

**ADDRESSING THE EDUCATION NEEDS OF
DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS IN OPEN
LEARNING: A JOINT VENTURE OF HIGHER AND
FURTHER EDUCATION**

Presented by:

**MARAIS, Francois
Centre for Higher Education Studies and Development
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, Free State Province
South Africa**

for

**The second Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open
Learning**

Durban, South Africa

28 July – 2 August 2002

ADDRESSING THE EDUCATION NEEDS OF DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS IN OPEN LEARNING: A JOINT VENTURE OF HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION

Francois Marais

Synopsis

The Career Preparation Programme (CPP) that is offered by the University of the Free State is a unique South African example of a bridging programme offered through open learning in a resource based learning mode. An additional feature of the programme is that the programme is a joint venture between higher (universities and technikons) and further education (colleges) institutions. This programme is in line with the national goals and priorities with the latest National Plan on South African Higher Education (2001) which put bridging programmes and the support of specifically learners from disadvantaged backgrounds as a national priority for redress.

The primary focus of this paper is to give an outline of the structure, requirements, subjects offered, management, successes and limitations of the programme.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Career Preparation Programme, launched in 1990, was implemented with the following distinctive and ambitious vision:

- 1.1** To provide disadvantaged students (locally and in rural areas) who do not meet the entrance requirements of higher education institutions, with **access** to general-formative and vocationally directed studies. This opportunity would also provide students with transferable credits for further study.
- 1.2** To establish '**access with success**' as well as ensuring the quality of a resource based learning bridging programme in an Open Learning paradigm.
- 1.3** To create a regionally coherent and efficient education system in which the Higher Education (HE) sector operates in **partnership** with the Further Education (FE) sector in the delivering of a resource-based learning residential and distance education programme.
- 1.4** To enhance **learner support** by means of developing specific skills and competencies for lifelong learning, academic language proficiency, and mathematical literacy.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE RESOURCE BASED LEARNING CAREER PREPARATION PROGRAMME (CPP)

2.1 ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

The admission requirement of the CPP is a senior certificate with an m-score between 12 and 27 points (the UFS's admission requirements for mainstream students are

matriculation exemption with an m-score of 28 points). This is calculated according to the symbols obtained for subjects in students' final matriculation examination (grade 12). The University of the Free State (UFS) allocates points for symbols obtained in the following way:

Calculation of m-score		
Symbol	HG-mark	SG-mark
A	8	6
B	7	5
C	6	4
D	5	3
E	4	2
F	3	1

An extra mark is added for any two of the official languages which have been passed with a D-symbol or above in the Higher Grade.

Grade 12 Mathematics on the Standard Grade is an additional prerequisite for students following option 1 (Economics) and 3 (Mathematics & Chemistry)

Cognisance should be taken that above mentioned admission requirements portray an educational system of higher education *which 'promotes equity of access and fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities'* (White Paper, 1996:4). These admission requirements are also in line with the national goals set for the transformation of South African higher education.

2.2 STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME

A prospective student registers for the Career Preparation Programme or bridging year at one of the Further Education and Training (FET) colleges with whom the UFS is in partnership. **The curriculum for this bridging year includes five cherry-picked strategic courses from three fields of study.** The following table is an outline of the curriculum of the bridging programme as well as the three levels presented in co-operation with a FET college:

Career Preparation Programme	One academic year	One academic year	One academic year
	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
	Economic & Management Sciences	Humanities	Natural & Agricultural Sciences
First-year level University courses	Economics + Accountancy or Industrial Psychology + Public & Business Management	Political Science + English or English + Sociology or English + Psychology or Psychology + Sociology	Mathematics + Chemistry
FET College courses	N4 Computer Practice N4 Communication	N4 Computer Practice N4 Communication	N4 Computer Practice N4 Communication
Foundation Course	Foundation Course in	Foundation Course in	Foundation Course in

on further education level	Lifelong Learning	Lifelong Learning	Lifelong Learning
-----------------------------------	-------------------	-------------------	-------------------

The programme requires students to pass the following five courses during the bridging year:

- **2 x UFS first-year level courses.** The UFS courses are presented as module courses with the exception of Mathematics of which the first semester is expanded over a year. The UFS registers the students for these courses, appoints facilitators and issues an academic record to students at the end of a successful year.
- **2 x FET college courses** are presented by college staff for which students register at the FET colleges.
- **A Foundation Course in Lifelong Learning** which includes the development of study methods, problem-solving skills, groupwork, the development of the student's self-esteem, etc., an academic language course and a Mathematical literacy course, developed by the UFS and presented by facilitators appointed by the university

2.3 THE AWARD OF CONDITIONAL EXEMPTION

The UFS concluded an agreement with the Matriculation Board to award **conditional exemption** to students after they have successfully completed the Career Preparation Programme as well as the remaining part of the first-year of study. Students who subsequently wish to continue their studies at another university may do so after the applicable university has consulted the Matriculation Board.

2.4 PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

Due to the formation of partnerships between the University of the Free State (HE-sector) and Further Education and Training institutions (primarily technical colleges) by the Free State Higher and Further Education and Training Trust, the CPP is delivered in a distance education mode at FET-learning centres in the following sub regions, most of them being rural areas.

Free State:

- (i) Bloemfontein (Programme implemented since 1992)
- (ii) Bethlehem (Programme implemented since 1998)
- (iii) Welkom (Programme implemented since 2000)
- (iv) Sasolburg (Programme implemented since 2000)
- (v) Phuthaditjhaba (Qwa-Qwa) (Negotiations are being finalised for presentation in 2003)

Northern Cape:

- (i) Kimberley (Programme implemented since January 1999)

Southern Cape:

- (i) Oudtshoorn (Programme implemented since January 2001)

Eastern Cape:

- (i) Aliwal-North (Programme implemented since January 2002)

2.5 CONTINUATION OF STUDIES

After successful completion of the bridging year, students receive full accreditation for subjects passed and are able to continue with the remaining first-year subjects, and later second- and third-year studies which will lead to a diploma or a degree at a specific higher education institution of their choice. Students also have the opportunity to continue studies at any FET or vocational college of their choice.

The ideal for the long term is that, by means of resource-based learning, students will be able to obtain a three- or four-year **general-formative or vocational degree or diploma** at a higher education institution through this programme.

2.6 TEACHING METHODOLOGY (RESOURCE-BASED LEARNING [RBL])

In RBL the traditional role of the lecturer changes from that of a teacher in the centre of the learning process to a producer of resource-based learning material, to a facilitator of learning and to that of an academic counsellor (Relf 1996:49). According to this scholar "... *Resource-based learning decentres the teacher and centres the learner in the education act*" (Relf 1996:51).

Relf (1996) reminds us of the fact that learners are '*taught*' by teachers but that they '*learn*' from books. This implies that within RBL a learner's perspective should shift from the passive 'I am taught' to the active 'I learn'. For Relf there seems to be a polarisation of issues in RBL: on the one hand the contact session used in RBL is similar to traditional contact lectures where the lecturer is the main source of information. On the other hand, RBL is an acknowledged form of distance education with pre-packed material expecting from students to work on their own and to regulate their own learning. In this approach the emphasis is on the resources students need for learning: these can be study materials/guides, and includes the learning facilitator as a knowledgeable resource. However, the role of the facilitator is to facilitate learning and to assist the learner to a better understanding of the subject knowledge.

Cognisance should be taken of the fact that both distance education and resource-based learning are based on the principles of open learning. Given the specific characteristics and unique academic needs of the 'typical' career preparation student, it would not be viable to present the programme without contact sessions. The programme should, however, not be viewed as a contact programme: it should rather be viewed as an open learning programme with elements of distance and contact tuition. Following, less emphasis is placed on lecturers' presentations and more emphasis on the development of quality self-study material (self-instruction packages) with accompanying academic support from the co-ordinator and

facilitators. Additional sources like multimedia packages (video, audio), computer-based instruction, contact sessions, etc. serve as additional support in the learning process.

2.7 SUPPORT BY COORDINATORS AND LEARNING FACILITATORS

(i) The role of subject co-ordinators in the CPP

A coordinator is appointed for each of the 11 subjects in the resource-based learning package at the academic department offering the specific subject at the University of the Free State. The coordinator, as subject specialist, is responsible for the management and coordination of the subject at the university as well as in the sub-regions (learning centres). **This coordinator also plays a further leading role in the development of resource-based learning material for the second, third and fourth years of study at the UFS.**

(ii) Learning facilitators

One learning facilitator is appointed for every 30-40 learners of a university subject. **Learning facilitators are appointed at the sub-regions' learning centres** so that all students (particular those in rural areas) have regular contact sessions with learning facilitators. The methodology of resource based learning (open learning) encourages the empowerment of communities in rural areas by appointing local qualified facilitators. The learning facilitators are appointed on a contract basis and report directly to the subject co-ordinators on the main campus of the UFS.

Subsequently, students experience the privilege of an off-campus (distance education) that provides contact sessions for students studying away from the university but allows them to stay as near as possible to their homes.

2.8 SKILLS DEVELOPED BY THE PROGRAMME

As already mentioned earlier, the programme aims at equipping students with life skills, academic language proficiency, and mathematical numeracy skills. At the beginning of the academic year, students receive resource-based learning materials for the different subjects and are expected to study it on their own. Facilitators assist students during structured contact sessions to cultivate the following types of skills:

- i) Planning, including time management and self-management.
- ii) Memory development skills.
- iii) Decision-taking and problem-solving.
- iv) Skills regarding taking an examination
- v) The development of academic reading skills.
- vi) Note-taking
- vii) Interpersonal relationships and group work.
- viii) Utilisation of sources.
- ix) Creativity.
- x) Skills to cope with stress.

2.9 EVALUATION STRATEGIES

Continuous assessment in the form of tests, written work assignments, structured group assignments is done throughout the semester. Finally a summative evaluation (written examination) is done in each of the courses. There is usually a logical order according to which modules should be completed whereby students earn credits. This “order” leads eventually to a diploma/degree.

2.10 SUCCESSES OF THE CAREER PREPARATION PROGRAMME

2.10.1 Success rate of candidates who completed the Career Preparation Programme

Since 1992, 48% (1719) of the students who commenced their studies in the Career Preparation Programme have subsequently enrolled at the University of the Free State. Approximately 20% (720 students) enrolled at the Technikon Free State.

After successful completion of the bridging year, many students also continue their studies at nursing colleges and other FET institutions.

Sadly, many students do not continue studies after the bridging year due to a lack of funding. No exact figures are available in this regard.

2.10.2 Throughput rates at the UFS

A total of 480 degrees have been awarded since 1996 to students who commenced their studies in the Career Preparation Programme. Thirty-three Honours’ degrees and five Masters Degrees’ were obtained.

2.10.3 Throughput rates at the Technikon Free State

Between 1996 and 1999, 187 students obtained a B.Tech. and a National Diploma at the Technikon Free State (B.Tech.: 25 and Nat. Dipl. 162).

2.11 RECORDING OF RESULTS

An individual and detailed report is kept of each student’s progress and results. Additionally an annual report regarding students’ progress at the various institutions is also compiled. Students who achieve exceptional performances obtain recognition in the appropriate media.

2.12 ACHIEVEMENTS

A number of achievements and institutional outcomes have been claimed to be a consequence of the CPP, beyond that of influencing the future and lives of students who would not have gained access to HE institutions. These include, for example, the CPP contributing to the transformation of partner institutions by increasing the growth of disadvantaged student numbers and sensitising them to the dire needs of disadvantaged students. The CPP also elevated the status of colleges in the community; hastened the official acceptance of English as a second medium of instruction; contributed to curriculum change (i.e. the necessary move to resource-based learning and foundation/core courses as part of “mainstream” learning and

teaching); and it illustrated the problems and advantages of partnerships among institutions.

2.13 CONCLUSION

The Programme prominently featured in a **Sunday Times**' special supplement on Higher Education on 18 October 1998 as one of South Africa's most innovative projects at higher education institutions. The Programme was selected as one of eight initiatives chosen "on the basis of their innovative and demonstrable contribution towards higher-education policy goals." It was also mentioned that they had selected the programme because " **the regional co-operation between educational institutions in the province is one of the most advanced of all such initiatives in the country** "

The **South African Association for Academic Development** stated the following in a report about Academic Development: *"The UFS Career Preparation Programme is an exception in that it does cater for large numbers of students and uses local institutions (learning centres) maximally in a post- secondary regional framework. Where regional coherence is possible, the model can be duplicated effectively. "*

The deduction can therefor be made that the CPP has a definite role to play in the widening of access for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education. Part of this success can be described to the fact that it is offered within an open learning paradigm, combining contact session with resource based learning materials and providing support through learning facilitators.

LITERATURE

Bitzer, E.M., Pretorius, E.V.E. 1996. **Resource-based learning at the UOFS: background meanings, implications and possible solutions.** Bloemfontein: Academic Development Bureau, University of the Free State.

Gibbs, G., Pollard, N., Farrell, J. 1994. **Institutional support for Resource-based learning.** Oxford Centre for staff development.

Lewis, R., Freeman, R. 1994. **Open Learning in Further and Higher Education – A Staff Development Programme.** Lancaster, Framework Press.

Relf, S. 1996. **Resource-based Learning at CSU: Changing roles in learning and teaching.** (Occasional Papers in Open and Distance Learning No. 20.) Charles Sturt University.

Rowntree, D. 1992. **Exploring open and distance learning.** London: Kogan Page.

RSA DoE (Republic of South Africa). Department of Education. 1997. **White Paper on Higher Education Transformation.** Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

South Africa (Republic): Department of Education. 1997. **Draft White Paper on higher education: notice 712 of 1997: a programme for higher education transformation.** Pretoria: Department of Education.

Strydom, A.H., Bitzer, E.M. & Lategan, L.O.K. 1995. **Community Colleges for South Africa.** Bloemfontein: Unit for Research into Higher Education.