

The accessibility of ODL to the disadvantaged- teenage employees

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Literature Review

Background

Over the years distance learning has been increasing in popularity among learners, especially adult learners, worldwide. According to Tamboura (2008) distance learning is becoming a more and more common strategy in educational systems, particularly in countries with increasing number of learners and teachers. Teachers at all levels are discovering the possibilities of facilitating meaningful learning with the World Wide Web resources (Bitter and Legacy, 2006). Students who are working at a distance and at different places from the others are able to use the web as the actual method of instruction. Distance learning has the potential to provide equal opportunities in higher and continuing education.

It is however, regrettable to realise that there is a certain portion of the society, that is neither aware, nor have access to available distance learning modes through which they can improve their education. These are mainly teenagers, who are supposed to be prepared to be responsible future generation in society. It is even sadder to note that even those who might be aware of such distance learning modes, they are denied the opportunity by others, who are supposed to be responsible for their well-being.

Importance of Distance learning

There are various benefits that are provided by distance learning. Distance learning gives opportunity for learning to those students, especially adults who never had the chance to study full time due to various reasons. Such students would be having other commitments which may not allow them to study face-to-face. Distance learning expands access in education in that it is able to reach a vast number of learners, particularly the underserved population of students who cannot attend a school that offers the educational services they desire, probably due to living too far from the services. Distance learning also presents the advantage of reducing costs of training as it can reach a large number of students at the same time. According to Harper et al., (2004), distance learning reduces the overcrowding of classrooms, and therefore improves the teacher to students' ratios. It also gives students opportunity to interact with a diverse group of

fellow students. The advantages can be summarised as **affordable**, **convenient** and **accessible**.

Most importantly, distance learning provides opportunity to those teenage employees, who could not continue with their education for various reasons. These include losing parents due to HIV/AIDS, and having no one to take care of; parents being too poor due to being unemployed and therefore not having money to pay for their children for higher education. Some children do not perform well at primary school and therefore do not meet the minimum entry requirements for post-primary education.

In most cases, teenagers who end up not going further with education, due to various reasons mentioned above, go on to find employment, either as domestic workers, gardeners, herd boys, shopkeepers or labourers.

Distance Education in Lesotho

Distance learning in Lesotho started in the early 1980's as an initiative of the Ministry of Education and Training. This was initially offered only through the Lesotho Distance Teaching Center (LDTC) which is only offering primary, secondary and high school courses. The programme was meant to help those students who have not done well in their final examinations, and therefore found themselves being excluded from the schools for one reason or another. The Lesotho education system includes three examination exit points which are a) the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), for leaving primary and entering into secondary school b) Junior Certificate examination (JC) for those leaving secondary and entering the high school, and c) the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) for those leaving high school and preparing to go for higher education.

LDTC has different learning centers formed in different regions of the country to cater for students in the neighbouring areas. The modules and the courses are designed in a way that they include all the content and the activities that have to be covered for a particular level. There are different modules for different subjects offered. The subjects offered do not include the practical subjects as it would be difficult to carry out the experiments from homes.

The study period for every level is divided into four terms per year. At the end of every term, the students meet at specified centers where they come into contact with the instructors and have a chance to discuss the part of the module to have been covered by that time. Such meetings are referred to as workshops. The examinations are written together with the rest of the candidates at relevant times per level.

LDTTC develops all the training materials in the form of modules and distribute the materials to the learning centers which are spread across the country. The information is also disseminated through various radio stations in the country. The assignments from students are collected during the workshops in the regions.

The National University of Lesotho also offers a BEd programme through distance, to primary teachers who are still in the schools. These are teachers who have obtained Diplomas in Primary Education from the Lesotho College of Education. Among the student support systems available, there is a mobile library that students can make use of to get information from their respective locations across the country. Institute of Extra Mural Studies (IEMS) is a branch of the National University of Lesotho in Maseru, which also offer various courses through distance. The courses range from the Adult education to different business and management courses.

Teenage employment in Lesotho

Teenagers, as defined by Concise Oxford English Dictionary, are people aged between 13 and 19 years. Teenage employment is very common in Lesotho to both boys and girls. This is brought about by various reasons, most of which have been mentioned above. The most common forms of teenage employment in Lesotho include the following: shopkeepers for both boys and girls; labourers, gardeners and herd boys for boys; as well as domestic workers for girls.

The labour law of Lesotho clearly stipulates that no teenager below the age of 18years should be engaged in any form of employment, as this would be regarded as “child labour”, which is an offence punishable by law. However, hundreds of people across the country do not abide by this law, but continue to employ these minors, as they are called. People who employ these minors, in most cases are not aware of the law, and therefore do not see anything wrong in teenage employment.

In most cases it is the teenagers themselves who seek employment, so that they can provide for their families. This applies mainly to those teenagers who are orphaned and have to take care of their siblings. Sometimes parents are not employed due to various reasons and it is left with the teenagers to take care of the rest of the family. This means for these teenagers, they cannot have access to education. The only option they have of studying is through distance means, but this can only be possible if the employers of such teenagers are aware of such means, and willing to allow the teenagers the opportunity.

Research method

Interviews were selected as research instruments for this study because of a number of advantages that it has over other data collection methods. Cohen and Manion (1980:219) define an interview as:

“A two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research relevant information, and focused by him on content specified by the research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation.”

This section will only highlight some of the advantages of interviews, as a justification for why they were used for this study. Because of the face-face nature of an interview, the interviewer can establish rapport and a trust relationship, and thus be able to obtain data that the respondent might not give on other data collection instruments. Again, interviews do not necessarily require high levels of education, meaning that even those respondents who are not literate can take part in the research without having to read or write, but still being able to easily express their views. Most of the respondents of this study were not literate at all, and therefore the only means of getting information from them would be by talking to them.

With interviews, because the researcher is the one who does the data collection, 100% return is ensured. This therefore increases the chance to make generalization of the results. For this research, seven teenage girls employed as domestic workers, five teenage girls employed as shop keepers, three teenage boys employed as shopkeepers and two teenage boys employed as herd boys, were interviewed. All respondents were employed in Maseru, the capital town of the country. The place was selected not only for the convenience of the researcher, but also because of the reason that this is the place where teenage employment is most common. Maseru, being the capital of the country, attracts different people from different parts of the country, especially those from the most rural parts of the country, coming down to the capital for employment. It is also in Maseru, where the distance learning centers are found. It is therefore reasonably safe to generalize the results of this study as a true representation of teenage employment in Lesotho.

Only eight employers of the seventeen employees were interviewed. The rest of the employers could not be reached due to different commitments, mainly work related.

The interview schedule was drawn in English, and later translated to the local language (Sesotho). This would enable the researcher to ask questions at ease to the participant, since all participants were not conversant in English. The responses were audio-taped, with the permission of the participants. The responses were then transcribed to enable the researcher to analyze the data collected from those interviews. Cohen and Manion (2001) point out that transcribing has to be done with great caution and accuracy, as it can lead to loss of data if not properly carried out.

Results

The biographic profile of teenage employees was included to determine the background of such teenagers.

The results of this study indicate that all teenagers interviewed were from the rural part of the country, and they only came to the capital for various reasons, most of which were employment related.

60% of the participants were double orphans, 20% single orphans, while 20% still had both parents. All the parents of the teenagers, whether single or double, were unemployed.

67% of the teenage employees interviewed were girls and only 33% were boys. This shows that there are more teenage girls employees than boys. This might be connected to the fact that girls have always been discriminated when it comes to education. In the past, the woman's place has always been in the home with house duties and raising children, as opposed to going to school like boys.

All the teenagers interviewed indicated that they would have wanted to become professionals when they grew up. They all wanted to have gone far with their schooling if it was not because of poverty, which eventually led them to being employed at that early age.

71% of the teenagers were not aware of the means of distance learning available. They thought it was not possible to study and work at the same time. Most of the teenagers believed that even if they got the opportunity to study, their employers would not allow them.

Only 29% of the teenagers were aware of the distance learning mode available in the country. Of the 29% who knew about the distance learning mode, only 40% approached the employer about studying while learning. Some of the teenagers, who were aware of the distance learning mode available, thought that it would not be accessible to them because of the fees involved. They indicated that the money that they get from their employers was only enough to take care of their other needs and therefore could not pay for their education.

Of the 40% who approached their employers, only 20% succeeded in studying while still working. This was a very small percentage comparatively.

With the employers, only 75% were aware of the distance learning mode, though none of them allowed their employee the opportunity to study. Most of the employers claimed that they were not aware of any interest from their employees of studying while working, even though they never questioned the employees about this matter. Of this 75%, only 15% allowed their employees to study through distance while working at the same time.

25% of the employers claimed that they were not aware of any available modes of distance learning through which their employees could be enrolled with while working. Some of them maintained that they would not allow their employees to study while working as they believed that this would prevent them from doing their tasks at work efficiently.

LDTC, which is the main distance education center in the country, did confirm that there are many employers, teenagers included, who are registered with the institution. Records also show

that there are many employed who have completed different levels of schooling through the center and managed to go to higher institutions

Conclusion

The working class, especially girls, is usually the least represented in higher education, due to various reasons which range from getting married at an early age, having children at early age, of financial constraints. This is evident from the results of this study, where there are more teenage girls employees than boys, due to the fact that they do not have proper education. Prümmer (2000) asserts that working class girls are more disadvantaged than boys from the same background.

From the results of this study, it is evident that most teenage employees are not aware of the possibilities of studying to improve their education, while working. Even those who are aware of such means, they do not give their employees the opportunities of improving their education, hence making accessibility impossible.

Due to lack of awareness on the part of teenage employees and their employers, accessibility of distance learning to these employees is almost zero!

Recommendations

Distance education policy makers have to provide a framework for teenage employees specifically, which will maximise the opportunities of them furthering their studies even when they are domestic workers, labourers, herd boys etc. People who continue with their paid work while studying should be the major target of distance education.

Labour law policy makers should also include a clause in the law, which will force employers to encourage their employees to further their studies through distance.

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