

The contributions of open and distance learning to national development in Namibia

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Abstract

Education in general continue to be a crucial means to national development and a well educated and trained population is found to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of any country (Marope, 2005). In addition, open and distance learning methods and programmes are known to make valuable contributions to the socio-economic development of countries that offer such programmes. Many countries have therefore recognized that open and distance learning is a powerful tool for achieving the country's educational and training needs and a potent instrument in creating a learning society capable of bringing about scientific, technological, social and economic development.

Since achieving independence in 1990 Namibian educational institutions have been offering programmes utilizing open and distance learning methods. By offering open and distance learning programmes educational institutions have recognized the critical role that open and distance learning can play in national development. Thus, open and distance learning programmes in Namibia are located within the developmental context of the country and have been designed and developed to address the developmental needs of the country.

During the panel discussion I will provide an account of the country's achievements in supporting open and distance learning, the huge contributions that ODL has made in meeting the educational and training challenges of the country and the potential of ODL to realizing Vision 2030. This will be done as follows:

1. The contributions that open and distance learning has made to Namibia's socio-economic development since independence in 1990 will be highlighted.
2. Tangible contributions would be presented in terms of the number of graduates that the four publicly funded ODL institutions have produced and injected into society over the past 15 years.
3. Specific cases of individual graduates who have made inroads and assisted the country to realize its developmental goals would be provided.
4. I will also highlight how collaboration and sharing of resources within and between Namibian ODL institutions has contributed to the development of quality and cost-effective ODL programmes and support systems.
5. Finally I will highlight how open and distance learning has already started making a contribution to realizing Namibia's Vision 2030 – a national development strategy which has set Namibia to the road of developing a knowledge based economy and becoming a developed nation by year 2030.

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Panel Discussion: The Contributions of Open and Distance Learning to National Development in Namibia

INTRODUCTION

Education continues to be a crucial means to national development and a well-educated and trained population is found to contribute significantly to the socio-economic development of any country (Marope 2005). Namibia is currently going through a dynamic reform, the national development strategy known as Vision 2030. The millennium development goals have shaped this development strategy. The broad goals of the reform are the acceleration of economic growth and social development; decreasing of the spread of HIV/AIDS, reduction of poverty and social inequalities; and curbing of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment. The Government has made a decision that these goals are to be pursued within a broader framework of transforming the economy into Knowledge Economy (KE).

The government has also recognised that the role of education and training, knowledge and innovation is very important in bringing about a knowledge-based economy. Furthermore, educational institutions have realized that knowledge can improve the quality of life and that they have a role to play in this improvement. In addition, institutions have also realized that in order to enable many people in society to benefit from education and improve their quality of life open and distance methods are important. This is because open and distance learning is a powerful tool for achieving educational and training needs and a potent instrument in creating a learning society capable of bringing about scientific, technological, social and economic development.

Sean McGovern (1999, p. 123) noted that there are 9 concepts associated with development, which are:

- "Education as the social institution through which people are prepared for society and work;
- Equality of opportunity for individuals and nations to compete for economic rewards;
- Participation of people in programmes to help advance the development process;
- Planning as the decision making process to encourage social change and economic growth;
- Production as the efficient processing of commodities to increase economic growth;
- Science as the objective creation of knowledge for greater production and productivity;
- Standard of living as the amount of goods and services which represent a country's level of development;
- State as the institution which supersedes cultural differences and organized to protect citizens and promote progress; and
- The application of technology to establish efficient production which increases prosperity".

In the context of Namibia's development strategy and the above concepts this paper provides an account of the country's achievements in supporting open and distance learning (ODL), the contributions that ODL has made in meeting the developmental challenges of the country and the potential of ODL to realizing the country's Vision 2030.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN NAMIBIA

Open and distance learning is found to make valuable contributions to the socio-economic development of those countries that utilize the mode (Perraton 2000). For a developing country of its size Namibia is endowed with publicly funded ODL institutions. Currently there are four, the Centre for External Studies (CES) at the University of Namibia (UNAM), the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) at the Polytechnic of Namibia (PON), the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) and the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED).

In addition, the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) has a statutory obligation to provide educational broadcasting services to the Namibian public. Section 2 of its Act state that the objectives of NBC includes informing the public, contributing to the education of the nation, disseminating information about socio-economic issues and

promoting the use of English as the country's official language. The Corporation therefore, plays an important role in advancing the agenda of ODL and continuing education activities in the country. In recent years, NBC has worked with the Ministry of Education and NAMCOL to produce a series of weekly radio programmes to assist secondary school learners in a range of subjects including English as a Second Language. The Corporation has also worked with the Centre for External Studies' Continuing Education Department in producing a series of radio broadcasts for "UNAM on the Air" radio programme.

The open and distance learning institutions in the country

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1997 with the intention of taking quality education to the doorsteps of the people of Namibia. The primary goal of NAMCOL is to contribute towards the social and economic development of the country by providing opportunities to out-of-school youth and adults to acquire general education and upgrade their professional and vocational skills. As such NAMCOL offers both secondary and tertiary level courses. With the examination system used in the country it is difficult to show how many students successfully completed their secondary education through NAMCOL. However, in 2006 there are 28,106 learners enrolled with NAMCOL and since its establishment NAMCOL has offered professional qualifications and graduated 149 with Certificate in Education for Development, 49 with Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training and 15 with Commonwealth Diploma in Youth in Development work.

The National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) was established in 1991 to spearhead the curriculum reform of the formal education system through:

- Curriculum and materials development
- Pre-service and in-service training of teachers
- General educational research

With the introduction of the Basic Education Teacher's Diploma (BETD) as the standard qualification for instructors in Grade 1-10, the four existing Colleges of Education were assigned responsibility of offering the BETD pre-service, of which NIED takes responsibility of the curriculum development. In addition, an in-service BETD using ODL methods was established to enable unqualified teachers to complete their studies while continuing with their teaching duties. Since its establishment NIED enabled 2,879 unqualified teachers to qualify for their jobs.

The Polytechnic of Namibia was established in 1995 by an Act of Parliament. According to Section 4 of its Act, it is mandated to provide "post-secondary career-education", though no specific reference is made to distance education. Nevertheless, in 1997 a decision was taken to establish a separate distance education centre, the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL), in order to facilitate the delivery of ODL programmes.

The following qualifications are currently offered through COLL:

- National Certificate/National Diploma in Business Administration
- National Certificate/National Diploma in Police Science
- National Certificate/National Diploma in Public Management
- National Certificate/National Diploma in Accounting and Finance
- National Certificate/National Diploma in Marketing
- National Diploma in Human Resources Management
- B. Tech in Nature Conservation
- B. Tech in Agricultural Management

With the mixed mode system used by the Polytechnic of Namibia, which does not distinguish distance students from part time or full time students, it is difficult to show how many students successfully completed their qualifications through the distance mode.

The University of Namibia (UNAM) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1992 to serve as a centre of higher learning and research. According to Section 4 of the Act, the University aims "to provide extension services" and "further training and continuing education". These clauses provide a statutory basis for the development and management of open and distance learning activities at UNAM. The Centre for External Studies (CES) was therefore set up to develop flexible and open learning methods that cater for the educational needs of people who, for a variety of reasons, cannot come full-time to any of the University campuses to further their studies.

Currently CES offers the following programmes:

- The Basic Education Teachers Diploma
- The Diploma in Education: African Languages
- The Diploma in Adult Education and Community Development
- The Bachelor of Nursing Science
- The Bachelor of Education
- The Bachelor of Business Administration
- The Diploma in Education (specializing in Mathematics, Biology or Physical Science)
- The Specialised Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership
- The Specialised Diploma in Education: Home Economics and Fashion and Fabric
- The Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE)
- The Certificate in HIV/Aids Counselling
- The Certificate in Midlevel Management

Since its establishment CES has graduated 3,034 teachers, 199 nurses, 59 adult educators, 21 HIV/AIDS counsellors and 181 public administrators and middle managers. In addition to ODL programmes CES, through its Department of Continuing Education, offers non-formal education programmes on issues of national interest.

As can be seen from above the four institutions have injected significant number of graduates into the Namibian society. To educate such a large number of professionals through conventional education would have required massive investment in building classrooms and recruiting adequate face-to-face lecturers (Perraton 2000). It also means that people would have to leave their jobs, even from rural schools and hospitals where there are no qualified people to replace them.

Institutional collaboration

Namibia is small in terms of its population as such Government opted for the policy of collaboration and sharing of resources in order to strengthen ODL activities at publicly funded institutions. Through the Ministry of Education, the Government set up the Namibian Open Learning Network Trust, NOLNET in 2000 with the purpose of coordinating ODL activities in the country and ensuring that quality control mechanisms are in place. The Ministry and the heads of NAMCOL, the Polytechnic of Namibia and the University of Namibia signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the coordination of open and distance learning. The MOU provides for the signatories to establish a network of open learning centres throughout the country, where facilities are shared and services offered on a collaborative basis. To a large extent the mandate of NOLNET includes:

- Assisting in defining appropriate policies for the promotion and implementation of ODL activities;
- Promoting cooperation between ODL institutions and their equitable sharing of resources for mutual benefit;
- Developing quality control mechanisms and structures for standard setting in ODL;
- Advising ministries and other funding bodies to ensure equitable and effective allocation of resources to ODL activities;
- Assisting in the promotion of good image of ODL in Namibia; and
- Providing advocacy for ODL activities at all levels.

The four public institutions and the Ministry of Education are actively involved in the activities of NOLNET through the Board of Trustees and the Management Committee to ensure the successful implementation of ODL programmes in the country. Through NOLNET the ODL institutions have so far managed to strengthen their collaboration and current activities includes:

- Collaborating in the training of staff to provide services and support to the distance students of all signatory institutions;
- Ensuring access for the students of all signatory institutions to the facilities and services of each institution according to an agreed framework of principles;
- Coordinating publications and information provision about the activities, courses and services of all signatory institutions; and
- Cooperating in providing advice and/or counselling to prospective students.

Such a collaboration and sharing of resources between institutions is aimed at developing quality and cost-effective ODL programmes and support systems. It also enables ODL institutions to work together towards a common goal and prevent unnecessary competitions. Last year a national conference on open and distance learning was organized under the auspices of NOLNET. The conference was attended by more than 70 delegates and produced a Declaration, which is currently being used to persuade Government into developing an ODL policy and providing adequate funding to ODL activities.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ODL TO NAMIBIA'S DEVELOPMENT

The contributions that open and distance learning has made to Namibia's socio-economic development since achieving independence in 1990 is commendable. Since then the four public institutions have been offering programmes utilizing open and distance learning methods. By offering ODL programmes the educational institutions have recognized the critical role that open and distance learning can play in national development. Thus, ODL programmes in Namibia are located within the developmental context and have been designed and developed to address the developmental needs of the country.

The contributions that individual graduates are making to society today

The country's ODL sector made contributions in terms of the number of graduates that the four institutions have produced and injected into society over the past 15 years. These graduates are assisting the country in realizing its developmental goals. It is worth mentioning that most people who have utilized distance education to gain qualifications have done so while they were in full time employment. That means, they have been studying and at the same time contributing to the socio-economic improvement of the country through paying income taxes, paying for their kids' education and by being important members of society participating in developmental activities in their communities. Furthermore, since there is no bursary or study loan scheme that supports distance students, all of the graduates have financed their own education.

Open and distance learning has also influenced the social landscape of the country. The graduates, as professional people in their own right are employed and adding value to both the social order of their communities and developmental projects that are taking place in those communities. Since they have gained knowledge and skills and they are at different level of understanding they assist in designing strategies that address challenges that face their communities.

The ODL system has also provided solutions to a bigger national problem that no other system in the country could have handled. The formal education system in Namibia is designed in such a way that if a grade 10 learner does not meet the predetermined qualifying points that learner is not allowed to continue with grade 11 or even to repeat grade 10. Every year thousands of these learners find themselves in the streets with no prospects of further education or finding a job. So, the Namibian College of Open Learning is the solution to the problem. Most of these learners register with NAMCOL,

and many times they succeed in gaining enough points for grade 11 and are able to go back to the conventional system. Furthermore, learners who fail grade 12 upgrade their points through NAMCOL to be able to enter vocational training or tertiary education. Without open and distance learning to cater for these learners the country would have a large number of young people in the streets, without completing basic education and without possessing any marketable skills.

Open and distance learning has also contributed to developing best practices in teaching and learning situations. Those of us in dual mode institutions came to realize that full time lecturers and professors who have worked with us in developing study materials and tutorial techniques that are appropriate for distance learners, they tend to adopt these teaching methods and techniques and use them for their full time teaching. We found that even the critics of distance education do utilize the open and distance methodologies in their teaching activities. I agree with Margo Menconi (2003, p. 105) when he said, "learning happens both within the group and externally to the group". Thus, as we learn and transform our work people outside the system are also learning and adopting new ways of facilitating learning.

Since the introduction of open and distance learning in Namibia students at the four public institutions have been increasing which prove that many Namibians are accessing education. For instance, currently 45% of the University of Namibia student population is studying at a distance. 99% of CES students are working and play important roles in their communities. When it comes to addressing developmental goals therefore these are the people in the forefront of development, many of them in rural areas where development is most needed.

Moreover, as graduates qualify for the job market they gain employment and earn a living, thereby improving their livelihoods and that of their communities. This is especially important for rural areas where subsistence farming is the main source of income for female-headed households, while 'wages in cash' is the main source of income for male-headed households (Editor: The Namibian Newspaper, 1999). Since 70% of people studying through distance is female, ODL is assisting in realising the country's equity goals as most female rural professionals will become wage earners like their male counterparts, who are usually urban based.

Lastly, the contributions of ODL will not be complete without highlighting how the open and distance mode benefits the individuals who are in remote areas. Namibia is a vast country (covering over 824, 000km²) with a small population (1.8 million people) open and distance mode is therefore able to provide knowledge and skills to all corners of this vast country, 'reaching the unreached' thereby enabling the country to realize education for all goals. People no longer need to move to educational institutions to seek knowledge and expertise, these are packaged and brought to them through open and distance learning (Perraton 2000).

ODL contributions to realizing vision 2030

We are told that the knowledge based economy require specialists who can utilize knowledge in order to bring about development. We are also told that competing in the global and knowledge-based economy requires skills acquired at tertiary level (Boshier, 2002). In order to educate people and allow them to think critically on issues of national importance they need to be provided with skills and opportunities through a combination of approaches for easy access and active learning. It has been advocated that knowledge and skills, provided through ODL, would enable the country to realize Vision 2030 - a national development strategy which has set Namibia to the road of becoming a developed nation by year 2030.

Namibia has recognised that ODL has the potential to address its educational and training needs in a cost-effective manner. Furthermore, ODL has the flexibility to accommodate varying levels of enrolments and the capacity to reach out to all corners of the country. Additionally, ODL is found to play a key role in the provision of opportunities for lifelong learning, which is central to the country's social and economic development agenda (Vision 2030). So, through ODL the Government has decided to

facilitate and make education readily available to train the human resources needed for the country's knowledge-based economy strategy.

The main objective of the Namibian Education Policy promulgated in December 2001 provides for an accessible, equitable, qualitative and democratic national education service. The realization of such a service has been greatly assisted by the use of open and distance learning which enabled education to be readily available to all Namibians regardless of their geographical location and economic status.

It is further noted that the Namibian workforce is becoming younger and younger. A significant number of younger people enter the job market right after completing grade 12. However, in order to move up the corporate ladder they need to obtain the paper qualifications required. That means taking some sort of courses while working which can only be accomplished through ODL programmes.

CONCLUSION

Open and distance learning is thriving in Namibia today because it has been supported by Government. Both Government and educational institutions realized that open and distance learning is potent instrument in creating a learning society capable of bringing about social and economic improvement. Through collaboration and sharing of resources and expertise there is a change in the mindset of the population. However, ODL institutions still need to work hard and ensure that ODL is accorded the recognition and respect similar to that is given to conventional education.

It should also be mentioned that except for radio and Television, Namibia has not yet fully integrated technology in the development and delivery of ODL programmes. Thus, there are no visible contributions from other forms of technology mediated learning as yet. As such during the 2005 conference ODL practitioners recommitted themselves to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the Information and Communication Technologies especially in teaching science and technology courses.

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