

Perceptions of participants on the certificate course for distance education practitioners: Botswana Case Study

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Abstract

This study qualitatively examined through case study, how the certificate in distance education for practitioners (CDEP) offered by the University of South Africa (UNISA) has helped or hindered the development of skills amongst the group. Specifically the study

1. Explored the skills that practitioners have developed from the course
2. Explored the benefits of the course to practitioners and how these benefits have impacted their performance
3. Identified challenges that practitioners faced when participating in CDEP
4. Identify new ways that could be used for teaching young people in Open schooling

A case study enabled the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the practitioners' perceptions on the program thus determining its relevance and significance to their jobs in particular and their skills development in general. The findings of this study will inform both the Center for Continuing Education (CCE) and Botswana College of Open and Distance Education on the relevance of the course and whether their staff members should continue to take it. The findings will further inform the Botswana government in advancing its long term vision 2016 of "an educated, informed nation." The proposed study had thirty one participants some of which have completed the course while others are still registered and some dropped out. However, only thirteen were interviewed due to time constraints. The study is ongoing. Interviews lasted twenty to thirty minutes. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions. All interviews were done face-to-face. Data was analyzed through constant comparison methods. The preliminary findings of this study revealed four themes: poor course management, learner support services, relevance and desirability and lack of course completion monitoring.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is generally identified as all types of formal instruction that are conducted when teachers and learners are not located in the same place (Gilbert, 1995). For hundreds of years instructors have taught students across great distances via correspondence courses using printed materials. Increasing access to more students is a common reason given for providing instruction in a distance learning format. In its bid to increase access to higher education, the University of Botswana (UB) undertook to expand the number of part-time continuing education programs (diplomas and degree programs) and professional qualifications through distance education. These programs are offered through self-development, franchising, partnership arrangements with other universities, academic and professional institutions, interactive video and access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) driven partnerships (Shaping Our Future, 2004).

One of the initiatives taken by the UB to achieve the goal described earlier is staff development and training through the CDEP course in order to build human resource capacity that is required for the implementation of distance education programs. This initiative is to be achieved by making the Center for Continuing Education (CCE) of UB a leading center of excellence in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and continuing education towards prosperity. The other staff development strategy to supplement CDEP

is staff associations such as Distance Education Association of Southern African (DEASA) in order to learn from other ODL providers.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The delivery of CDEP is a collaborative initiative between the UNISA Institute for Continuing Education and DEASA. The DEASA member institutions from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region nominate members of staff to attend the course. The course addresses the main areas of open and distance education theory and practice. One of the expected outcomes of the course is that learners will apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes developed during the course to their work and community contexts.

UNISA has received financial support from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) for sponsoring participants of DEASA member institutions. The COL funding contributes 75% towards tuition fees while the 25% per each participant is paid by the participating DEASA institution. At the SADC regional level, participants come from DEASA member institutions such the Directorate of Distance Education at the University of Swaziland and the Emlalatini Development Center in Swaziland (EDC), the National University of Lesotho, Center for External Studies of the University of Namibia, UNISA, Technikon South Africa, CCE of the University of Botswana and Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL).

This one year foundation course is in a modular form. The learning materials comprise of five printed modules supported by audio cassette tapes as an instructional media supported by face to face sessions.

- Module 1: Adult Education and Adult Learning
- Module 2: Introduction to Distance Education
- Module 3: Good quality distance education study materials
- Module 4: Introduction to Open and Distance Learning (ODL)
- Module 5: Management and administration of Distance Education at a local level

The target group comprises all those who work as tutors, counselors, fieldworkers, administrative and record staff and regional/study learning center coordinators or facilitators.

CONTEXT OF STUDY

Design and Methods

This study used a qualitative case study approach. One of the many advantages of a case study approach is to be able to watch people in their own natural context and interact with them in their own languages, on their own terms (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996).

Population and sample

A purposeful sampling procedure (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003) was used to identify and select research participants involved in this study. The participants were practitioners who are currently registered for CDEP, some have completed the course while others dropped out of the course. The participants were identified from CCE/UB and BOCODOL. These were staff members who carry out various tasks in the CCE and BOCODOL. The course has been taken by academic staff members with Masters Qualifications

in their academic areas of specialization who join the CCE as program coordinators and learners support providers. It has also been taken by technical staff with degrees and diplomas in areas such as graphic design, supplies, administration and secretarial training.

A consent form was sent via email to all the participants inviting them to participate in the study as well as requesting their demographic information. There were thirteen participants. Initially about thirty participants were identified but due to time constraints, some of them had not been interviewed at the time of compiling this report. The sample included seven male and six female. Age of participants ranged from 33-50. Five had completed the course, three dropped out of the course and five were currently enrolled.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What motivated you to enroll in the CDEP?
2. Who sponsored you?
3. What skills have you learned from the course?
4. How do you use those skills in your work?
5. What challenges did you face during your study?
6. How could those challenges be overcome?
7. What academic support did you get from UNISA?
8. Did the course help you to think of ways of teaching young people in Open Schooling?
9. What could be the deterring factors for new employees to take this course?

Data Collection Procedures

First, contextual information was needed pertaining to the sites and the distance education course under review. This information was obtained by way of documents review. Systematic examinations of documents and other sources that provided relevant information on CDEP were carried out. Educational documents examined included brochures, newsletters, students' handbooks, scholarly papers and calendars. Personal documents included students' self-reflection papers.

Second, perceptual information was collected by way of individual face to face interviews. The information collected from the interviews shed light on perceptions surrounding the impact of skills learned in the course. Surveys provided demographic information.

The researcher prepared an interview protocol that consisted of semi-structured questions describing participation in CDEP. All interviews were done face to face. They were conducted in English. The interviews started with a brief explanation of the reason for the meeting. The following features of interview techniques were important in developing the interviews and protocols for this study:

- Purposive selection of the participants
- Participants have a way of expanding the question initially asked. This means that the questions asked were not limited to the ones prepared beforehand
- The interview method enables the researchers to establish personal rapport with the participants
- It offers a level of interaction contributing to the depths and richness of the information gathered
- With the interview method, "participants are representatives of the same experiences or knowledge; they are not selected because of their demographic reflection of the general population" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p.74).

A tape recorder was used to record the interviews. All the interviews were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was iterative process, beginning with the development of a coding scheme, extending into four broad analytic categories and culminating with thematically organized findings. Coding categories were developed and refined on an ongoing basis, drawing from interview transcripts. To analyze data from the interviews transcripts, the researcher used constant comparative method, borrowed from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). On this process, the researcher coded data, developed categories and compared emergent themes. Each interview was examined to find any similarities and differences of responses.

FINDINGS

This study yielded four emergent categories from the interviews: poor course management, learner support services, relevance and desirability and lack of course completion monitoring. Data is reported in the participants' own words.

Finding #1: Poor Course Management

Administrative challenges involved late distribution of course materials, poor management of assignments and lack of learner support. Of the thirteen participants, eight expressed disappointment that the course was not well-managed by the offering institution. The participants stated that they struggled to get relevant textbooks on time. The audio tapes were also not available. Below are some of the participants' comments:

"The challenges were mainly the material. We had to struggle to get relevant texts and again there were no audio tapes as indicated in the manual."

"...the course is very good with the exception of the fact that I think it's not well managed. It's not well managed in the sense that feedback doesn't come timely."

"The materials were incomplete; audio tapes that were supposed to be part of the material were not available..."we actually had to utilize our HR person to actually talk to them and then it was sent in an electronic version. But as for the audio, we never got them and you feel you might have missed some impressions from the audio."

The participants complained that they did not receive timely feedback and one of the participants received a wrong portfolio from the offering institution. He lamented, "My portfolio was typed and it was almost about 25 pages and I got a portfolio which was literally not mine, not my hand writing and I was quite disappointed when I looked at the achievement mark... 60% which I totally could not believe was my performance...when the institution gives you the wrong assignment, it's quite disappointing."

Lack of academic support from the offering institution also was raised as a serious concern. According to the participants, face to face contact was supposed to be part of the learner support services. Only one participant reported face to face contact with the tutor. The majority of the participants reported that they never met with their tutor until they completed the course. Here are some of their comments:

"I never got any face-to-face support."

"...there need to be one or two meetings where people come together and talk about the course to actually ensure that we understand why we are in this course and begin to see its benefit. We were just issued with study packets. We haven't met with the coordinators of the course."

Finding #2: Learner Support and learner support services

A key feature of distance education is the geographic separation of a teacher and learner. The “distances” facing learners include a range of socio-psychological factors that may impede learning or completion of the program. These are resources that learners can access in order to carry out the learning processes (Garrison & Baynton, 1987).

The responses of the majority of participants overwhelmingly pointed to learner support and learner support services as the course component that stood out for them. Nine participants acknowledged that the CDEP was beneficial to them since the majority of them came from various settings hence, needed orientation to redirect their skills to distance education mode of delivery. They commented:

“It helps ... to ground you-to help you understand that this is not a conventional set up. I thought it was more into learner support issues-to help learners progress in the course and also how you model the study materials.”

“Basically the management of Open and Distance learning and the other area of interest were ... learner support services-the skills of supporting learners.” “I gained the skills required to offer support in ODL. I appreciated that learners support is also embedded in the learning materials. Distance education learners need a lot of counseling since they are isolated from tutors and other learners.

Finding #3: Relevance and desirability

Many of the participants joined the CCE and BOCODOL with no knowledge and skills in open and distance education; yet they were expected to provide services as program coordinators, content reviewers, learners support, copy editors and graphic designers in the development and production of learning materials. Others such as the secretarial staff, supplies officers and administrators who dealt with materials production and distribution and kept records of assignments and other responsibilities had not met a distance learner before joining the two institutions. To many of the participants, this course has been an eye opener in that it provided them with knowledge and skills which have enabled them to provide services to distance learners and part time staff within the requirements of a distance learning environment. The course helped the participants to appreciate special circumstances that distant learners go through such as the challenges, discipline required, time management and other particular situations that someone could encounter when studying by distance. One participant summarized some of the knowledge and skills they learned from the course. He noted, “some of the skills were instructional design for distance education; analyzing the characteristics of distance education learners and also the support services within the distance education environment.”

Some more testimonies were:

“The portfolio takes into consideration your own reflection, introspection. In other words, you reflect on what you have been doing and to me I could transfer this to other areas.”

The program coordinator commented:

I joined the CCE/UB with no experience as far as distance education is concerned. I was the coordinator but only to discover that there is a lot to be done in distance education. As a coordinator of the Business program, I am accountable for many things to keep the program running. I was applying my business concepts but only to discover that I lacked some distance education concepts. I enrolled in the UNISA Certificate in Distance Education program. I learned many things: about Adult Education and learners. I now know that distance learners are adults ...therefore to be treated differently from the full-time learners. Distance learning materials need to take into consideration the fact that there are many things which affect distance learners.

The supplies officer noted:

The course was really an eye opener for me as I knew only a little about the organization of distance learning before and this has helped me to develop my knowledge and skills in the field of distance education. The course has enabled me to work harmoniously with other workers... particularly the students because they are my clients. As the supplies Officer at CCE/UB..my networking and inter-personal skills often facilitated timely printing and efficient and effective distribution of the study materials. The course has made me a team player who frequently consults with relevant authorities/offices in colleges or within the university in order to plan for future activities.

The personal secretary remarked:

I found the course as a first hand tool for everybody who wishes or works within distance education. It helped me a lot even with the communications skills in assisting the learners. I have come to know the problems likely to be encountered by distant learners. I have come to know how learners can be supported...the course has really broadened my understanding of distance education.

Some questions suggested by the assessment manager for any distance institution planning to embark on a distance education course/program. "When you start a course, what are the materials needed? Can you ensure that they are procured and packaged accordingly and delivered?" With regard to the administration of assignments, the manager recommended a clear record keeping of when the assignments are received, marked and dispatched back to the learners.

Finding #4: Lack of course completion monitoring

Monitoring of course completion by receiving institutions was lacking. The two receiving institutions do not monitor completion of the course by practitioners even though they sponsor them for the course. Some practitioners have registered for the course but never completed it. Even though the institutions spent money on tuition fees, there is no return on investments. When asked why they did not complete the course, some participants noted:

"...Even the institution is relaxed because I don't remember anybody asking me if I have finished or not."

"We are busy right now."

If receiving institutions continue to ignore monitoring of course completion, CDEP would not benefit these institutions as it was intended.

CONCLUSION

This study qualitatively examined through case study the skills that practitioners developed from CDEP and how they were applying these skills in their jobs. The study also identified challenges that practitioners faced when taking the course. The four emergent themes were poor management of the course, the importance of learner support services in distance education, relevance and desirability of the course and lack of course completion. The descriptive results of this study indicated that overall the practitioners positively perceived the course to be beneficial to them. The participants were motivated to do the course because their institutions paid tuition fees for them.

The practitioners recommended that any institution planning to offer a distance education program/course should ensure that the following are in place:

- The course/program is well planned.
- Materials are delivered on time to the learners;
- Feedback is given timely to learners;
- Learner support services well in place; tutors are available and orientation is done before the course starts to give the learners a road map.

In this course, some participants were disillusioned because they neither received the audio tapes nor met with the tutor for this course.

Good management of assignments in distance education is crucial. Learners are not only discouraged when they do not receive feedback on time but they are also disgruntled when they receive wrong assignments from the offering institution. This could lead to a high dropout rate from the course. Course administrators must be readily accessible to learners to address their queries, concerns and any related matters. One of the participants lost hope when he tried in vain to contact the administrator regarding a wrong assignment. He said, "I got the portfolio which was literally not mine...I have been trying to get the person on line. I am failing... I can't get them on email, they are not responding on their mobiles. So I literally gave up."

In conclusion, the CDEP has provided developmental skills to all the participants who completed the course and they recommended it for all new employees in their respective institutions.

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