Factors Affecting Students Completion from the In-service Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) by distance mode at the University of Botswana

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Abstract

In a bid to raise academic standards from primary school to the tertiary level, and in its drive to achieve universal primary education by 2016 by expanding a teaching force that is shrinking through retirement and disease, mainly through(HIV/AIDS), the government of Botswana, through Recommendations 100 (a) of the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994, raised the minimum qualification for primary school teacher certificate (PTC) holders from certificate to the diploma level. Recommendation 104 (b) of RNPE, mandated all (PTC) holders to be upgraded through part time studies. The first cohort of 600 teachers enrolled on this four year DPE programme in December 1999, with an expectation of completing their studies and graduating no later than December 2003. So far, no students have graduated from this programme which is a collaborative venture between the University of Botswana and the Ministry of Education.

This paper, explores the challenges faced by the consortium of educational providers and stakeholders who set out to share available resources in the design, development and delivery of the DPE programme and how these challenges contributed towards the delay in the completion of the programme by learners. The paper also discusses how collaborative and participatory methods designed to achieve maximum benefit in the preparation and distribution of learning materials, tutoring and marking of students' work and how joint management and administration of assessment procedures and processes impacted on programme completion dates.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the distance taught DPE programme was to upgrade both academic and professional qualifications of PTC holders in order to improve standards of education from basic to tertiary level and at the same time create upward career mobilities for these teachers. This programme is in line with the socio-economic development goals stipulated in Vision 2016 of creating an educated and prosperous nation through part time and lifelong learning. It is the same as its pre-service counterpart in colleges of education, except for the distance delivery mode. Distance learners are identified, selected, admitted and registered as bona fide students of colleges of education. Colleges are affiliated to the University of Botswana and as such, quality assurance structures, procedures and processes governing tutorials, marking of assessment work and external moderation of examinations including approval of final results and award of the diploma are the same as those governing the conventional diploma. As such distance learners are basically subject to the same academic regulations, content and qualifications as their full time counterparts. The programme has an enrolment of 2400 students.

By the time external moderation of examinations commenced in April 2006, the completion rates by the first cohort were as in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Completion rates per college by the first cohort in April 2006

College	Pass Rate	Incomplete*	Total
Francistown	70	50	120
Lobatse	79	52	131
Serowe	89	50	139

Tlokweng	**87**	**29**	**116**
Total	**325**	**195**	**506!**

***Incomplete:** This category includes learners who are either supplementing or repeating assignments and tests in various subjects and those still owing research projects and/or teaching assignment portfolios.

! This number represents active students from the initial intake of 600 in December 1999.

EARLIEST COLLABORATIVE IN-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION INITIATIVES VIA THE DISTANCE MODE

This is not the only collaborative teacher education initiative via the distance mode in Botswana. The earliest teacher training intervention via distance mode dates back to (1960-1965) when the British Bechuanaland obtained learning materials from the Rhodesian government present day Zimbabwe, (Jones 1979), to launch a teacher upgrading programme at a distance.This Elementary Teachers' Certificate was launched to provide trained teachers required for the eradication of poverty, ignorance and disease, the main development goals of the sixties and the seventies. The mode of delivery comprised of correspondence texts supported by tutorials conducted at Lobatse College during school holidays, and radio broadcasts aired during weekends so that they would be accessible to learners.

Following independence in 1966, there was need to develop qualified manpower which was required for rapid expansion of the education system in order to promote socio-economic development. To improve literacy levels the government initiated the implementation of universal primary education (Mphinyane 1994). This initiative led to the recruitment of untrained primary school graduates to supplement the limited number of qualified primary school teachers. Between 1968- 1973 and in collaboration with Unesco, the government launched the Francistown Teacher Training project via the distance mode. By the time this programme came to an end in 1973,over 700 primary school teachers had been trained through a combination of printed materials supported by radio broadcasts and face to face tutorials conducted at the Francistown College of Education.

WORKLOAD, DELIVERY MODE AND ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

The DPE programme has a workload of 13 subjects all of which must be taken as foundation courses at Level 1 as shown in Table 2 below. The delivery mode comprises mainly printed modules, supported by audio cassette tapes and face to face tutorials. Learners take Communication and Studies Skills and Education at all levels. Starting from Level two to four, learners specialise in two teaching subjects which are selected from either English/Setswana; Social Studies/Religious Education; Maths/Science or any two from the five practical subjects, namely Music, Art, Craft and Design, Agriculture, Home Economics and Physical Education. Each module is assessed through two written assignments, a supervised test and a final examination. To qualify for the award of the diploma, each learner must pass in all subjects at level one and in specialisations at levels two, three and four, including the Research Projects and the Teaching Assignment Portfolio which is in lie of teaching practice. Table 2 below shows subject coverage.

Table 2. DPE (by Distance): “normal” Module distribution over four years

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4

Subject codes	Modules 1	Hrs per week	M2(L2)	Hrs per weeks		Hrs per week					
Education (ED)	EDU 1 EDU 2	3 3	EDU 3 EDU 4	3		EDU 5 EDU 6			3	EDU 7 EDU 8a EDU 8b EDU 8c	3
CSS	CSS 1	3	CSS 2	3		CSS 3			3	CSS 4 (Computer Awareness)	3
Maths	MAT 1	3	MAT 2	3		MAT 3			3	MAT 4	3
Science	SCI 1	3	SCI I2	3		SCI 3			3	SCI 4	3
English	ENG 1	3	ENG 2	3		ENG 3			3	ENG 4	3
Setswana	SET 1	3	SET 2	3	M3 (L3)	SET 3	Final modules	Hrs per week	3	SET 4	3
Relig Ed.	REL 1	3	REL 2	3		REL 3			3	REL 4	3
Soc Studs	SST 1	3	SST 2	3		SST 3			3	SST 4	3
Music*	MUS 1	3	MUS 2	3		MUS 3			3	MUS 4	3
Agriculture*	AGR 1	3	AGR 2	3		AGR 3			3	AGR 4	3
Physical Ed.*	PED 1	3	PDE 2	3		PED 3			3	PED 4	3
Art,Craft&design*	ACD 1	3	ACD 2	3		ACD 3			3	ACD 4	3
Home Econ*	HEC 1	3	HEC *2*	3		HEC 3			3	HEC 4	3
NOTE: *Practical. Subjects										2 selected from any of the 5	
Teaching Assignment										Teaching Assignment Portfolio	3
Research Project										project	3
Total	14 modules		5 modules			5 modules				5 modules	

Key: (a) M = Module; L = Level; Total modules = 29. (b) EDU 7 (Teaching Assignment Portfolio), EDU 8a (Teaching Lower Primary), EDU 8b (Teaching Upper Primary), EDU 8c (Special Education).

For assessment and progression purposes the programme is organised over four levels:

Level 1: normally takes 64 weeks covering foundation courses and Education one and two.

Level 2: normally takes 32 weeks (equivalent to an academic year of the conventional programme).

Level 3: normally takes 32 weeks (equivalent to an academic year of the conventional programme).

Level 4: normally takes 32 weeks (equivalent to an academic year of the conventional programme).

COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND ITS EFFECTS ON PROGRAMME COMPLETION

The main stakeholders comprised of the Department of Teacher Training and Development (TT&D) within the Ministry of Education, Colleges of Education which fall under the purview of TT&D and the Centre for Continuing Education, (CCE). As the principal implementing agent, the (TT&D) was to provide funds to cover the development of study materials, delivery and administration of the programme including tutorials, examinations setting, moderation, marking, validation and programme review. It was also the responsibility of the TT&D to work mutual agreements with Colleges of Education and other stakeholders, including schools and study centres for the utilisation of shared resources in the provision of learner support services. The assumption was that the TT&D would make financial disbursements to the University on time. Sometimes, prolonged funds procurement procedures led to delays in paying for part time services which in turn set back the programme completion dates.

Colleges of Education were expected to ensure that all college-based assessment processes and procedures such as ensuring prompt setting and marking of examinations, tests and assignments by college lecturers including processing of final results for approval by College Academic Boards took place as scheduled, before forwarding final results to the University of Botswana for consideration by Senate. This arrangement assumed that college lecturers, who double up as tutors on the DPE programme would cope with the additional workload and execute their part time duties particularly marking as per the set deadlines. To ensure efficient programme delivery, Colleges were also expected to mainstream the distance taught programme with college activities by integrating the management of tutorials and assessment processes with those of the pre-service programme. To oversee these activities, and supervised by college principals, part time coordinators and their assistants were appointed. Their duties include:

- Organizing and supervising tutorials, setting of assignments, tests and examination papers, invigilation and marking of all students work and monitoring provision of academic and social counselling;
- Distributing study materials and scripts of marked assignments and tests to learners;
- Maintaining up to date records of students' continuous assessment work, final examinations including supervision of research projects and the teaching assignment portfolio;
- Processing final results through academic departments and College Academic Boards which consider results for full time students;
- Securing laboratory space, equipment and consumables for science and other practical subjects;
- Securing printing facilities, stationery and other office supplies, audio/visual equipment and arranging the use of the college library;
- Liaising with the University and other collaborating institutions on the development and delivery of the DPE programme.

MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON PROGRAMME COMPLETION

Through the (CCE), the University of Botswana was in-charge of timely development, production, distribution and review of study materials which include printed modules and audio cassette tapes. In order to produce good quality materials, the University recruited, trained and supervised all part time writers, content reviewers and copy editors, including tutors and markers. Delays in materials development and production was one of the major constraints in programme completion.

This programme required 56 modules, 4 each in the 11 teaching subjects and Communication and Study Skills and 8 modules in Education before the learners could be enroled. However, due to mounting external pressure to launch this programme, only 9 out of the 14 modules required for Level 1 had been developed when the first cohort enrolled in December 1999. All the other study materials had to be developed as the learners waited. The first final examinations scheduled in July 2003, were ready for English, Setswana, Music and Communication and Study Skills as development of learning materials for the other subjects was still in progress.

Development of learning materials for subjects such as Maths, Science, Art, Craft and design, Agriculture, and Physical Education was not completed until 2004due to scarcity of expertise in these subjects. The major constraints included:

- Difficulties in getting writers and editors who were motivated to write within the set deadlines perhaps due to lack of a culture to write;
- Low payment rates and harsh taxation procedures for part time work and delayed payment procedures which de-motivated part time writers, editors and tutors/ markers;
- Delays to recruit or replace full time staff such as in-house editors who moved to greener pastures resulting in pile up of editing work.

The CCE was also responsible for preparation of budgets and processing of claims for part time work.

PROCESSING OF ASSESSMENT ITEMS

To maintain parity of standards between the pre-service and the in-service programme, assessment items were set by colleges of education, and sent to CCE processing. After printing, the CCE distributed tests and examinations papers to colleges for administration at residential sessions during school vacations. However these processes were often behind schedule due to the following constraints.

- More often than not assessment items came to CCE late and without marking keys in some subjects and resulted in delays in subsequent examination processes;
- In other cases, examination questions were submitted without, instructions, illustrations or page numbers resulting to prolonged consultations before an examination paper could be corrected;
- Some times, examination papers had to be cancelled if they were not available.

It should be noted that delays by tutors in setting and marking assignments, tests and examination work was not due to any indolence or indifference, but rather due to heavy workloads and lack of time (Peters, 2000). The tutor/markers are full time employees of colleges of education and as rightly noted by Paul (1990), their loyalties are first and foremost to their host institutions. Secondly tutors do not have regular face to face contact with distance learners and supervisors from CCE, and as such deadlines relating to turnaround times for marking assignments, tests and examinations were difficult to enforce.

CONSTRAINTS ARISING FROM THE COLLABORATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

The execution of roles and responsibilities by various stakeholders played a significant role in delaying the assessment processes and subsequently, affected programme completion dates. Some of the constraints included:

- Lack of accountability procedures for stakeholder operations;
- Delays in materials development, production and distribution processes;
- Delays in setting of assignments, tests and examinations papers and marking of students scripts resulting to delayed feedback;
- Delays in developing special academic regulations to streamline the structures of the distance taught programme with the pre-service one;
- Late submission of research projects and teaching assignment portfolios by learners.
- Delays in processing payments and taxation procedures de-motivated many tutors.

Stakeholder Accountability for the Assessment Process

In the absence of a Memorandum of Understanding, to bind various stakeholders formally, the activities of the stakeholders were regulated by an Advisory Committee comprising of members mainly from the TT&D, Principals of Colleges of Education and the CCE. The Advisory Committee was to ensure continuous operation of the programme through:

- Overseeing the activities of each stakeholder by monitoring the implementation and progress of the programme;
- Advising on student selection and admission.
- Developing and reviewing policy for the distance taught programme and making recommendations to the relevant authority;
- Reviewing draft budgets for approval by the Ministry of Education;
- Identifying, learner support requirements and making recommendations.

This committee did not have executive decision-making powers, and very often, some of its recommendations were not promptly implemented. Though its meetings were diarised, they could be cancelled easily if the key stakeholders had other commitments. Irregular meetings created a void in the decision making process which further led to delays in the preparation of required documents such as the adaptation of special academic regulations from those governing the conventional programme. Special regulations were required to facilitate external moderation before the approval of final results by the University Senate.

Late Submission of Research Projects

The deadline for submitting research projects was 31st August 2003.However by February 2004 only 52 projects had been submitted from over 500 expected projects 506 as indicated in Table 3 below. Some of the learners were at different stages of proposal writing, (Table 3) while others had not even started work on their proposals. This is despite the fact that the research project was a core component of the diploma course. Given this over all low completion rate

Table 3: Status of research projects by February 2004

College	Completed project	Proposal Stage	Total
Lobatse	4	81	85
Tlokweng	-	80	80
Serowe	8	82	90
Francistown	40	80	120
Total	52	323	375*

*Note: This number reflects the number of learners working on research projects but not the total number of active learners

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to argue how loose collaborative arrangements contributed to delays in programme completion and graduation. Lack of a formal memorandum of understanding to bind and regulate the activities of stakeholders minimised accountability of each stakeholder. No needs assessment survey was carried out to establish whether the required resources particularly writers, editors and tutor markers would be available and the conditions under which they would discharge their services. In addition, launching the programme before the initial materials were developed was frustrating not just to the learners but also to the programme implementers. These constraints should serve as a lesson to any institution that wishes to venture into a collaborative venture in open learning. One lesson from the DPE programme has been that planning collaborative materials development processes, tutoring and marking procedures including programme management and administration operations is necessary before programme implementation.

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