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Ensuring employability and widening access: the case of the University of Eswatini

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The University of Eswatini (formerly known as the University of Swaziland) has an Institute of Distance Education since the mid nineteen nineties. The introduction of blended learning in 2017/2018 throughout the University means some of the mandates of the Institute have now been overtaken. Changing mandates, changing policy environment (an IDE Policy document is circulating as we speak, with possible adoption before the end of this year), changing world, changing Swazi society.

In my contribution I aim to show how the Institute of Distance Education could transform and reposition itself in order to assist the nation with satisfying its educational and professional development needs, in particular when it comes to entrepreneurship, languages and related study areas. Enhanced stakeholder involvement is, in my view, one of the ways in which IDE can ensure that it responds to societal needs.

One of the major developments is that through blended learning 'traditional' faculties may now be able to attract a higher number of students than in the past (when this was not possible, mainly due to infrastructural limitations). This constitutes a major 'threat' to the Institute. One way of counteracting this threat is to introduce training courses (short and long) that can be delivered online or in a blended manner (with limited face-to-face offerings in the students' workstations, if they are employed). Intensified stakeholder involvement is able to construct strategic partnerships with both internal and external stakeholders. It is necessary to research this new direction as it might change the face (and content) of what occurs in the Institute of Distance Education in the Kingdom of Eswatini.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Eswatini, the second smallest state in mainland Africa, once possessed one of the continents highest income levels per head. In 2001, the World Bank's Gross National Income (GNI) estimates led to the classification of the then Swaziland (the country's name changed on 19 April 2018) as a 'middle income' economy. In 1985-89, the country recorded significant average annual growth in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 10% which was the second highest after Botswana (Matthews, 2004). However, economic growth has wavered in the past few years, exacerbated by the economy's inability to create new jobs at the same rate that new job seekers enter the market. Today Eswatini seems to be struggling economically as it has been facing numerous problems that have threatened the country's economic stability.

These problems include the 2008 global financial crisis which progressed into a fiscal crisis. The fiscal crisis of 2011 brought to the fore underlying problems such as the weak business environment, low Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) influxes, an overvalued exchange rate, an extraordinary HIV and AIDS burden and most critically, a high unemployment rate. According to Brixiova *et al.* (2012), by the late 2000s, the unemployment rate, after a gradual rise since the mid-1990s was one of the highest in middle income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2007 and 2010, the official unemployment rate (strict definition of unemployment) reached 28.2 and 28.5% of the people able to work (aged 15 and above), whilst the unemployment rate stood at 38 in 2007 and 40.6% under the relaxed definition of unemployment (Government of Swaziland, 2010). The unemployment rate has remained high even after the end of the global financial crisis.

In my contribution I look at possible avenues to reduce this unemployment rate through a variety of initiatives undertaken by the Institute of Distance Education, University of Eswatini, in view of raising access to education and success with studies and post-study employment (self-employment included). The paper is divided in three sections, the first one looks at transformation, the second at the programmes proposed by the Institute of Distance Education (IDE). The final section discusses, recommends and concludes.

Transformations: changing policies, changing worlds, changing societies

Globally, the situation has been described, among others, by the McKinsey Global Institute which estimates that by 2020 there will be a global shortfall of 85 million high- and middle-skilled workers, up from 75 million in 2012 (ILO,

2012). Seeking to understand this phenomenon, McKinsey & Company developed two unique data sets. The first is an analysis of more than 100 education-to-employment initiatives from 25 countries, selected on the basis of their innovation and effectiveness.

Despite attempts made at fighting unemployment, this continues to be a problem in Eswatini. What can the country do to generate employment opportunities in adequate numbers and to reduce the rise in unemployment or eradicate it completely. Clearly, thus far Eswatini has been unable to provide the necessary job opportunities which resulted in a rising unemployment rate. It has been noted that the problem is aggravated by the HIV prevalence rate and the great number of new entrants into the labour force. This means that labour absorption has been far lower than the rates necessary to hold the unemployment levels constant or prevent them from rising.

National Development Strategy – Vision 2022

In 1997, the government of Eswatini adopted a national economic strategy called the National Development Strategy – Vision 2022. This Vision 2022 includes all development priorities for the country's various economic sectors, including education.

Through the vision of this strategy Eswatini indicates its wish to feature in the top 10% of the medium human development group of countries founded on sustainable economic development, social justice and political stability. The strategy's vision statement also states that the focus is on quality of life, which is composed of areas such as social integration, poverty eradication, employment creation, gender equity and environmental protection, which are in turn linked to education, health and other aspects of human resource development. Employment and education are strong priorities in this list. The strategy has to be implemented in and via the various national educational institutions, of which the University and its Institute of Distance Education is a major one.

The strategy spells out that appropriate education and training are important elements in the quest for a transformation in the educational section (this includes moving away from the current, traditional academic orientation towards a more technical and vocational direction), adequate incentives to encourage businesses and households to fully develop human capital, appropriate youth programmes, inclusion in all societal endeavours and attention to other areas possibly impacting on the quality of human capital (health, water, sanitation, housing, etc.).

In order to ensure that people can study (immediately after ending high school or later on in life as the international trend towards lifelong learning is also present in Eswatini) and gain the skills necessary for insertion into the labour force, be it as an employee or an employer, as an entrepreneur, the University of Eswatini and its Institute of Distance Education analysed the challenge of unemployment and saw the link between employment and learning opportunities as vital. Thus, it formalised the blended learning approach and worked on an institutional ODL policy. I will discuss the introduction, implementation and consolidation of the blended learning approach in Eswatini below.

The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy (2011)

This 2011 policy aims to provide an equitable and inclusive education system that gives all learners access to high-quality, free and compulsory primary and secondary education. The idea is that schooling does not stop after secondary education. All citizens should have the opportunity to continue with lifelong education and training, enhancing personal development and contributing to Eswatini's cultural development, socio-economic growth and international competitiveness. This policy targets all learners, teachers, employees, managers and other service providers in the education and training sector, including all public and private, formal and non-formal learning institutions, at all levels of the country's education system.

In the list of challenges identified in the policy, employment features as one of the main ones. As such, education for sustainable development needs to be part of what is implemented; the identification of norms and practices to ensure sustainable living in a society in which citizens contribute, via employment and entrepreneurship to growth and development is one of the steps to be undertaken.

This policy stated as its main targets the following:

- “Early childhood care and development: expansion of equitable access, high standards
- Primary education: free/compulsory access, competence-based curricula, textbook policy
- Secondary education: school infrastructure, libraries, enhancing cognitive skills

- Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET): establishing the Swaziland Training Authority¹, initiating and regulating a National TVET Qualifications Framework
- Tertiary and higher education: establishing loan funds, flexible entry level assessment, improving cost efficiency
- Teacher education and training: competency-based teacher education, upgrading student teaching practice, reforming the demand-based financing model for teacher education
- Non-formal and continuing education: developing and regulating a non-formal and continuing education system to facilitate flexible access to relevant education opportunities for disadvantaged, over-aged or challenged learners; aligning non-formal education levels and standards in Swaziland with other countries in the South African Development Community (SADC) region.”

Important for the purpose of this paper is the necessary interaction between the various levels and sectors of the education system, and also the focus on non-formal and continuing education, an area which for a very long time universities and other higher education institutions have neglected. Transformations at the University of Eswatini have been brought about via a rethinking of non-formal and continuing education, first because it is a gap which was not filled previously and secondly because lifelong learning can be more easily achieved through blended (and online learning) than through conventional teaching and learning methods. In the next section, I will briefly describe the university’s steps towards a blended learning policy.

Uneswa’s Blended Learning Policy (2018-2019)

The world of teaching and learning in most universities is changing. The pressure for change comes from many sources, one of them being the need to offer education at a time and place convenient to the people of Eswatini. Teaching and learning methods are being reviewed and revised in the light of the rapid technological advances. The Blended Learning (BL) Policy is an essential part of the overall University’s Teaching, Learning Quality Assurance Policy (draft, 2018). It should also be read in conjunction with the draft Guide to designing blended learning programmes².

The University’s revised strategic plan for 2018-2022 recognizes the need to introduce technology into its teaching and learning approaches. The Blended Learning Policy’s intention is to ensure that by 2022, all programmes and courses are blended i.e. contain components of online and traditional face-to-face teaching and learning.

Looking at new ways of teaching and learning allowed the university community to also reflect on relevance of programme content, especially in view of enhancing employability of its graduates. The Institute of Distance Education, with its stakeholders (internal and external), thought it an opportune time to devise a few new programmes (degree and short courses in Entrepreneurship, a variety of short courses open to the general public, etc.) which I briefly detail below.

One of the ways the university and its Institute of Distance Education ensure that new programmes are relevant and target broader employment (including self-employment) is by involving internal and external stakeholders when programmes are designed, developed and implemented. External stakeholders include the government, former and potential students, parents, business partners, employers, employment agencies, competitors, donors, communities, governmental and non-governmental regulators, professional associations, science and technology parks, etc. Internal stakeholders include the university’s Council and Senate, faculty and departmental boards, current students, management and employees (teaching and research staff, administrative staff, support staff).

New programmes and new ways of “doing things”

For many years, the university continued offering what it had always offered. Changing environments, a changing world and a changing Swazi society initiated the need for new programme design and development. One of the areas in which transformation was most needed was that of entrepreneurship, especially when the lack of entrepreneurial

¹ This section includes Swaziland instead of Eswatini as the draft policy document still contains the old name of the country.

² All these policy guidelines and directives are new. They form part of the University’s drive towards excellence and are a sign of the University’s willingness to participate fully in the country’s Vision 2022.

skills became apparent. Finding potential young entrepreneurs to enhance the rate of youth start-ups was one of the areas where immediate improvement was needed.

In order to address youth unemployment, two fundamentals need to be in place: skill development and job creation. McKinsey's research focused on skill development, with special attention to the mechanisms connecting education to employment. The researchers did not look at macro- or micro-economic factors such as monetary policy, regulation or fiscal issues. Nor did the survey deal with the least-skilled youths; the respondents all have at least some high school education.

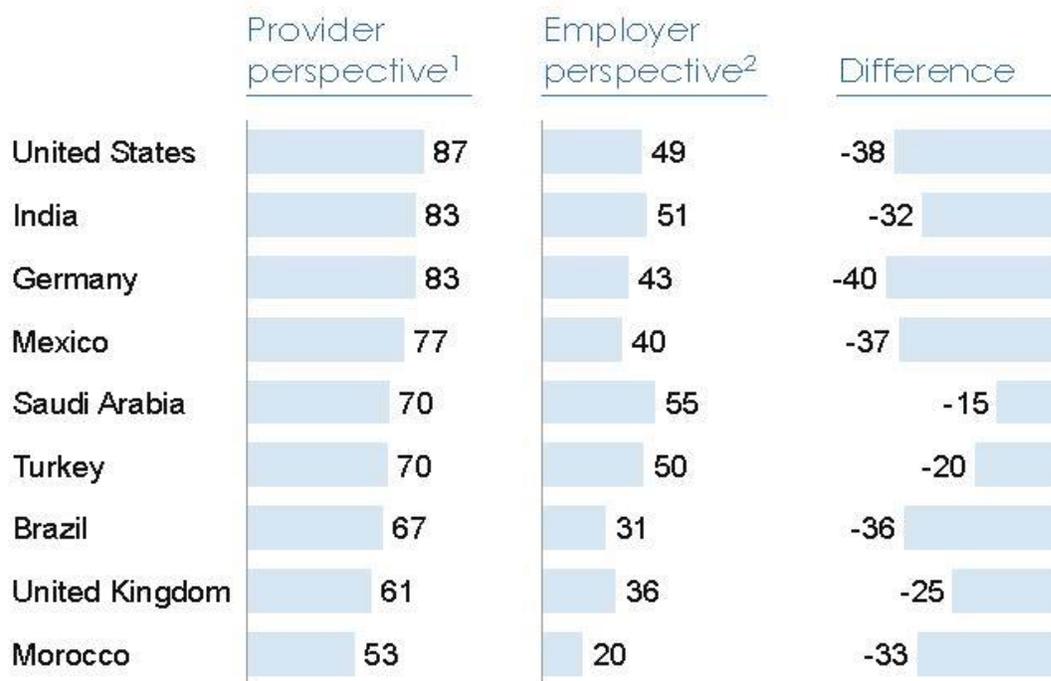
Based on McKinsey's research work with young people, educators and employers, three conclusions can be drawn:

1. There are effective individual programmes, but these tend to be small; moreover, they are the exception, not the norm.
2. The most successful efforts are those where the different stakeholders interact intensively and frequently. Employers get involved in education and educators play a bigger role in employment.
3. The infrastructure required to improve government performance does not exist. There is a glaring absence of empirical research and no mechanisms to coordinate and monitor activity.

The second conclusion is an important one for the University of Eswatini, Institute of Distance Education. As I discuss below one of the improved features of our programme development and implementation is increased stakeholder involvement. The same 2012 McKinsey research also states that almost three-quarters of educational institutions surveyed (72 percent) believe that the students they send out into the world are 'adequately prepared' for work. Their confidence is not shared by either employers (42 percent) or youths (45 percent). This once again clearly indicates the need for appropriate stakeholder engagement.

Agreement that graduates/new hires are adequately prepared

% of respondents



1 Overall, graduates from my institution are adequately prepared for entry-level positions in their chosen field of study.

2 Overall, employees we hired in the past year have been adequately prepared by their pre-hire education and/or training.

Why do the three major stakeholders fail to see the same thing? In large part, it is because they are not engaged with each other. A third of employers report that they never communicate with education providers, while of those that do, fewer than half believe doing so proved effective. Similarly, only two-thirds of education providers ensure that employers visit campuses to meet with students.

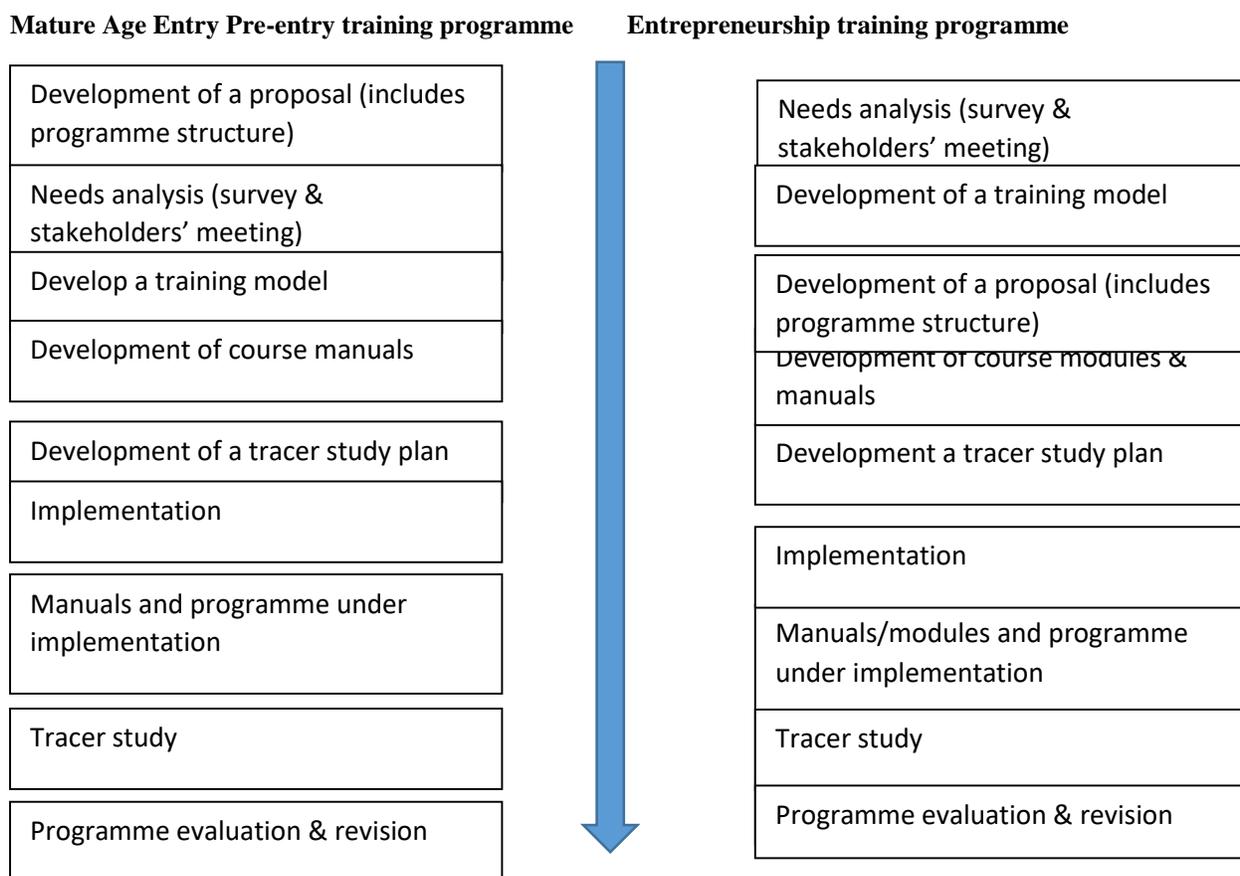
Proposed innovations to prepare graduates for (self-)employment

A collaborative programme development process for teaching and learning consists of a great number of different activities organised into methodological steps in accordance with a chosen process model of development. Successful realisation of this process requires numerous, capable and devoted experts involved in one or more activities defined within a process model, which are known as internal or external stakeholders. The Institute of Distance Education has adopted this 'business process' approach in developing programmes. This approach can be defined as a set of activities that use inputs to create added value for customers/clients, both direct and indirect. Two programmes are used as case in point to illustrate of how the Institute collaborate with key stakeholders in the design and development of programmes in the process building capacity for successful programme implementation and improved programme sustainability.

The two programmes are the Mature Age Entry pre-entry support programme which intends to open up access to university education for people who, for diverse reasons, were unable to join the university immediately when they obtained their high school certificate, and the Entrepreneurship programme which wishes to give young entrepreneurs an opportunity to fine-tune their skills so as to ensure growth opportunities in the open market.

The Programme Development Process³

A general systematic, step-by-step framework for iterative design can be structured into five phases: Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation. But considering the steps that are followed in the development of the two training programme it appears that IDE has programme design and development process which may vary at the initial stages. The main steps seem to be a needs analysis, proposal of the programme spelling out the programme structure, development of instructional materials, implementation of the programme followed by programme evaluation and revision. Figure 1 below indicates this variation:



Considering the steps that are followed in the development of the two training programmes it appears that IDE has generally a standard way of designing and developing programmes. However while the activities are the same the sequence may vary particularly at the initial stages.

The main steps seem to be similar; these are a needs analysis, proposal of the programme spelling out the programme structure, development of instructional materials, programme implementation followed by programme evaluation and revision. The general process is summarised in Figure 2 below.

³ This part of the paper was shared with participants of the international NADEOSA conference held in South Africa between 3 and 5 July 2019. The paper was written by a team of authors from the Institute of Distance Education, University of Eswatini.

Figure 2: IDE Programme Development process

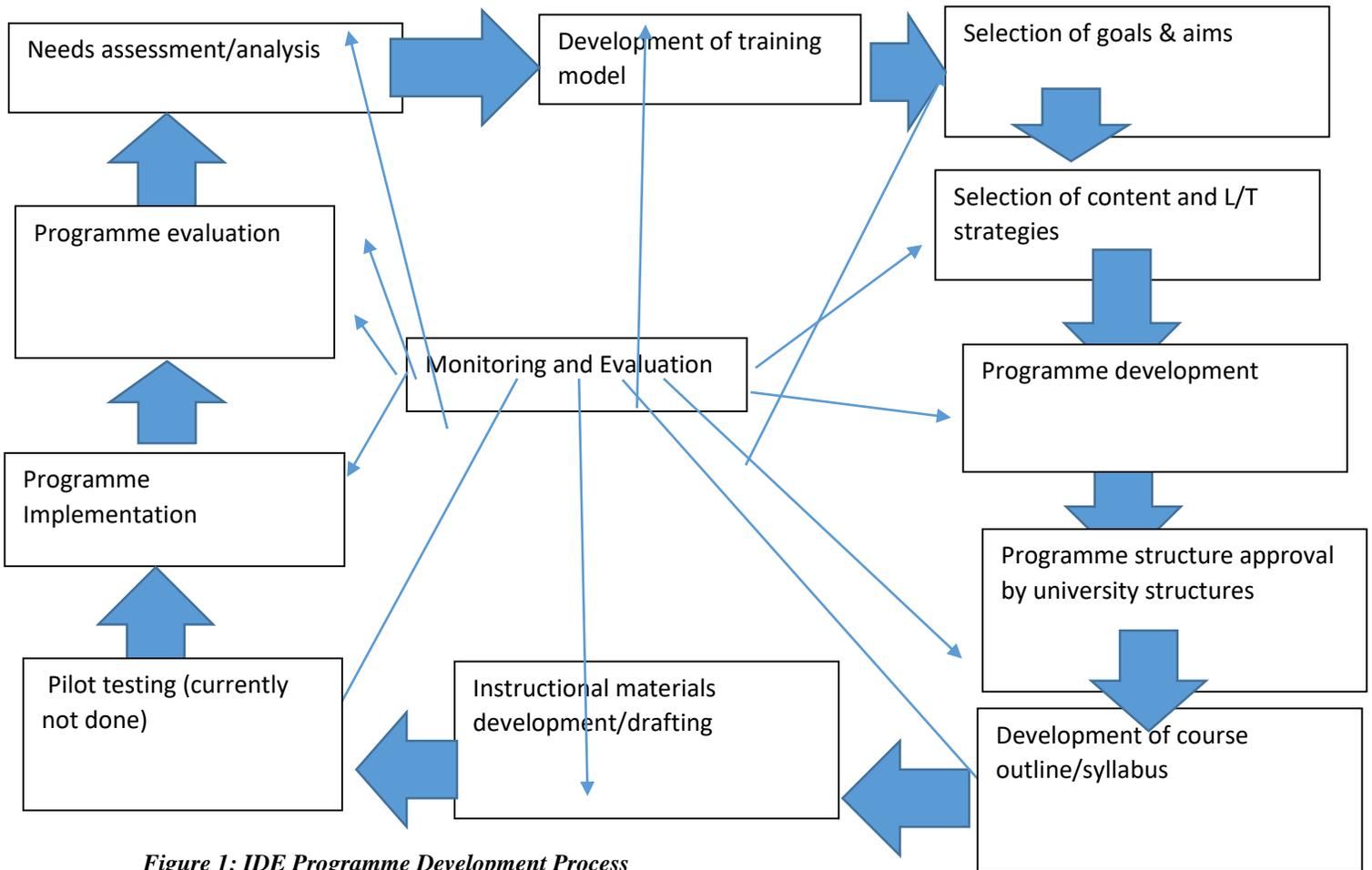


Figure 1: IDE Programme Development Process

The process of programme design and development (Figure 2) followed by the Institute entails several steps which are not linear. Our model can be described as circular, with a central point: monitoring and evaluation. IDE does not work alone, in isolation, but in collaboration with key stakeholders at various stages of the process. This collaboration with key stakeholders helps in building capacity for successful programme implementation and improved programme sustainability. The collaboration is evident mainly during needs analysis, programme development, instructional materials design and develop, and programme implementation (training). These steps are described next pointing at how capacity building and collaboration occur.

STEPS (including examples from both above-mentioned programmes)

1. Needs Assessment/Analysis

The development of a training programme for the Institute of Distance Education at the University of Eswatini begins with a needs analysis. The needs analysis involves holding initial consultation meetings with key UNESWA departments and/or organisations to establish partnerships (collaborative working relationships); conducting a needs analysis survey followed by a stakeholders' meeting. The stakeholders' meeting serves as a Focus Group Discussion to get in-depth views of stakeholders. The importance of the needs analysis as an initial stage of programme development is to identify gaps and training needs. Knowledge of those informs programme development to ensure that the resulting programme addresses the needs and fills existing gaps. In other words, the programme developed is most likely to be relevant, marketable and supported (owned) by the stakeholders.

At this stage, and relating to the Entrepreneurship Programme, the Institute involved key stakeholders including the Ministry of Commerce and Trade which is the mother ministry for businesses/entrepreneurs and the custodian of policies related to business and entrepreneurship, and the Small Enterprises Development Company (SEDCO)⁴.

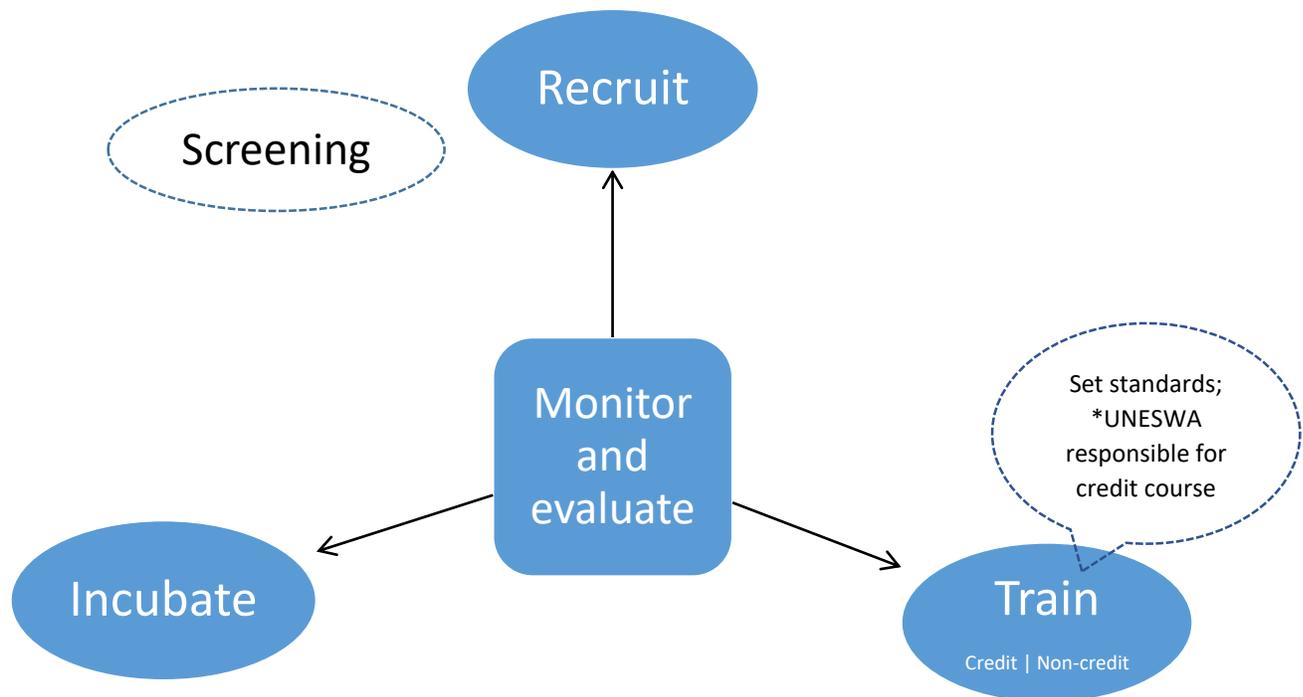
At the stakeholders' meeting other stakeholders were invited and participated. Those were a government organisation responsible for loaning funds to micro entrepreneurs (Inhlanyelo Fund), Cooperatives, micro and small entrepreneurs, UNESWA's Faculty of Commerce, National Youth Council, Royal Swaziland Technology Park.

For the MAE pre-entry training programme IDE included representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training, Ministry of Labour and Social Security, relevant UNESWA departments, University Planning Centre, Admissions Office, university students who were admitted through MAE, and MAE applicants who did not pass the previous entry examinations.

2. Development of a Training Model

There were two main outputs for the stakeholders meeting: a training model and the needs analysis report which is a synthesis of the results from the survey and the discussions that took place during the meeting. The presence of various stakeholders ensures production of a suitable training model in the content of UNESWA and IDE in particular. Figure 3 presents a training model for entrepreneurship.

Figure 3: Rough sketch of training model for entrepreneurship



The proposed training model for entrepreneurship was a result/outcome/culmination of rigorous discussion among the stakeholders under the guidance of an expert in the field, a consultant provided by the Commonwealth of Learning.

⁴ SEDCO is a government-supported organisation established to create, develop and promote Small, Micro and Medium Enterprises (SMMEs) throughout the Kingdom of Eswatini. Its goals and objectives are:

- To promote an entrepreneurial culture among Swazis through interventions and advocacy
- To stimulate the SMME sector, increasing employment opportunities and reducing poverty in the country
- To provide business development services to add value to emerging and existing SMMEs

Sourced from SEDCO presentation made 15 May 2019 to data collectors

The conception of the training model began by review of the entrepreneurship needs through discussion of the survey results (identifying needs/gaps). This was followed by a SWOT analysis of existing models in the SADC region and beyond as a way of benchmarking. Based on the identified needs of entrepreneurs in Eswatini and exposure to trending models in the region and internationally, the stakeholders crafted the entrepreneurship training model most suitable in the context of UNESWA and the Kingdom of Eswatini.

IDE is also in the process of offering other programmes such as the proposed short courses (Portuguese, English, French, siSwati, commerce, editing and proofreading, etc.) and the first fully online programme in Information Technology. The Degree in Information Technology received its first intake in the 2019-2020 intake. It will be interesting to see how the students fare in the online study world. Stakeholder involvement for the design and delivery of this programme was done at various levels, the most important one being the needs' analysis combined with the development of course syllabi and content.

At Uneswa, short course development and delivery falls, traditionally, under the responsibility of the Consultancy and Training Centre. However, IDE feels it can make a positive contribution to the enhancement of important skills in the Kingdom by offering some of these, and others, in a blended manner/online. One of the major skills necessary for full integration in today's and tomorrow's worlds is communication. Communication happens through the competent use of language. If Eswatini wants to participate fully in the 21st century business environment, then the language competencies of its citizens have to be constantly enhanced. For now, no additional stakeholder involvement besides previous needs' analysis (from the early 2000s)

Recommendations

1. As transformation occurs continuously, flexibility at all levels of the education system is necessary.
2. The education system has to be sustainable and has to "produce" people who can function in society in a sustainable manner. This includes being employees, employers and entrepreneurs.
3. Some of the new programmes and short courses should benefit from additional stakeholder involvement (as an institution we sometimes forget to include students at all stages of programme design, development and implementation).
4. When introducing new programmes intense stakeholder involvement is needed. However, while certain programmes are useful, not all of them are implementable. Internal stakeholder feedback regarding financial viability may also be one of the areas where further research is essential.

Conclusion

It is widely agreed in local and international literature that education – and specifically the quality of education – plays a central role in determining which individuals get jobs and how much they earn in the labour market. While Eswatini understands the importance of the shift towards the setting up of new enterprises and entrepreneurship, all the elements needed for such are not yet in place.

The McKinsey study advises us to

Think of the education-to-employment system as a highway, where three drivers—educators, employers and youth—all want to get to the same destination. There are three critical intersections—when young people enrol in postsecondary education, when they build skills and when they seek work. At each point, each driver needs to take account of the others to keep moving safely and efficiently. Our research, however, shows that doesn't usually happen. As a result, too many young people are getting lost along the way. (<https://journals.openedition.org/poldev/1802>, accessed on 21 June 2019)

One of the main criticism given to university programmes is that more often than not they do not take into account what society needs, what is sustainable and what will allow graduates to be employed, to be employers, to be entrepreneurs and to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

This paper looked at the changing educational environment, at policy development in view of responding to societal transformations, at programme design and development involving stakeholder engagement at the University of Eswatini and its Institute of Distance Education. It noted the limited involvement of one major stakeholder group, namely the prospective and current students. The study's recommendations include undertaking further research to verify the impact of these transformations on communities and the society at large.

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