

Distance Education not a “Prison Sentence”- A Case Study of Student Support for Prisoners at the Windhoek Central Prison

Theme: Social Justice

Sub-theme: Scaling up Quality Education for All

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INTRODUCTION

The Polytechnic of Namibia is one of Namibia's tertiary institutions. It is situated in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia. It is a dual mode institution with distance education offered by the Centre for Open and Life Long Learning (COLL). It comprises of five schools namely the School of Business and Management, School of Engineering, School of Information Technology, School of Health Sciences and School of Communication. It has ten centres including Windhoek and provides support for 2359 students which is this year's enrolment number. The majority of COLL's students fall under the School of Business and Management. COLL is made up of three interrelated subsystems namely materials development subsystem, student support subsystem and an administrative subsystem. The services provided by the student support subsystem are:

- Training of tutors
- Tutor-marking
- Telephone tutoring
- Vacation schools
- Orientation Seminar
- Face-to-face tutorials
- Radio tutorials

The aim of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the student support services to distance students studying from prison. While distance students usually cannot come to campus to study due to their various responsibilities they have freedom to come and go as they please. Students who are in prison do not have such freedom. They experience more isolation and remoteness than other distance students and would find it difficult to find a quiet place to study (Worth, n.d). They require more support in order for them to be able to complete their studies successfully. It is against this backdrop that this study was undertaken. The central question the paper tries to answer is “*how well has COLL adapted the student support services to accommodate the learning needs of the students in prison?*”

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

There are attempts all over the world to provide education to prisoners in the belief that after they are released they would be able to return to society and leave the life of crime (Al Saif 2007). According to Callejo and Viedma (quoted in Schuller 2009, p.24) 'Education must be understood as one of the main functions of prisons in preparing the inmates' return to society. Studies have shown that prisoners who have been involved in educational programs tend to stay out of prison after release and are less violent (Taylor in Mitra n.d). Prisoners have an abundance of time on their hands and education allows them to use that time productively. Distance education allows prisoners to receive education and transcend the physical barrier of imprisonment (Schuller 2009). According to some of the key findings of the joint project by Prisoners Education Trust, Inside Time and RBE Consultancy Ltd (2009, p.3)

Learning new skills in prison does make a difference. Education changes prisoners' self-perception and outlook. Over half the respondents said that learning had boosted their self-esteem, and almost as many said it had changed the way they saw themselves and their future”.

Education should not only be seen as a way of deterring prisoners from a life of crime, “it should be recognized as a human right to which every person is entitled without discrimination and is therefore considered important for social justice..... If education is a right, then education in prison is the act of a moral society that ought to be guaranteed to one of the least-advantaged, most vulnerable groups in our society (Mitra n.d., p.1)”.

Distance education providers should take into cognisance the unique situation and challenges prisoners face and ensure that special arrangements are made to accommodate their learning needs. Some of the challenges are:

As cited by Kerka(1995), the challenge in providing effective educational programmes in the prison is compounded by the uniqueness of prison culture: routines such as lock-downs and head counts, inmates' hearings or meetings with lawyers, all disrupt regular studies and attending contact classes (Shethar 1993). Tutors and learners are sometimes locked in a room and monitored by guards. Peer pressure may discourage attendance or achievement (Haigler et al. 1994). In addition, the prison environment is unlikely to be rich in verbal and sensory stimuli (Paul 1991). Critically for prisoners, as opposed to distance learners in the community, they have limited power to change their environment and are subject to many influences beyond their control. The limited resources in prison environment to access educational opportunities call for efficient and effective ODL instruction. It is necessary to recognise the importance of appropriate use of ICT to learning in the prison. Fears around using technology in prison should be clearly identified and addressed. Also the diverse instructional needs of incarcerated adults may be complicated by a long history of academic failure, therefore calling for effective and highly motivating strategies.

It is evident from literature that providing education to prisoners is an effective way of reforming prisoners. However what is even more important is that to deny them education that would be a violation of their human rights. However in order for them to benefit from the education provided we need to ensure that they are able to access resources and support services that distance students need to be successful. It is on this premise that this study was conducted.

SUPPORTING DISTANCE STUDENTS IN PRISON

Recognising the unique situation prisoners find themselves COLL and the education officers in the prison liaise with each other to accommodate them as much as possible. Students are accompanied by prison guards when they come for registration, write examinations, attend vacation schools and visit the library. Since the amount of time students can be out of prison is limited, COLL makes prior arrangements with the library to collect materials and with the registration officials to complete their registration. Students receive their study materials the day they register. The education officers are provided with the vacation school timetable so they can be released for the allocated time slots. Whenever it is possible, COLL arranges with the Internet café in the library for Internet access to conduct research. Students contact COLL through the education officers to request for face-to-face sessions with their tutor. Tutors then visit the students in prison and provide individualised tutorial support for them. A graduation ceremony is held at the prison for the students who graduate.

POPULATION OF STUDY AND METHODS

Currently there are four students studying from prison. Questionnaires were distributed to the students to gather the data. Some questions asked them to rate the effectiveness of the support services provided by COLL. Open ended questions were used to capture the positive and

challenging experiences of studying through COLL. Some of the open ended questions allowed them to recommend improvements and propose additional support services.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE STUDY

1) Biographical data

All students are male with ages varying from 20-40, see figure 1.

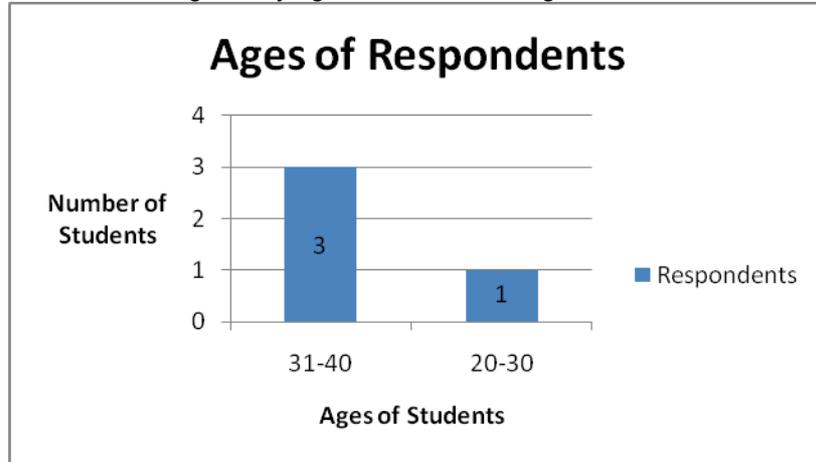


Figure 1: Ages of respondents

All the students are enrolled in the School of Business and Management, see figure 2.

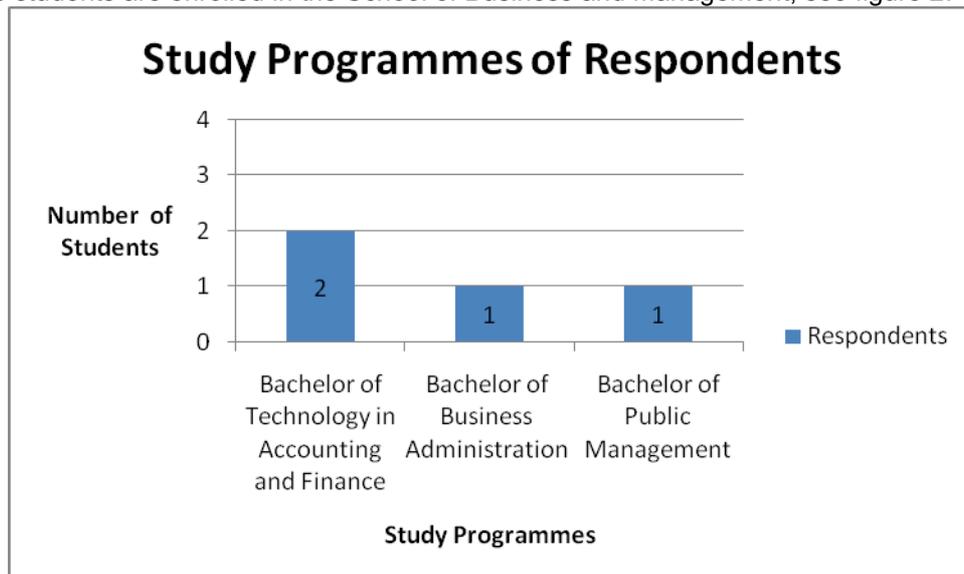


Figure 2: Study programmes of respondents

The students have been studying through COLL between 1-6 years, see figure 3.

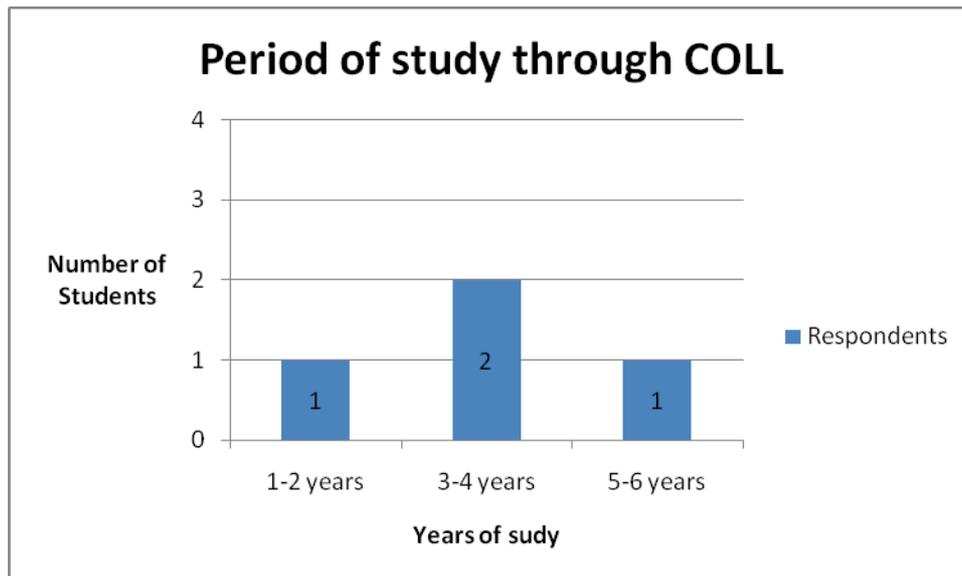


Figure 3: Period of study through COLL

2) Positive experiences

In general they are satisfied with the support services provided by COLL, some of the comments provided were:

- *Student support officers are always very helpful and I have enough time to complete assignments and prepare for the examinations.*
- *I was more at liberty to establish my understanding on the subject matter.*
- *COLL is always helpful in organising face to face sessions with market tutors. I have been fortunate to have been helped with subjects I have found difficult by way of revision before exams by my tutors.*
- *Tutorial support provided by the lecturers/tutors has been excellent whenever I needed it. Student support officers at COLL are always willing to assist.*

3) Challenges

Due to their incarceration, students don't have easy access to the tutors and Internet which has a negative effect on their work. Below are some specific comments made by the students about their experience:

- *Not knowing that you are on track. Not able to do research and in the end your work looks stupid.*
- *Access to resources and meeting with tutors for assistance is very difficult and at times even impossible. And the exams are sometimes too close to one another.*

4) Proposed improvements

Face-to-face tutorials are usually conducted at the Polytechnic's campus during the weekend as that is the time the facilities would be available but this time is not suitable for the prison guards to accompany them.

- *It will be helpful if the face to face tutorials can be done during the week 8:00 to 15:00 because weekends are impossible for the authorities.*

Vacation schools are held once every semester during the recess period of the on campus students. This is the time where tutors meet with the students and answer specific questions and help with problem areas. They would like to have tutors provide this support on a more regular basis after the vacation school at the prison premises.

- *Vacation school should have lecturers assigned to do follow ups either part time lecturers who can broaden the subject matter at the prison premises with the students. This is after the initial vacation school.*

Most courses require students to write two assignments and one examination. Once assignments are marked and processed they are sent back to the students through the post. They experience delays with this method and they propose a system of picking up the assignments instead of

having them posted. They also find that the time between receiving the second assignment back and writing examinations too close to each other. They would prefer to receive the assignments earlier to give them more time to use the feedback to prepare for the examinations.

- *Instead of posting our assignments back to us, it would be more beneficial to use id our education department could pick them up from your offices personally. This would save time.*
- *Assignments should be returned well in advance of the exams to make preparation for the exams manageable and easier.*

5) Proposed additions

Their main need now is access to computers and Internet which would enable them to keep in touch with their lecturers and do their research.

- *Install computers with Internet. We can get in touch with lecturers and do research*
- *Because of our situation, access to computers is almost impossible. If that can be looked (maybe convince the prison head to supply computers for us).*

6) Evaluation of services provided

Students were provided with statements regarding the services they receive from COLL and asked to rate their experience with the services A Likert-scale of strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, strongly agree was used. A not applicable option was also provided to accommodate their situation with regard to the service but this was not used.

a) Quality of study materials

All four agreed that they receive their study materials on time. When asked if the study materials contained all the information they needed to complete their assignments one disagreed, one strongly disagreed and two agreed. Two disagreed and two agreed on whether the study materials contained all the information they needed to help them pass the examinations. However students realised the need additional reading as evidenced by the following student's statement

Not all subjects can have mechanical answers; most of mine are theory and therefore needs theoretical understanding. Hence focus can be directed to the provision of research devices.

b) Marker-tutor support

Only one agreed that tutor marked assignments were received on time with two disagreeing and one strongly disagreeing. When asked if the feedback was adequate to correct their mistakes and prepare for the examinations, three of them disagreed with one not responding to the question. Marker tutors mark assignments, provide face-to-face tutorials and personalised tutorial support when students need assistance. However the students indicated that they did not receive adequate tutorial support as evidenced by the comments made by the student:

- *However, not that the problem is with COLL but the problem is with some prison officials that are of the opinion that I should have studies outside prison. Thus they are reluctant to assist with making a call even if it is education related.*
- *A few of the tutors I've called are seemingly minded that I ought to do research after all that what dedicated students do.*

One student commented that the tutor does not offer personalised tutorials at all when needed.

c) Usefulness of tutorial letter

Three of the four students agreed that the first tutorial letter contained all the necessary information they needed to start the course with only one strongly disagreeing. According to two students the feedback tutorial letter's was helpful to correct their assignment answers and prepare for their examinations. The other 2 disagreed, One of the students who disagreed commented on his feeling:

Some feedback varies, meaning they tend to put you in a constant search for answers. Some do clarify.

d) Registration

Three of the students were in agreement about getting assistance from COLL to complete their registration process as quickly as possible with two strongly agreeing and one agreeing. Only one of the four was undecided on this matter.

e) Use of library services

All four agreed that they were able to access the prescribed textbooks from the library with three strongly agreeing and one agreeing. When it came to obtaining additional reading

materials two of them strongly agreed that this was possible with one disagreeing. One person did not respond to this question. One of the comments made by a student was
With the introduction of long term loan, things are much better

f) Access to the Internet

Two of the students strongly disagreed that they could easily get access to the Internet with only one agreeing. One did not respond to the question. This is an area identified by students to be of importance to them. One of the comments made by a student is:

- *This is a core problem. However in conjunction with the prison education office, COLL can install a furnish desktop because we all need it especially for subjects like Project Research that I am to take soon (at least to desktops).*

g) Face-to-face tutorials

The response to the easy access to the tutor had one student strongly disagreeing, one disagreeing and only one agreeing that this was possible. One student was undecided on whether this was the case. On whether the tutor was helpful when they had questions one agreed, one strongly agreed, one disagreed and one strongly disagreed. When asked if the tutor made an effort to offer personalised tutorials one strongly agreed, one agreed, one was undecided and one strongly disagreed.

h) Student support officers

All four agreed that their student support officer was helpful with three agreeing and one strongly agreeing.

i) Vacation school

Two students agreed that they found the vacation school helpful with one agreeing and one strongly agreeing. One strongly disagreed and one was undecided. Though the students see the benefit of the vacation school, they face problems in attending vacation schools mainly because of the prison wardens as evidenced by the following student's comment

Firstly it is a struggle to convince the prison to be escorted to Polytechnic. Secondly should you get lucky enough to attend vacation school officials decide how you can sit for a class even if the lecturer is not finished.

j) Submission of Assignments

All four agreed that COLL made submission of assignments easy with one strongly agreeing and three agreeing. COLL has an assignment drop in box which students can use to drop their assignments; they can also e-mail the assignments to their student support officers or use the postal services.

k) Information Manual

All four students agreed that the information manual they received as part of the course package was a helpful orientation tool with one agreeing and three strongly agreeing.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings of this study indicate that students find COLL's student support services adequate because none of them requested any additional services. They however identified areas of improvement with regard to access to Internet facilities, timely return of assignments and access to tutors for attention. Access to tutors and Internet facilities are not services that can be provided by COLL alone but require cooperation from prison officials. These are areas that cannot also be ignored because all students enrolled for programmes in the School of Business and Management must do research projects.

Tutors play a vital role in the success of distance students by facilitating and guiding the learning of the students. According to Lentell (n.d) students need personalised feedback more than just a mark for effective learning to take place. Each student's approach to the questions will be different and requires a tutor to provide individualised attention and correction (Lentell n.d, p.10). Tutors would need to have a multitude of skills and strategies to keep them motivated. To deny students access to tutors is to set them up to fail. Internet access is vital if students must do well in research projects. COLL has introduced e-learning as of 2010 as another mode of learning. This provides a unique opportunity for students to learn from each other, be supported by the tutor and have access to multimedia resources that can enhance the learning experience from where they are. Students who are incarcerated will definitely benefit from this mode of learning and reduce the dependence of students on tutors assisting them in prison and prison guards accompanying them to the campus. COLL plans to use web-conferencing tools to provide tutorial support as of 2011. Through internet access prison students can benefit from and participate in weekend tutorials and vacation schools without physically attending them. The education officer was asked about the provision of computers

with Internet and she mentioned that they are aware of the situation and the matter is getting attention. Though there will be costs associated with providing computers with Internet and training tutors to meet the needs of inmates, it would be a worthwhile investment.

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