2004) further advance the idea that distance education is cheaper in terms of the production of graduates than conventional education. It is also noted that it is mainly for this reason that Open and Distance Education (ODE) has offered access to many people who would have previously been denied access to educational opportunities especially because of their poor-economic circumstances, which translates to their social status etc (Afolaya, 2015). It is against this background that this paper presents the case of Certificate Programme on Community Based Work with Children and Youth to demonstrate how in a practical life situation, ODL is serving the fundamental purpose of increasing access to education for a disadvantaged sector of the population of Botswana which is the point of reference in this paper.

### **Background of the CBWCY Certificate Programme**

The Situated Supported Distance Learning (SSDL) Certificate Programme: Community Based Work with Children and Youth (CBWCY), is a programme that was designed to address a gap in skills building for those, mainly volunteers, who working with children and youth, particularly in peri-urban and rural settings. The Certificate was conceived and designed in 2004 as a Regional Programme, by the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) in collaboration with UNICEF Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa, the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal and the African Centre for Childhood (ACC) in South Africa, (REPSSI Concept paper for BOCODOL: 2011). In 2010, the Southern African Development Countries – Centre for instance Education (SADC-CDE), which is housed in the Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning (BOCODOL) was approached by REPSSI to introduce the certificate programme to the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL). The SADC-CDE has been formally recognised as a SADC institution through principle of subsidiary, to contribute towards improving and strengthening distance education and training systems in the region through collaborative efforts, (ODL Newsletter April-June 2013). Hence its collaboration with REPSSI for the running of the CBWCY program in some SADC countries.

This being a regional programme for Eastern and Southern Africa, by 2010 when Negotiations were underway for it to be introduced in Botswana the programme was already offered in 10 countries of Southern and East Africa,(as shown in the map below) except Botswana, Angola and South Africa, which joined later.



*Source: Cycle 4 Surveyor Training slides*

In Botswana, once the negotiations were concluded and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between BOCODOL and REPSSI, the certificate programme enrolled its first cohort in July 2012. By this time the programme was in its third cycle in other countries which started earlier. The college admitted 76 students into the programme.

### **Purpose of the programme**

The CBWCY certificate programme is an innovative response to a regional demand for quality training in child and youth work, especially social and emotional (psycho-social) support, child protection and promotion of children's rights (REPPSI programme brochure – UKZN). It helps to ensure that vulnerable (disadvantaged) populations receive the professional care and support they are entitled to. The CBWCY programme, specifically aims to:

- ✚ Provide frontline practitioners in the Orphan and Vulnerable Children (OVC) sector with access to an accredited professional certificate which will enhance relevant skills and knowledge in order to enhance their daily performance in working with communities, families, youth and children.
- ✚ Strengthen their understanding and practice of psychosocial care and support, and promote a child rights approach
- ✚ Provide access to education and training for frontline workers, who are traditionally marginalized and do not receive professional and educational opportunities, without removing them from their valuable work with children
- ✚ Provide frontline child and youth workers with a theoretical framework within which to base their existing knowledge and practice  
*(Program Regulations – Aims and Objectives: 2014 – Revised version)*

It was against this background that the Certificate programme was designed for people working with children and youth. It is meant to open up educational opportunities for community workers, community care givers, programme officers, teachers, police and special workers. The programme focuses on providing a coherent theoretical framework and on enhancing the skills and practice of volunteers and programme officers working in the support of vulnerable children, (*REPPSI Position paper*). It offers learners an overview of the sector pertaining to working with vulnerable children, youth, families and their communities. The programme focuses on knowledge creation through describing key trends, theories and approaches as well as building practical skills through experiential learning, creating a workforce of reflective Practitioners. The following is the general profile of those who register to study in this programme

### **Profile of participants in the CBWCY**

**Age:** ranges from 22 to 65 years

**Gender:** 90% Females only about 10% male

**Minimum qualifications:** Junior certificate secondary education

**Employment Status and income levels:** Mainly volunteers at Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) taking care of vulnerable children and youth. Earns an allowance not more than P800.00 (US\$80) a month. 10% are workers earning a sizable salary of about P4500.00 (US\$455) a month.

**Work experience:** Care takers; Police officers, Social workers, mother at NGOs and pre-school teachers.

### **Programme delivery**

The first BOCODOL cohort of the programme was delivered through what REPSSI calls model 1. This is a system of delivery in which the country or institution offering the programme administers it with the University of Kwazulu Natal (UKZN) through REPSSI /UKZN arrangements. All the materials for the programme are developed and revised by UKZN and sent to the administering Institution. The students' assessment and moderation is also done by the University of KwaZulu Natal.

This is an eighteen months long certificate programme which is offered through six modules within the framework of the Distance Education method called situated Supported Distance Learning. It is called **situated** in the sense that the students are situated in their work environments, where they are already

working with children and or youth. (REPSSI Concept Note to BOCODOL: 2010). The students do not have to stop working in order to learn and they apply their learning immediately within their work environments.

CBWCY students at BOCODOL meet in groups of mentor led sessions (tutorials) for five hours every two weeks on Saturdays for a facilitated discussion which encourages them to integrate their experience of working with children at community level into the theory that they are learning and also to apply the theory to their practice and share the results with the group. The sessions are facilitated by a trained and experienced mentor who is drawn from civil society, government or an academic institution. There are 4 mentored sessions for each of the 6 modules and students write 2 assignments which are submitted in hard copy for each module (formative and summative).

The students are supported by 4 full day group sessions per each module which are facilitated by a skilled mentor. The sessions are held at a venue that is relatively close to all members of the student group. Participation in the sessions is mandatory and marks are earned for it. Furthermore the students are learning with colleagues from the same field and geographical location. This way they are enabled to form “communities of practice” thereby strengthening the impact of their learning for their benefit that of those they serve. Evidently, by its nature as described earlier in this paper, it is only the ODL mode as practiced by BOCODOL which could make this possible for these marginalised groups.

In 2014 BOCODOL adopted what REPSSI and UKZN call Model 2, that is, a way of delivery in which while BOCODOL continues to jointly award the certification with REPSSI but now it fully owns the students. The institution now admits and does all the administration and offers all other students’ support services, such as organising and running the tutorials, student inductions and training of mentors. UKZN does only the external moderation of assessment (settings and marking) as part of the Quality assurance). In this model two, which was cycle 4 of the programme regionally, BOCODOL enrolled 89 students. Out of these 89 students 63 have successfully completed and are graduating this academic year 2015/16, in November withal other, which is the graduates of the college.

#### **How is the CBWCY a Distance Education Programme**

The CBWCY programme here presented is offered by the distance education mode through Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL). BOCODOL is the leading ODL institution in Botswana which was established by an Act of Parliament of 1998 (*Revised National Policy on Education: Recommendation number 87*) BOCODOL was found to be the right institution to deliver the programme as its mandate is, to extend educational opportunities to out of school youth and adults using Distance Education methods (RNPE: 2004). The college has four regional centres where it administers its programmes. In 2012 when the programme was introduced in the college it was administered in the three regional centres of the College being, Gaborone, Francistown and Palapye regions. The table below shows the enrolment distribution of the 76 first cohort students across the three centres

**Table 1 – First Cohort (2012/14)**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total enrolled</b>	<b>% Female</b>	<b>% Male</b>
Francistown	13	3	16	81%	19%
Gaborone	27	8	35	90%	10%
Palapye	20	5	25	80%	20%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>21%</b>

In the second cohort of the programme, when now Botswana is in its cycle 2 (which was cycle 4 of the programme in other countries of Southern Africa), the college enrolled 89 students in the programme. Table 2 illustrates the enrolment per region and by gender.

**Table 2 – Second Cohort (2015/16)**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total enrolled</b>	<b>% Female</b>	<b>% Male</b>
Francistown	11	1	12	92%	8%
Gaborone	32	1	33	96%	4%
Palapye	15	1	16	94%	6%
Maun	24	4	28	86%	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>8%</b>

In the second cycle the programme was rolled out to the fourth College region, that of Maun. This has increased accessibility of the programme. This is bound to expand the skills base of those enrolled in the programme and subsequently to improve the quality of service offered to the vulnerable children and Youth in the Ngami and Ghanzi areas of Botswana. These are some of the most remote areas in the country with relatively limited resources and difficult reach by most of the services including educational facilities

### **Impact of the Programme**

Results from the independent evaluation of this pilot carried out by SAIDE<sup>1</sup> clearly indicate that the SSDL course provided a rich environment for the acquisition of new skills and knowledge around community based care and support for vulnerable children and youth. Distance learning has great potential in the developing countries by offering a powerful channel for bringing education to groups that have previously been excluded (Afolayan:2015). The Situated Supported Distance Learning Certificate Programme ‘Community Based Work with Children and Youth’ aims to provide community based workers with vital and sustainable training in the context of their community. Situated learning specifies that the course is taken by caregivers in the remote areas in which they are working. Supported learning means that even those without prior learning have the opportunity to access support within a regular mentor support group.

Distance learning enables students to study in their home, using the hard copy modules while they continue to provide their vital community service. An independent evaluation of the first cycle, conducted by the South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE:2010) found that the certificate is an excellent example of a well designed and implemented distance education access programme. This SAIDE report (2010) mentions that “there is a consensus among students and mentors that without the group sessions they would not have been able to participate successfully in the programme. The programme is recognized for offering an innovative learning and teaching model that combines learning with immediate practical application of the knowledge and skills”.

### **How does the CBWCY programme promote open access?**

Access implies the facilitation of people to get education, the opportunity for enrolment as well as the facilitation and the encouragement of sustaining enrolment by learners in appropriate education programmes. UNESCO (2002) equally stated that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place and offering learning opportunities to individuals and group of learners. Education is seen as the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalised adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain means to participate fully in their communities, (UNESCO:1999).

This certificate programme adds to an existing strong education system Botswana already enjoys. The program is non-discriminatory as its open to all people, especially the most vulnerable taking care of children and youth on voluntary basis. It adheres to physical accessibility in the sense that it is a situated



distance learning program. In this programme students are able to access the program and attend mentor-guided session in their own local areas without leaving their areas of work to travel to tutorial sessions. It is affordable as the students pay only 20% of the whole tuition fees and the 80% is subsidised by REPSSI or other institution, which could be approached to fund the needy students. For the two cohorts that the BODOL has enrolled the Stanbic Bank Botswana has fully sponsored 10 students.

The certificate programme is thus far succeeding in strengthening the work being done by its students who are also engaged in their various working environments some employed and some on a voluntary basis. Interestingly, initially the programme was designed for care givers and volunteers but the relevance of the course content has gone beyond this target group. A cross section of the students enrolled in 2012 who graduated in 2014 indicates that a significant number of teachers, social workers and police officers were amongst the graduates. The programme became very popular with teachers in Botswana and other countries where it is being offered like Swaziland, Lesotho and Zambia such that a new Diploma program on Psych-social care and Support, specifically designed for teachers has been introduced in Zambia (initiated and developed by REPSSI and UKZN).

### **Benefits of the programme to the OVC workers**

The programme has been seen as very valuable by most of the students who had enrolled in both cohorts. However, after the painful challenges of completing the programme, their living standards and those of their families have improved. From the first cohort graduates three of the CBWCY students were enrolled with the college for the Diploma Programme in Integrated early childhood education. Two more were admitted this year 2016/7. Some students have said they have been promoted to become facilitators in their NGOs.

From a questionnaire that was administered with the intention to evaluate the programme students have shown that they have gained from this programme the skills such as *communication; managing information; community mobilization; personal health; networking; reflective skills; how to be non-judgemental; advocacy strategies; Motivational skills; leadership as well as to be able to work independently*. For the benefits derived by their places of work one student said in her work place she mostly applies *“interpersonal skills by being better able to interact with other people*. She also said she has gained some facilitation skills and now she is not taking or making decisions for people but helps them make decisions for themselves’. In working with children and youth one student wrote; *“the course helped me to see and be able to work well with children and youth. I know what it takes to motivate them to participate and learn, be interested when we have sessions for them to be able to stand for themselves and make wise decisions about their own lives”*.

Some students’ voices from other countries of Southern and East Africa such as Tanzania, Lesotho, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, as noted by SAIDE report shows that the programme has been of great value on the lives. For example it says one student from Uganda said this has influenced her personal life and was quoted as saying: *“module 1 has helped me to know ways of taking care of myself when the work is very demanding. It has helped me to look at my own growth seriously, which is important for helping children and youth because in this type of work I am a tool of the work”*.

The students voices show that the programme is not benefiting only students or OVC workers in Botswana, but regionally, where it is administered. Qualitative and quantitative data collected from 64% of the alumni of Cycle 1 (2010) and 67% of the cycle 2 (2012) graduates, by REPSSI indicated that students now valued a rights-based, asset-based, participatory approach where interactions with children were more child-centred and child-friendly. It also found that career ‘pathing’ and promotion does not wait: at graduation, eight percent of those who had started as volunteers were already reporting being paid. One plausible cause for this is the increased respect they received within their organizations. (ACC Quarterly report: 2010)

### **Conclusion**

Many students as they progress from this programme have shown that they have grown, they are now able to make better decisions and some have been given higher posts of responsibility in their work places. These are students who some were care-givers, some, programme officers, OVC community facilitator,

with no proper skills of doing their jobs. Now here they are, having graduated or graduating with more higher valued skills of working with communities as care givers and working with children and youth, some as program facilitators. The materials for the programme by producing such acknowledging graduated shows that they are self-instructional materials of good quality, developed by qualified team members from a University set up.

Distance education has a long history, but its popularity and use has grown exponentially as more advanced technology has become available. By 2008, online learning programs were available in the United States in 44 states at the K-12 level. The high cost of education affects students at all levels of education. Evidently, the way in which the CBWCY programme as here presented was conceived, seems to have offered some relief for the students in many respects. These include relief with regard to the strictly rigid requirements with regard to minimum entry qualifications, financial burdens, remoteness of learners and the burden of usually having to forego employment in order to pursue studies, thereby compromising the usually much needed financial gains from a job. This bears testimony to the fact that distance education can be a viable alternative to conventional learning especially for the marginalised groups of society such as the students of the BOCODOL/REPSSI/KZN offered CBWCY programme.

This case and the students' verbatim reflections about the course also seems to confirm the view that when the course design and delis innovative enough and the learning environment offers optimally conducive conditions, then distance education can lead students to higher satisfaction with their learning experiences. The strength of this Programme for the country, offered by ODL lies with the through such programme countries such as Botswana can leverage on these to successfully provide and expand its capacity to respond to the need for trained personnel and to do so in cost manageable ways.

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