

CHALLENGES OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION IN A DUAL MODE INSTITUTION

by

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education has gained currency as an alternative mode of delivery because of its ability to address issues of equity in the provision of educational opportunity to people who did not go on with their education for one reason or other. It enables institutions, governments and countries to train staff, upgrade peoples' academic and professional qualifications and impart new skills without withdrawing them from their duties in nation building. Its flexibility has made it a viable alternative since it utilizes available physical, human and material resources. It is able to draw from high calibre academicians and other professionals thus maintaining the required standards and parity across similar programmes of study and by so doing dispelled perennial, negative attitudes and prejudices that this mode of delivery is second best.

SINGLE MODE INSTITUTIONS

Open Universities such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), the Open University of Tanzania, Indira Gandhi, National Open University (IGNOU) and the mega UK Open University characterise single mode outfits. Proponents of single mode, institutions argue that the administrative structures of conventional systems do not facilitate the growth of distance education, that often, they regard distance education programmes as second place; that requirements of distance education students are better served when an institution is dedicated wholly to the needs of distant learners. To support this observation, Croft (1992:49), says: "Single mode institutions are the top-of-the-line in distance education. Since they are established to teach solely at a distance, they are unencumbered by conventional classroom teaching allowing them to focus on developing and managing distance education. Academics are involved in all production and teaching processes. The processes are flexible and may be changed to meet the changing needs. Since autonomy and programme control rest with the institution as a whole and not with faculties and other administrators, all systems are focused on the distance education student."

Croft's words echo the need for autonomy prevalent in single mode institutions which is curtailed in dual mode institutions where all the structures are set up to service a different clientele. Marshalling these to the needs of distant learners pauses a big problem for distance educators whose mission is often not understood.

DUAL MODE INSTITUTIONS

These exist mainly within conventional institutions as subject-oriented and/or distance education departments, within a college or university; consortia or a co-operative between several institutions and highbrids. In most cases the magnitude of operation determines whether or not they will operate either as a unit or section within an existing conventional department or as semi-autonomous distance education departments. The University of Botswana is a dual mode institution which runs conventional, distance education, and other part-time (evening/weekend) programmes concurrently. The part-time offerings are administered by the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), which has the mandate to extend university education to the people. The Distance Education Unit (DEU), within the CCE is mandated to:

1. Select existing conventional programme(s) and introduce new courses via distance mode.
2. Facilitate the recruitment and training of part-time staff required for course development, production and implementation.
3. Develop regional study centres and set up learner support services.
4. Facilitate distribution of study materials and administer marking of assignments to ensure two-way communication between students and their tutors.
5. Maintain an accurate and comprehensive record system of students, materials production and records of regional study centres.
6. Administer examinations and process students' final results in liaison with relevant departments.
7. Write handbooks for students, course writers, tutors, and study centre coordinators.
8. Liaise with University library in the provision of library services at the regional study centres.

The above provision enables the CCE to externalise existing programmes. However the CCE is established as a non-credit awarding department which services existing academic programmes of other departments. Currently the CCE can however initiate new programmes in consultation with other departments of the university. While this arrangement has worked well new demands for education are beginning to emerge whereby clientele require the CCE to offer credit, non-credit and modular programmes which are not necessarily offered by conventional departments. To facilitate the implementation of such continuing education courses either by distance or any other mode, the CCE requires some degree of autonomy. According to the revised University statutes (1998), the CCE is mandated to:

Promote, plan, direct and coordinate the provision of University education, continuous learning, and academic and intellectual resources of the University through alternative means to the public including policy formulation, administration of the centralised support for continuing and distance education to all academic units of the University and its affiliated and associated institutions in a technology oriented environment

Empowering the CCE to initiate educational programmes without relying on another department for admission and awards would enable it to respond to people's demands more efficiently. A case in point has been CCE's efforts to offer the Diploma in Primary Education by distance mode which is meant to upgrade academic and professional qualifications of some 10,000 plus Primary Teacher Certificate holders to the diploma level. After consultations at different levels, it has not been possible for conventional departments to collaborate with CCE in this venture due to their heavy workloads. This and many requests will come to the University and enabling the CCE to address them directly looks like the best way forward. According to Akinpelu (1997), this autonomous status would later elevate the CCE to a Constituent College of the University of Botswana which would offer its own certificates, diplomas and degrees "with distance education as its centre piece". This autonomy would enable it to develop its own programmes and by so doing shed some of its "attachment syndrome", and as a spin-off, enhance its credibility as an academic departments of the University.

Having some degree of autonomy has enabled centres of continuing education elsewhere to function independently and maintain high academic standards. The Centre for Off-Campus Studies, in the dual mode Universiti Sains, Malaysia for example has similar powers to those of any faculty of the University (Dhanarajan 1992). It formulates its own academic policies on course offerings, teaching and delivery, and examination systems. It is managed by a Director assisted by three deputy directors who are responsible for course design, creation and tutorial support systems. The centre has an assistant registrar and two assistant registrars who deal with course registration, student's records, assignments, and despatch, production schedules and warehousing. There is a student counsellor who deals with students' problems. It caters for about 3000 off- campus students. For ease of operation, the CCE would require a similar outfit.

STUDENT REGISTRATION AND ORIENTATION

Due to shortage of classroom and accommodation space, distance education students report to the University for orientation and introduction to study materials a week or so before the full time students. The CCE liaises with the registrar's department, students' welfare, the bookstore and the library to

make sure that distant learners are registered and issued with textbooks and library books. This mainstreaming of orientation to all the sections of the university enables distant learners to identify themselves with the institution. They also get to know where to go for help particularly after the residential session without having to rely too heavily on the Distance Education Unit.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

In order to sustain quality, parity and equivalencies in standards and status between regular on-campus and off-campus programmes, academic staff who teach courses to on-campus students are invited to write study materials and conduct tutorials in distance education programmes. Where these part-time involvements are not part of their normal workload, the staff concerned is remunerated for their services at rates approved by the University. While procuring staff for course creation and tutoring is not a problem since personnel is readily available from the University and other institutions, task completion has been a nightmare particularly among writers and editors. Majority of the writers and editors are unable to meet agreed deadlines citing workloads in their parent departments as a major constraint. This delay throws course implementation schedules off-course and challenges the myth that course creation in dual mode institutions is well catered for by a qualified and captive personnel. Although dual mode institutions reduce the duplication of originating, designing and developing new syllabuses, (Akinpelu 1995) course development for distance education is delayed by duality of assignments. Another area of constraint is in materials production where the seasonality of assignments requires the distance education department to hire secretarial service for example on a part-time basis. This arrangement is right because no institution wants to retrench staff after course development is completed. However, co-ordination of materials developing relying on part-time typing poses problems of delay since typists are stationed elsewhere and their first loyalty is to their parent departments. They also take time to adapt to the house style format and most of the work typed outside the distance education department has to be reformatted.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff development is done through short courses, attachments to distance education institutions in country and in the region. Inhouse course writers, editors and tutors workshops have been useful since they enable staff coming from conventional institutions to acquire some skills in distance education. However organised training which would lead to certification for purposes of credibility is necessary. The certificate course offered by UNISA for example has been very useful to support staff. Efforts are being made to seek training opportunities for academic staff either at the diploma and/or masters level. The Masters programme at the University of London is too expensive, while the four year duration for the UNISA Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education makes it daunting to many would be aspirants.

STUDENT SUPPORT STRUCTURE

Students coming to distance education for the first time find this mode novel and baffling. They lack psychological security which is prevalent to students in conventional institutions since they do not, have opportunity to consult with their tutors and colleagues as often as is required. Therefore, they need an elaborate learner support structure to cater for their academic and personal problems. According to Guri Rosenblit as cited by Akinpelu (1995 p.10) the needs of distant students include:

- receiving accurate, consistent and timely information on their programme from one source; setting timely academic counselling on their programme in form of assistance over course registration, programme regulations and examination schedules;
- access to supplementary instructional materials through the bookstore, the library, electronic media and other resources.
- tutorial assistance, as and when needed.
- counselling services over financial, social and psychological problems.

Distance education students at the CCE get support during residential sessions and study weekends which are conducted in between the residential sessions. These face to face contact sessions are highly

valued because they give students the opportunity to interact with their tutors and among themselves. Telephone tutorials are not frequent due to financial constraints and given that some students do not have access to telephone facilities. The CCE needs to install a toll free hotline for students' use. Computer mediated support is planned in the near future but this presupposes computer literacy which many students do not currently have. Also in the pipeline is audio cassette and video tapes support to be introduced at study centres. The CCE also collaborates with other institutions for the provision of student support. This necessary because some subjects such as science, home economics and art and craft require laboratories and equipment which are available elsewhere in the regions.

COMPARISONS WITH DUAL MODE INSTITUTIONS OUTSIDE BOTSWANA

Distance education departments in dual mode institutions work within similar constraints. According to Siaciwena (1997), the Directorate of Distance education, University of Zambia which was created in 1994 had operated as a Correspondence Unit in a conventional University since 1966. Prior to 1994, distance education programmes had suffered, due to lack of clear and comprehensive policy, inadequate funding and long bureaucratic decision-making processes. Since then, the Director has authority similar to that of a Dean of Faculty or School, and the decision-making process has improved because the Director can now take matters pertaining to distance education all the way to Senate, unhindered. But, even with these changes, the Directorate lacks trained staff (in distance education). Training and sustaining part-time personnel is difficult due to their other responsibilities. According to (Kapaale 1993) the teaching function for internal lecturers was part of the terms and conditions of service before 1992 a measure which was not popular with the academicians as they felt overburdened with internal and external teaching assignments. But now, lecturers are paid allowances separately for services rendered to the Directorate. Giving the Directorate administrative and financial autonomy to recruit and remunerate staff accordingly has motivated academic staff to work with the Directorate.

The University of Zambia model was borrowed from the University of New England, Australia where academic staff from internal departments are required under terms and conditions of their employment to teach in both internal and external programmes (Chick, 1992). It is important to note that the New England model worked in Australia but was a source of frustration in Zambia's Distance Education outfit which is operating in a different political and socio-economic context.

Other distance education programmes in dual mode institutions, (Makerere University, Uganda , Faculty of External Studies, University of Nairobi Kenya) and the University of Zimbabwe just to name a few, have experienced similar constraints at one time or other. For example, the University of Nairobi's residential sessions for External B.Ed students would be canceled if there was no accommodation in the halls of residence. The University would be reluctant to have them run in Teacher Training Colleges or elsewhere arguing that university programmes could not be conducted outside its premises (Kamau 1997). Perhaps it is to avoid similar experiences that the former Directorate of Distance Education, University of Zimbabwe sought autonomy to become a Constituent College with a hope to becoming an Open University.

This comparison demonstrates distance education programmes' inability to function independently in dual mode institution because they do not make their own decisions. They operate under rigid internal structures which are not flexible to the peculiar needs of distant learners. Because many of them are housed within a continuing education centre which deals with extension work, the feeling of attachment is for ever present and can easily relegate them to a peripheral position if they are not part of the university mission. Renwick (1992) makes the following suggestions towards developing viable distance education programmes in dual mode institutions.

1. Distance education programmes should be developed as an integral part of a University's teaching mission and not as a separate division devoted to the teaching of external students only.
2. Academic staff should form the primary resource of writing, content editing and revision course materials.
3. Distance education activities should be autonomous and contained in the University policies.
4. Once course development, production and distribution is finalized, various duties could be devolved to other departments or faculties.
5. Contribution to distance education by academic staff should be adequately remunerated and considered during staff development and promotion.

CONCLUSION

In order to function normally, distance education programmes in dual mode institutions need some form of autonomy. They should be allowed to take decisions that affect the administration and management of distant learners' affairs. Also experiences which have been a success story elsewhere cannot be replicated in another environment with similar results. The University of Zambia is a good example of that. Finally, distance education programmes should be developed as part and parcel of the institutions mission for them to succeed.

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