

OPEN LEARNING WITH SUCCESS: PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATIONS FOR FACILITATORS AND LEARNERS IN RURAL AREAS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Consensus exists that the success and quality of open learning is highly dependant on a variety of factors such as the appropriateness of the learning materials, the way in which facilitators are prepared for their task and whether learners are familiarized with what is expected from them in such a delivery mode. In the South African context open learning is complicated by factors such as the underpreparedness of students to participate in higher education, language barriers, the need to be in regular contact with facilitators, etc.

This paper will focus on the experiences of one of the Co-ordinators in the Career Preparation Programme and will illustrate how the Facilitators' skills, knowledge, and attitudes are enhanced and how the learners are assisted through certain interventions to ensure success.

2. THE CAREER PREPARATION PROGRAMME (CPP)

2.1 The Need for the Programme

As a result of academic backlogs, inequalities in the school system and financial stringency many learners from disadvantaged communities cannot meet the admission requirements of higher education institutions. In order to address these backlogs, the University of the Free State decided in 1992 to establish a selection, development, and bridging programme (The Career Preparation Programme) in collaboration with colleges in the Further Education Sector (Marais, 2002).

2.2 The Aim of the Programme

The **aim** of the programme is to provide disadvantaged learners with an opportunity to enjoy general-formative and vocationally-directed education and training and also to address the learners wider needs with regard to an improvement in the quality of their personal life, academic needs, and other generic competencies (Marais, 2002).

2.3 Implementation of the Programme

Learners attend classes at colleges in the different **regions**, namely Bloemfontein, Bethlehem, Kimberley, Welkom, Sasolburg, Aliwal North, and Oudtshoorn. The learners study two university-credited **subjects** (higher education) as well as two N4 subjects, Communication and Computer Practice (further education). They also follow the compulsory course in Skills and Competencies in Lifelong Learning course which includes the various life and academic skills they will need to be successful. The university subjects presented in the course are listed in Table 1. This is the only programme that gives learners credit in their bridging year for university subjects passed. On **successful completion of the one-year course**, they can continue their studies at a university, technikon, or college. Access has also being successfully negotiated for learners who successfully complete the Programme with Potchefstroom Vaaldriehoek, the University of Stellenbosch, Rhodes University, the University of the Western Cape, and the University of Pretoria (Marais, 2002).

Table 1: Subjects presented in the Career Preparation Programme

Economic and Management Sciences	Humanities	Natural and Agricultural Sciences
Economics Accountancy Industrial Psychology Public and Business Management	Political Science English Sociology Psychology Afrikaans/Dutch	Mathematics Chemistry

2.4 Enrolment

The Career Preparation Programme began in Bloemfontein in January 1993 with 74 learners and has increased to a capacity of 760 in 1997. From 1998 - 2002 the Programme has had an average of 485 learners per year. The decrease in enrolment from 1998 may be attributed to a reduction in the Programme to 3 courses after expanding to 7 courses between 1994 and 1997, as well as a national decline in student enrolment figures at higher education institutions. The latter may be ascribed to a lack of finances and the proliferation of private colleges. In 2002 there was a marked increase in enrolment to the Programme to 582 learners. This is probably due to an intensive marketing campaign. Since 1993, 4515 learners have made use of this opportunity and there are currently over 900 learners continuing their studies at the University of the Free State and 30 learners at Technikon Free State (Howard, 2002).

2.5 The Structure of the Programme

The structure of the programme is characterised by **two main functions**. On the one hand, the **administrative function** and on the other, the academic function. Each sub-region has an Administrator who is responsible for all administrative matters. A core team at the University provides support. On the **academic side**, for each subject presented, a co-ordinator is appointed in the appropriate department at the University. The Director of the Programme, Mr Francois Marais, manages both these functions.

3. THE CO-ORDINATORS AND FACILITATORS

3.1 The Co-ordinators

As previously mentioned, there is one Co-ordinator for each subject. There are currently 14 Co-ordinators in the Programme (12 subjects, Chemistry and Afrikaans/Dutch has two Co-ordinators each due to the scope and nature of the subject content). In each of the sub-regions a Facilitator was appointed to be responsible for the contact sessions and other duties as identified by the Co-ordinator. The Co-ordinator and Facilitators are appointed based on their subject and discipline knowledge.

3.1.1 The Role of the Co-ordinators

The Co-ordinators are responsible for the **academic material** and the setting of tests and assignments. They also have to organise and plan the course and ensure that the Facilitators receive all of the material on time. This is done with the help of the administrative staff. All of the Co-ordinators have received **intensive training**, nationally (at the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) and various other workshops) and internationally (University of Gent, Belgium) in the design and development of resource-based material. The Co-ordinator is responsible for the quality of the academic content. The Co-ordinators work in their various

departments at the University so that they remain involved in their department. This also ensures that the Programme does not become isolated from the changes in the different disciplines, but is able to adapt to developments in the different faculties on campus.

Some of the Co-ordinators are also involved in the presentation of workshops on writing resource-based learning at different departments of the University as well as at some of the colleges and the Technikon Free State. Therefore the Career Preparation Programme also serves as a **pilot programme** for academic renewal at the University of the Free State, in terms of the writing of resource-based learning materials and the implementation of resource-based learning on campus.

3.1.2 The Development of Learning Materials

It is the responsibility of the Co-ordinator in collaboration with the academic department at the University of the Free State to develop the academic content of the course. The methodology followed in the writing of course material is resource-based learning. Bitzer and Pretorius (1996:1) defined resource-based learning as a "teaching/learning system by means of which learning content is made accessible for learners other than by the typical lecture presentation and class meetings. The emphasis is shifted from the lecturer as the transmitter of knowledge and of information to the lecturer as the manager/disseminator of knowledge/information. Likewise the importance of the student as 'recipient' of knowledge/information is replaced by the student as 'active discoverer'/learner. Learning resources include printed material (structured manuals, study guides, workbooks) and/or electronic media (audio, video and computer software) rather than lectures or notes". The material is developed in an activity-based mode in which the learners participate actively. Contact sessions are used to motivate learners, to help them pace themselves through the material, to help them with problem areas, and to make the material understandable (Parsons & Gibbs, 1994:9).

In the **development of material**, Co-ordinators must ensure that the work is equivalent to the academic standard of the first-year course in the mainstream and that underprepared learners understand the work. To ensure this, extra support is given in the development of the material. The Co-ordinator must also use examples which are in the learner's experience and frame of reference. Since English, which is the medium of instruction, is a second or even third language for the learners, the material must accommodate them by making abstract content very concrete through the use of examples, discussions etc. Language barriers are accommodated in the material with the use of easier synonyms than those found in textbooks. Textbooks are also selected with care, but this is complicated due to the consideration that they must remain at a first-year university level.

Co-ordinators must also **integrate** certain **generic** (e.g. group work) **and academic skills** (e.g. note taking, time management) with the academic content to ensure that learners will be successful. This selection of skills is decided by the Co-ordinator and is usually determined by the academic subject, as well as the content of the Skills and Competencies for Lifelong Learning course.

3.2 Facilitators

As indicated earlier the Facilitators are appointed by the Co-ordinators and must have a university degree and the specific subject they will facilitate on a third-year level. Most of the facilitators in the Programme are part-time. Currently 75 facilitators are appointed in the Programme. Each Co-

ordinator is responsible for the Facilitators in the different regions in his/her subject. On average, there are about 6 Facilitators per subject.

3.2.1 Training and Development of Facilitators

Most of the Facilitators do not have an education qualification and therefore it is very important to give them the necessary background on how they are to facilitate and deal with the learners. Facilitators are **appointed** for a year, renewable annually based on the number of learners for the specific subject in the sub-region.

On appointment they have to work through a **Facilitator's Guide** and **video** which demonstrates the basics of facilitation. A self-study module on resource-based learning which explain the theoretical knowledge on the methodology enhances this. Once every year there is a compulsory **facilitators' workshop** at the University of the Free State to sharpen their skills and provide support. At this workshop the Co-ordinators are able to see all of their Facilitators at once and are able to solve any subject-related problems with them. At these workshops an expert usually presents a training session a popular topic.

Co-ordinators are also in **weekly contact** with their facilitators. This can be via the telephone, an e-mail, a facsimile or courier mail.

3.2.2 Additional Support

To enhance the study material, all of the Facilitators receive a **Facilitator's Guide** at the beginning of the academic year which contains the rules and expectations of the Programme. These are compiled by the subject Co-ordinators and are not standardised guides as each subject is different from the other.

In Industrial Psychology, for example, the Co-ordinator also compiles an **Instructional Guide** for each unit. The Instructional Guide spells out the material needed to be able to complete the unit, important aspects related to the administration of the subject, as well as a section in which the difficult parts are highlighted and suggestions are given on possible parts for self-study etc.

Co-ordinators **visit** the sub-regions once a term. The purpose of these class visits is to make personal contact with the learners and to assess the content of the contact sessions.

Facilitators are also responsible for the **assessment** of the learners, although the test paper and assignments are compiled by the Co-ordinators. The Co-ordinator moderates the papers and assignments. The Facilitators are responsible for the learners in their region. The focus is on formative assessment and ipsative assessment. (Kerkhof, 2001)

The **administrative contact person** at each sub-region is responsible for administrative support in terms of the facilities and any other reasonable administrative need. The contact person ensures that there are classrooms for contact sessions, that there is sufficient stationery, and also deals with student enquiries etc.

4. LEARNERS

4.1 A Profile of Learners

The **learners** are mostly between 18 and 25 years of age with a senior certificate and a M-score of between 12 and 27 points. (The admission requirement for a mainstream learner is matriculation exemption and a M score of 28).

The Programme has a lot of **needy learners** who cannot afford the class fees. Bursaries are awarded to help needy learners who make progress. The half-year marks are assessed and needy learners are selected to receive bursaries from funds provided by the Irish Embassy.

4.2 Contact Sessions

Attendance is compulsory for all of the subjects in the Programme. There are never more than **40 learners** in a class so that the Facilitator is able to give personal attention to each learner. Learners are sub-divided into study groups of about 5 learners per group within these groups. These small groups serve as an additional resource when they work through the material.

Learners also have double the amount of **contact time** with the Facilitators when compared to their peers in the mainstream. For most of the subjects this means 4 hours of contact per week. This ensures that learners have enough time in their study groups and with the Facilitator.

At the beginning of the year it is found that learners are **very passive** and expect Facilitators to do everything for them. Facilitators usually begin slowly to introduce the learners to resource-based learning and ensure that they know what is expected of them. Gradually learners are moved on to a level where they can work independently as expected at tertiary institutions. To help learners to familiarise themselves with the new methodology, each learner receives a self-study module on resource-based learning at the start of the year. This must be handed in and it is also dealt with in a discussion.

Learners are also introduced to the **rules, regulations, and policies** of the University of the Free State to help them adapt to the stricter policies of higher and further institutions.

4.3 Assessment

Personal attention is very important. In Industrial Psychology, Facilitators are expected to know the name of each learner and to carefully monitor their progress throughout the year. The focus is therefore on ipsative **assessment** where each student is compared against him/herself (Kerckhof, 2001). Learners are encouraged to do better and the Facilitator and student set goals to improve the marks together. To enable learners to reach these goals, Facilitators are expected to make constructive suggestions on where learners can improve. The focus is on the skills developed throughout the year. Learners are helped to realise that these skills will enable them to be successful.

Assessment is also very different from assessment in the mainstream. Learners in the Career Preparation Programme also have more opportunities to improve their marks. In Industrial Psychology, for example, mainstream learners write two semester tests and have to hand in two assignments. Career Preparation learners write two semester tests, hand in three assignments, and write four formal class tests during the semester. One of the assignments is in the form of an

oral presentation and is evaluated by their peers. The other assignments focus on the academic skills they have acquired. They must draw up a study timetable, summarise a part of the work, and set goals for themselves. These assignments serve as a preparation tool for the first semester test.

5. THE SUCCESS RATE OF THE PROGRAMME

The average pass rate of the Programme since 1993 has been 56%. As may be expected, the vast majority of these students continue their studies at the University of the Free State and between 1992 and 2000, 55% (1748) of the learners who had successfully completed the Programme enrolled for degree purposes at the University, while 17% (537) enrolled at the Free State Technikon. 481 Learners have obtained degrees since 1996 (including 33 Honours degrees, 1 Masters degree, and 1 medical degree). At the Free State Technikon between 1996 and 2001, 165 learners obtained B.Tech (18) diplomas and National (147) diplomas (Howard, 2002). The *Sunday Times* named the UFS Programme as one of the most innovative education programmes in a special supplement on higher education in South Africa. (Sunday Times, 18 October 1998:1)

6. CONCLUSION

The Career Preparation Programme follows an integrated approach; not only in the close collaboration of their academic and administrative functions, but also in the support given to learners. The integration of support is a golden thread that runs through each aspect of the Programme, starting with the Co-ordinators and running right through to the client, the learner. This approach also enhances the quality of the Programme and the commitment of each participant in the Programme.

The Career Preparation Programme is in line with national policies that seek collaboration between higher and further education institutions. The Programme also showed that with academic and social support given to the learners they are able to perform themselves into tertiary education. These are learners who traditionally would be denied access to university studies. The Programme does show that the school system did not give them the necessary support to be successful and that these learners do have the capacity to gain access to university studies and be successful at tertiary education as well.

The key to prosperity in developing nations lies in quality education so that their citizens can develop to actively participate in improving the quality of life in their country. It is in this area where the Career Preparation Programme is making a critical contribution.

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