

DISTANCE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME:

SOME LESSONS FROM LESOTHO PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

If there was a flaw in the Distance Teacher Education Programme (DTEP), it was that the programme succeeded in taking off. Although the decision to establish the programme was conceived as early as 1998, it was not until in the year 2000 that the curriculum restructuring process started, while the actual work of course design and writing began in August 2001. The courses were reviewed and edited internally in November – December, the students were recruited, registered and oriented to the new programme in January, and the programme was officially launched on 18 January 2002.

A good number of lessons have been learnt during this implementation process and more will be learnt during the pilot year and will be used to improve upon the shortcomings and flaws that were made. This case study will outline the steps taken in the total process from design to the printing of the courses and the registration of the first cohort of students.

BACKGROUND

Lesotho, with a population of about 2.2 million, has an approximate land area of 30,300 square kilometers of which about one quarter is lowlands and three quarters make up the highlands, and she is completely surrounded by South Africa. (Lesotho 1996 Official Yearbook p.6)

The French Missionaries brought education to Lesotho in 1833. Education in Lesotho is however a joint responsibility of the government, the churches and the community. The government's role in this partnership is to provide facilities, pay teachers salaries, formulate policy pronouncements and determine curriculum and syllabus. Others are, to provide primary school textbooks and other instructional materials through the revolving fund, set academic standards, monitor and evaluate education system.

Lesotho's educational structure consists of primary education which takes seven years, while the secondary education extends over five years. Higher education is provided by the National University of Lesotho (NUL) and the technical and vocational education is offered by Lerotholi Polytechnic and the National Teacher Training College (NTTC). The latter which is the only teacher training college in the country is certainly the focus of this presentation.

NTTC, which is a department of the Ministry of Education, was established in 1975 by the Lesotho Government Order to replace the teacher training colleges hitherto run by three main churches in the country. The college which is an affiliate of NUL, is the only provider of primary school teachers in Lesotho and also through its full time programmes, trains junior, secondary and high school teachers of technical subjects. In addition to the pre-service programmes, the NTTC provides in-service programmes for both qualified and unqualified teachers in the Lesotho schools. Although the college has been in operation for twenty seven years, it has not been able to reduce the number of unqualified teachers to a minimum. This is caused by the fact that its conventional programmes cannot take the targeted number of students due to lack of facilities. The introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2000 has aggravated the situation as shown by the following table (MOE Statistics office):

Year	Total No. of Teachers	Unqualified teachers	Qualified teachers
1999	8225	6416	1809
2000	8578	6362	2216
2001	8585	6189	2396

The college has had in-service programmes since 1977 as a way of improving the professional quality of teaching in the primary schools of Lesotho. This programme had limitations due to space and facilities because there has not been much development of infrastructure since the beginning of the college, the classroom space, the library and laboratories can only accommodate a limited number of students. As a result of these limitations, the Distance Teacher Education Programme (DTEP) has been introduced to

respond to the need for enhancing the quality and quantity of primary school teachers in Lesotho. Again because of the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE), primary schools are overcrowding and need more quality teachers to cope with this situation. The numbers of pupils have increased significantly in the remote areas of Lesotho where there are marginalized teachers who are constantly yearning for knowledge acquisition. For NTTC to be taking the distance education (DE) route, is therefore not different from other institutions of higher learning that want to reach the marginalized clientele. This action corroborates the view of Braimoh (2001) who opines that “inevitably some universities had to embrace distance education (DE) practice as an alternative and complementary route for offering some of their academic programmes to the hitherto unreached and marginalized clientele, especially the working adults who are constantly yearning for knowledge acquisition.” Therefore, distance education is attractive to the multitude of learners because it has student support service (SSS) whose functions include the following as expressed by Burn and Bugbee, (1993); Dillon et.al. (1992) and Peters, (1992):

- Motivate and guide learners for self-study
- Providing answers to administrative queries
- Making individualized study a reality
- Promoting effective study skills
- Providing access to resources.

There is no doubt that adopting DE process will not only aid efficiency and effective performance of teachers duties but it will also lead to the massification in the number of serving teachers across the country. This benefit will be enjoyed by majority of teachers

irrespective of their geographic location, without necessarily removing them from the classrooms for long periods and without causing any disruption to their social and family lives. In essence, they will still perform their roles as spouses, parents and bread winners while on the other hand continuing with their professional development right on the job.

This paper shares the experiences of the implementation process of the distance education programme at NTTC in Lesotho. It also outlines the steps that were taken during the course design, materials writing for the eighteen (18) first year modules and the recruitment and admission of five hundred (500) students into the programme. Lessons learned during this process also form part of this presentation.

PREPARATORY MEASURES TAKEN IN THE DESIGN OF THE DISTANCE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME

In the year 2000, a task force made up of the college lecturers under the guidance of Assistant Director In-service, was formed to steer up the process of the design of a Distance Teacher Education Programme. Amongst its tasks, were the following:

- Consider the structure of the conventional programme and restructure the proposed DTEP
- Examine present In-service entry requirements, suggest entry requirements for the proposed DTEP
- Suggest the mode of delivery to the students and the forms of support

- Consider duration of programme for the existing In-service programme and suggest programme duration for the proposed DTEP
- Suggest mode of assessment for the proposed DTEP
- Make recommendations on curriculum structure to curriculum committee.

The intention was to strengthen the in-service programme by fully transforming it into a viable distance education programme. To achieve this, the group reviewed the existing curriculum at the college and developed it in a manner suited to the needs of distance teacher education in Lesotho. For purposes of credibility and compliance with the standards of similar programmes, the task force collected literature from different institutions that offer similar programmes. An educational trip to Botswana was taken by some members of the task force and their experiences proved valuable in the development of the programme.

After completing the first draft of the document, a workshop for all tutors at the college was held in order to review the work that was done by the task force. A lot of good ideas came out of that workshop, amongst others, it was agreed that a consultative meeting be held. In this meeting, institutions in the SADAC region that are involved in the Open and Distance education were invited. The institutions that participated are Institute of Extra Mural Studies, University of Fort Hare, National University of Lesotho and also representatives for Malawi and Namibia. The suggestions and ideas from the meeting complemented the programme document as they brought about the need to include the development of relevant, effective and more user-friendly student materials. Furthermore, they stressed upon the building of Education Resource Centers (ERCs) in

remote areas of Lesotho which should be provided with suitable study materials, equipment specifically developed for primary school teachers enrolled in this programme and an effective and viable student-friendly support system.

After the inclusion of all the relevant recommendations and ideas into the programme document, the final draft was written and taken through the academic channels of the college for approval. Since the college is affiliated to NUL, the document was taken to the university and had to pass through a number of bodies before it got to the Senate of the university for final approval. These include Faculty of Education Board, Academic Planning Committee and then to the Senate. This is going to be the first In-service programme at the college that will be accredited by NUL.

WRITING OF PROGRAMME MATERIALS

The Ministry of Education introduced Free Primary Education in the year 2000 and the need for qualified teachers in the primary schools was more inevitable than before. The Principal Secretary for Education took it upon himself to mandate the relevant departments to expedite action on the start of the DTEP. The Projects Co-coordinator in the Ministry, working hand in hand with NTTC, invited Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to assist in the design and development of self-learning materials to support DTEP to upgrade under and unqualified teachers to the Diploma level.

As good learning materials are at the heart of every successful distance education and training venture, the development of high quality multimedia self-learning materials was the priority of this project. NTTC has qualified and experienced faculty members who brought their knowledge of content to develop course materials. COL's role was to manage the process of course development, ensuring that the courses are enriched by appropriate and sensitive instructional design, and also to ensure correctness of language, the accuracy of information, currency of content and consistent presentation style. The courses being developed were those of the first year of DTEP curriculum.

To facilitate the development of course materials, four two-weeks' workshops were run in September, October, November and December 2001. Participants involved in these workshops were:

NTTC DTEP faculty and part-timers who were course writers because of their knowledge of content in different subject areas. Their task included drafting each module in accordance with the adopted NTTC's house style and making necessary revisions as agreed in the workshops taking into account the views of the instructional designers and editors.

Editors whose responsibilities included:

- Supporting the course writers and the instructional designers in ensuring that the language, style, and accuracy of content is maintained at the highest standards;
- Ensuring the organization of text, structure of lessons, grammar and idiom of content are all consistent with agreed protocols;

- Ensuring the appropriate and accurate use of graphics, illustrations, tables etc.;
- Ensuring that all legal obligations in relation to intellectual property rights are met in conformity with the laws of Lesotho and relevant international conventions;
- Supporting the technical adviser and instructional designers in organizing and running workshops for course writers; and
- Preparing the completed texts for final copy editing and reproduction.

Course Reviewers whose responsibilities included

- Carrying out an academic review of courses created under this project to ensure that they meet prescribed standards of quality, content and instruction.

Local and International Instructional Designers whose responsibilities included:

- Developing an appropriate house style in consultation with the appropriate partners for the products to be developed;
- Designing and developing an instructional design strategy and protocol for the materials to be developed;
- Designing and delivering short-term training both on the job and outside of it to enhance the skills of the materials development team;
- Working on a one-to-one basis with course writers constantly to improve the instructional design elements of the knowledge products;
- Striving to ensure the maximum transfer of knowledge and skills related to instructional design while working with the course writers on each of the modules.

The Technical Adviser whose responsibilities were:

- To assist and support the work of content writers
- To assist and support the work of expert instructional designers and editors, and to oversee maximum transfer of skills and knowledge to the course writers.

Word processing staff tasks included the processing of text materials created by content writers to ensure that manuscripts are made ready for publication.

Project Administrator who acted as the local counterpart to the technical adviser mirroring his tasks as well as facilitating the smooth running of the project in accordance with agreed schedules.

In the first workshop, all the participants were involved in designing and agreeing on milestones, deliverables and deadlines. The instructional designers trained course writers and developed instructional styles and protocols. They confirmed curriculum and individual course plans drawn by course writers. Outlines for eighteen (18) modules to be used in the first year were prepared. The second workshop reviewed products of the first drafts, participants rewrote and revised their drafts in order to produce an acceptable product. The work completed was edited and reviewed in the third workshop. During the fourth workshop, the finishing touches were made on the modules and many writers left the workshop with completed modules ready for printing and binding. The college was able to print the course materials internally because of the gigantic machine that had been bought for this purpose. The secretarial staff was trained to use the printing

machine and the dead line for printing was met. Binding was outsourced because there was no binding machine and manpower to do the work at the college level.

RECRUITMENT OF STUDENTS AND THE START OF THE PROGRAMME

Administratively, recruitment and admissions falls under the office of the Registrar, but in this case, since it was already late for the process, some faculty members from DTEP were involved. Recruitment process started in October 2001, with faculty holding campaigns and issuing application forms to prospective candidates in the ten districts of Lesotho. The radio was also used to advertise the programme. The activity was a success because there were more candidates than the programme could accommodate. The selection and admission of the students was done by the admissions committee under the supervision of Assistant Directors and the Registrar. Education Resource Centers in all the ten district played an important role as dissemination centers for DTEP information. Letters of admission for students were dispatched to those centers for ease and faster delivery to the students. About 85% of the candidates were able to get their admission letters before the start of the programme in January 2002.

On the 13th January the first intake of DTEP students arrived at the college and the registration process started on the 14th up to the 15th January 2002. The students were inducted into the DTEP. The subject tutors played an important role of familiarizing the students with course materials, guiding them to draw study schedules and advising them on how to study effectively at a distance. The launching of the programme on the 18th January, 2002, was marked by great celebration which was attended by The Minister of

Education who officiated in the inauguration of the program. Other dignitaries who attended the launching included, among others, the Principal Secretary for Education, Senior officers from the Ministry of Education, Donors, COL representative, college staff and students.

LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

The students are supported by the distance education printed course materials which are specifically designed for the learners across all the subjects in the DTEP curriculum. In addition to the materials, there are face-to-face sessions which will be provided not only at the college, but also at the District Resource Centers (DRCs), Farmers Training Centers (FTCs), Institute of Extra Mural Studies (IEMS) centers and Education Resource Centers (ERCs) nearest to where the students live and work, hence, most students will have access and not be disadvantaged by long distance or remoteness from the major population centers. Again, there is a network of local study sites grouped around six larger regional centers. All sites and centers will have a tutor in charge who is a full-time member of NTTC staff dedicated to DTEP. Students are allocated to a site and a tutor who has a dual role of tutor-counselor. The programme is administered by the Assistant Director In-service who is assisted by six regional coordinators.

OBSERVATIONS

In any new venture there will always be some lessons learnt, some of which may be negative while others may be positive. The following problems were encountered during the design and implementation of this project.

- All the DTEP staff had no previous training on distance education;
- The structures and management systems designed by the Technical Adviser are not yet fully operational because of technical problems;
- Too many modules (18) were written within a short space of time and typing was a problem because there were only four secretaries;
- Facilities during the workshops were not up to the standard and this negatively affected the morale of the writers and hence the outputs in some workshops were below expectation;
- Some of the international experts had not worked in Africa and it was not easy for them to adapt some ideas they had to the situation in Lesotho because they were not familiar with the social and cultural environment of the country.

However, the following successes were observed:

- The targeted date for the launching of the programme, which was January 2002 was achieved;
- Recruitment and admission of 500 students to the programme was implemented;
- NTTC's house style of writing the modules was produced and guided the course writers in producing self-instructional materials;
- NTTC faculty has been trained in writing self-instructional materials for distance learners.

CONCLUSION

In order for this programme to succeed and be of value to all those involved, objectivity in analyzing and reviewing it is very important. Tutors involved in helping students need to understand their position and help them adjust. College management and stakeholders such as field education officers, district resource teachers and school proprietors need to be aware of their roles and perform them to the letter. It is hoped that the quality and quantity of teachers that will be produced by this programme will benefit the Basotho nation now that education for all is being advocated.

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