

Barriers to Learning: The Difference Distance Learning can make in Namibia

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Abstract

This paper will address the barriers to learning, including innovative structures and strategies put in place to overcome such barriers, with specific reference to rural distance education students in the Namibian context. Access to quality learning has been compromised for many years prior to the country's independence in 1990. Distance education, having been around for a long time, has seen changes, innovations and vast improvements that contribute to enhancing quality learning. If we are to find means to improve the situation, it will be vital that everyone understand the importance of education- that it is not merely a means to obtain status in society, but rather, that it is the responsibility that society owes to itself.

The Polytechnic of Namibia, through its Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL), has recently fulfilled this responsibility to the rural society of Namibia when it established a network of Regional Centres across Namibia that has the function of coordinating and facilitating all the necessary instructional and support services to address the needs of distance education students throughout their learning process and to give them the academic tools they need to overcome unnecessary barriers in order to succeed. There are various drawbacks on the part of those who would like to pursue their studies through distance learning. Despite the fact that decentralisation of the support services has taken place through the establishment of the Regional Centres, all areas in Namibia are not covered and students face limitations due to factors like distance from the Centres, and affordability.

Making studying through distance education possible for more Namibians will require funding to students who are economically disadvantaged. eLearning is one way to bridge the gap and ensure easier access to education. Students become more pro-active in their pursuit of studying towards their desired qualification once the facilities that support their learning are brought closer to them.

The support services on offer through COLL, and in particular through the Regional Centres, ensure that barriers such as distance and affordability are overcome. Students, prospective students and the public should be educated about the facilities on offer, and how these can support their learning. They can then be encouraged to pursue studying on distance, knowing they have a good chance to succeed. In this case study, the strategies implemented to establish a well-functioning Regional Centre with good logistics and reliable infrastructure as an integral part of the delivery of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), including the support provided to rural distance education students are put forward.

Introduction

It is the wish of most Namibians these days to live a better life. Many have come to the realization that a better life can be achieved by studying further to improve skills and knowledge. In order to make this ideal a reality, the Government of Namibia has adopted a National Policy for Education called Education for All (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). The Namibian Education reform policy is underpinned by the reform goals of access, equity, quality and democracy. Severe constraints have made it difficult for many countries to implement active-learning reforms successfully in response to the Education for All

goals (UNESCO, 2004). Affordability is one such constraint in Namibia. For example, despite the fact that many school leavers in Namibia obtain the required grades as a requirement for access to higher education, a great number of them are not able to do so in the first instance, because of a lack of funds. For those who do qualify to study at tertiary level, but are unable, because of some reason or the other, one needs to explore the options available to them in their pursuit of gaining the necessary knowledge and skills. Distance learning is one of the options available should prospective students want to pursue studies through tertiary education.

Distance Learning as an Option to Study at Tertiary Level in Namibia

During 2004 I worked as a teacher in the northern town of Tsumeb, Namibia. I was working with grade 12 learners, teaching them Mathematics. During this year I have also worked on encouraging these learners to further their studies at one of our tertiary institutions. Most of these learners applied to either the University of Namibia or the Polytechnic of Namibia, two of the leading tertiary institutions in the country.

It was early in the beginning of 2005 when I met with one of the guardians of a very bright grade 12 learner. They related to me how they took the girl to Polytechnic of Namibia's Windhoek campus after she gained admission to study towards a National Diploma in Accounting and Finance. However, they had returned to Tsumeb with her hopes of studying further pushed aside, for a year at least. According to her guardians, she would remain at home in Tsumeb for a year without studying, which would give them ample time to start saving enough as the cost of tuition and accommodation fees was too high for them to bear. They would be able to pay the tuition fees, but could not secure accommodation for the young lady, and private accommodation in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, was unaffordable for them. Her dream to study further for the first year out of school seemed shattered. Having heard this, I let my thoughts go, and just the following day, I went to see the guardians and explained to them the option for the girl to do her first year of studies through the distance education mode, from her hometown, Tsumeb, thus cutting the additional costs of accommodation.

Since there was a Regional Centre, she could study from home and also attend weekend face-to-face tutorials which would support her learning. I explained to them that there was a library where she could do her reading and conduct research for her studies. They welcomed my advise and consulted with the Regional Coordinator at the Tsumeb Regional Centre. She was subsequently registered for her first year through the distance education mode of study. This particular young lady studied successfully through the distance education mode for her first year of studies. She continued her studies through the full-time mode in 2006, during which she obtained her Certificate, while she managed to obtain her National Diploma in 2007 and graduated in 2008 with her Degree in Accounting and Finance. This is one of the few success stories that I have come across, one of perseverance and proof that studying through the distance education mode can indeed lead to success.

There are other cases where learners do not attempt to study through the distance education mode, because they are unaware that they can do so and that it is indeed possible to receive quality education through this mode of study. Once it turns out that they cannot study on the full-time mode at the main campus in Windhoek, because of one or the other reason, they stay home for the year in our rural towns. Unfortunately, many of them never get to pursue their dream of studying further. This has also been evident in the southern town of Keetmanshoop where the Polytechnic of Namibia has had a Regional Centre for the past couple of years.

Barriers to Learning Faced by Rural Distance Education Students in Namibia

Open and distance learning (ODL) is one of the ways in which learners can study successfully, while still attending to other responsibilities at home and work. Due to the flexibility of studying through ODL, many students who would otherwise not be able to, can continue their studies at their own convenience and

pace. However, students are at times demotivated, or at the worst, prevented to study, because of factors like a lack of student support services at regional level, which include administrative support services like payment of fees and writing of examination; academic support services like face-to-face tutorials, study groups, library services, access to reliable internet and email services and even the personal inability to pay accommodation fees. Students from the Karas and Hardap Regions in the south of Namibia are originating from socio-economic deprived areas, hence experiencing huge challenges financially. Students cannot always afford to travel long distances to visit Regional Centres which are well equipped to support them in their learning. These two regions also do not have well established infrastructure to accommodate wider access to information and communication technology (ICT) such as the internet service to foster conducive and interactive learning from home.

Bridging the Gap

The Polytechnic of Namibia has a significant number of study programmes available on the distance education mode. With the establishment of its own network of ten Regional Centres, the institution, through its Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) is now better positioned to provide its rural distance education students with the much needed student support services that make their off-campus learning experience easier. The Regional Centres administered by the Regional Coordinators, are equipped with the necessary infrastructure to house facilities such as a library, computer laboratories with wireless internet facilities and classrooms amongst others. Regional distance education students are therefore able to access similar support services than their fellow students studying at the main campus in Windhoek and can attend weekend and evening face-to-face tutorials and access library services to support them in their studies. With the necessary ICTs available at the Regional Centres students are able to contact their tutors by email if they for example have the need to clarify matters pertaining to the understanding of their course content. Access to reliable ICTs at the Regional Centres further provides the opportunity of access to administrative services. For example, online registration is now possible from all the Regional Centres, or from anywhere in the world, using the internet, which has not been the case until the current academic year. Although provision of these student support services may be common practice for tertiary institutions in other parts of the world, this has been a major achievement in ODL delivery in Namibia, considering the infrastructure challenges experienced by developing countries.

Students are further provided with quality instructional material that ensures interactive and meaningful learning and come into daily contact with their face-to-face tutors and peers while visiting the Regional Centre. Apart from the number of contact hours and given the various strategies and structures put in place, distance education students have the same instructional contact and interaction as their fellow students studying through the full-time mode at the main campus in Windhoek. When teaching through ODL, there is a geographical separation of teacher and learner and of the learner from his/her learning group, with the interpersonal face-to-face contact of conventional education being replaced by a personal mode of communication which is mediated by technology (Keegan, 1996). At the COLL Regional Centres the different support options available complement each other, contributing to the quality of education that is on offer to distance education students. Keegan (1996) further cites Peters (1991) who outlines that the interpersonal communication and face-to-face interaction in the learning group seem to be eliminated in distance education, however, as is evidenced at the COLL Regional Centres, the variety of student support services in place significantly bridges this gap.

Student Enrolment

TABLE 1 STUDENTS REGISTERED PER POLYTECHNIC REGIONAL CENTRE: 2010

REGIONAL CENTRE	NO. OF STUDENTS:2010	NO. OF STUDENTS: 2009	%INCREASE
Windhoek (WDH)	1316	1488	-12%
Gobabis (GO)	46	35	31%
Katima Mulilo (KM)	58	58	0%
Keetmanshoop (KE)	124	92	35%
Opuwo (OP)	28	27	3.7%
Ongwediva (ON)	362	281	29%
Otjiwarongo	119	92	29%
Rundu (RU)	76	88	-14%
Walvis Bay (WB)	207	151	37%
Tsumeb (TS)	66	60	10%
TOTAL	2 402	2 372	1.3%

TABLE 2 TOTAL NUMBER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS: 2000-2010

(Excluding Windhoek-based distance education students)

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
417	403	394	328	371	465	538	646	871	884	1 086

TABLE 3 TOTAL NUMBER OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS: 2000-2010

(Including Windhoek-based distance education students)

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
774	784	764	898	913	1 059	1 263	1 588	2 079	2 372	2 402

TABLE 4 TOTAL NUMBER OF COURSE ENROLMENTS: 2005-2010

(Including full-time and part-time students registered for some of their courses on the distance education mode)

2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
12 380	13 354	19 636	25 106	28 786	31 152

The establishment of the COLL Regional Centres have accelerated the growth of distance learning in the country (see tables 1 – 4). Students have access to a range of decentralised support services and state of the art ICTs that are adequate to their specific needs and based on the typical profile of a rural distance education student in Namibia. Although some of them still have to travel long distances, a common occurrence in distance education to reach their Regional Centre, it is possible for them, with the reliable availability of the internet, to access their assessment results, biographical data, proof of registration,

vacation school timetables and examination timetables via the Student Kiosk, which is an online student portal available on the Polytechnic of Namibia website. Students are further equipped with a free email account for the duration of their studies, while the open source learning management system, KEWL (Knowledge Environment for Web-based Learning), is available to students who prefer to study via the eLearning mode. Students therefore do not necessarily have to travel to their nearest Regional Centres, because they are able to have a meaningful distance learning experience from anywhere in the country.

However, one cannot deny the fact that the geographical distance leads to some challenges with access to the necessary support services, especially when students do not have access to the internet from home. It is worth noting that some students still have to travel long distances to access internet facilities as it is not widely available in rural Namibia. For example, students who do not have access to the internet to submit assignments online, often have to travel up to 200km to the nearest courier services for assignments to reach the Centre on time. Travelling over long distances will continue to be a challenge for distance education students until such time that facilities become more widely available. Library services which provide access to relevant prescribed and recommended textbooks as well as online journals and other material, including the computer laboratory is not easily accessible to those living far away from the Regional Centres. This, and the fact that they cannot afford to buy the prescribed textbooks are barriers to their learning. Some students drop out because of the demands from their careers as working adults. There have been cases at the Keetmanshoop Regional Centre where students come in to cancel courses due to the demanding and conflicting roles adults are subjected to while studying. Considering these factors, distance education practitioners must explore ways to motivate these students and find innovative strategies in addition to the above support services to foster a meaningful learning experience and to ensure wider access.

One of the ways to increase the level of motivation amongst students is to introduce group learning (Simpson, 2002) so they can benefit from the diverse group experiences. This will diminish the perception that they are studying in isolation (Keegan, 1996). Realising the value of this support service, Coordinators at the Regional Centres therefore capitalised on this strategy and managed to facilitate the forming of study groups at regional level. Students confirmed that they benefitted academically as well as socially from these groups. Not all of them form part of a study group, but those who are, get together during face-to-face tutorials and assist each other. From my personal experiences as a Regional Coordinator and Distance Education Tutor, face-to-face tutorials provide opportunities for students to firstly meet the tutor on a one-to-one basis to receive vital support in addressing challenging concepts in their course content, whilst interaction with their fellow students provides an ideal opportunity for conversation and cooperative learning to further enrich their learning experience..

Conclusion

Open and distance learning is not new in Namibia and considerable achievements have been made in supporting students through this mode of study over the years. Supporting distance education students from a rural background with poor infrastructure is particularly challenging. The Polytechnic of Namibia through the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning has made substantial efforts to cater for the needs of their students from the remote rural surroundings. The focus of the COLL Regional Centres is not only to effectively support students in their learning but to empower them to take ownership of their studies and complete it successfully. Observations and informal discussions with students found that problems encountered by distance education students from the Keetmanshoop Regional Centre fall in categories of cost, isolation due to travel of long distances to the Centre and lack of access to ICTs from home. This paper also pointed out the popularity of ODL as a mode of study at the Polytechnic of Namibia, which is evident through the steady growth in enrolment over the years and COLL's continuous efforts to widen access and meet the needs of distance education students. The latest strategy is the valuable support from Senior Management to allocate more funds to COLL to facilitate the establishment of more Regional Centres and to upgrade the existing Centres to Satellite Campuses in the bigger towns where more students are enrolled. This is a clear indication that ODL is valued in a dual-mode institution and regarded of equal importance, because parity of standards are continuously ensured and no distinction is made between ODL and conventional delivery.

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