

National ODL Policy Development for Namibia

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUALISATION

Open and Distance Learning in Namibia

Even before independence in 1990, it was recognised that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has the potential to address Namibia's educational and training needs in a cost-effective manner. ODL has the flexibility to accommodate varying levels of enrolment and the capacity to reach out to all corners of the country.

In the Namibian public sector, there are four institutions which provide ODL programmes: the Centre for External Studies at the University of Namibia (UNAM-CES), the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning at the Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN-COLL), the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) and the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED). Over the last eight years, these publicly-funded ODL institutions have been working together with the Ministry of Education to coordinate their activities through the establishment of a national trust, known as the Namibian Open Learning Network Trust (NOLNet).

Since its establishment in July 2001, NOLNet has been striving to enhance opportunities for supported, independent learning for adults and young people through a framework of collaborative management of open learning centres in terms of a legal agreement between publicly-funded ODL institutions. NOLNet's activities include institutional capacity-building; establishment and expansion of a national network of open learning centres; supporting e-learning initiatives to supplement existing ODL print-based programmes; and the development of radio programmes and audio-visual material.

Rationale and Development of a Policy for Open and Distance Learning

In reaffirming that ODL has great potential to promote the goals of Education for All in Namibia and contribute greatly to the development of a knowledge-based economy, a national ODL policy was deemed to be essential. As such, the impetus to develop an ODL policy followed NOLNet's organisation of the 2005 National Conference on *Towards Education for All: The Critical Role of Open and Distance Learning in National Development*. The key outcomes of the conference led to the drawing up of NOLNet's 2005 Communiqué, entitled the *Windhoek Declaration on Open and Distance Learning*, which set out an agenda for the future of ODL in Namibia and asked the Government for a clear commitment to this agenda. The Cabinet, through the Ministry of Education, responded to the *Windhoek Declaration* with an invitation to NOLNet to develop an ODL Policy for Namibia. Accordingly NOLNet, with financial support from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) engaged a group of international consultants to help it in the process of drawing up a draft policy and options for implementation. A draft policy paper was discussed at a consultative seminar, held in Windhoek in October 2007. Following this seminar, which brought together the vast majority of key stakeholders in ODL, the draft policy was refined for further consultation with stakeholders.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

A participative approach was followed during the development process of the National Policy for Open and Distance Learning in Namibia. This approach was of cardinal importance to ensure that stakeholders at all levels influence and share control over the development process and to generate a sense of ownership. With financial assistance from COL, consultants from the Centre for Education Research and Development (CERD) were contracted to assist with the development of the policy. A local core team consisting of officials from the publicly funded ODL institutions and the education fraternity oversaw the work of the consultants to ensure that a practical and relevant policy is developed. An initial meeting between the consultants and the core team took place to spell out the modalities and to develop an action plan for the pre-consultative seminar activities. The consultative process was carried out in three phases.

Institutional Audit, Policy Review and Consultation with Key Stakeholders

The initial stage of the consultative process focussed on institutional audits to assess the capacity of the institutions in the delivery of quality distance education programmes. The audit covered all publicly funded and private ODL institutions as well as other relevant stakeholders in the education sector. In addition, existing policies and government legislation were reviewed and the experiences of other African countries were drawn upon.

Policy Development Stage

The second phase of the policy development process entailed the development of the draft policy by the consultants in consultation with the core team. Areas for inclusion in the draft policy were agreed upon, including the consideration of options for its implementation.

Consultative Seminar

The final stage in the consultation process was to engage the stakeholders at the consultative seminar which was aimed at refining the draft policy. The seminar facilitated by the consultants highlighted the key policy issues and also identified gaps for further refinement of the policy. Following the consultative seminar, the consultants, in collaboration with the core team, refined the policy and the document was subsequently submitted to NOLNet for further discussion at the Management Committee and Board of Trustees levels.

KEY POLICY ISSUES

The ODL policy for Namibia is underpinned by nine key issues which are as follows: values, purposes and principles; integration and blended learning approaches; human resources implications of ODL and blended learning; credit accumulation, recognition of prior learning, and credit transfer; media and technology; learner support; training, research and development; quality assurance; and cost and financing of ODL.

Values, Purpose and Principles

The policy recognises that distance education is widely used to address education and training needs of people everywhere and that the use of distance education methods and the adoption of open learning approaches generally support a set of key values: accessibility, equity, equality, diversity, inclusiveness, flexibility, affordability, responsiveness, pro-poor strategies and improved quality. Furthermore, the policy emphasises a number of principles which need to be considered in the planning and delivery of ODL programmes and projects, including sustainability, replacement of content and courses, collaborative frameworks and competition, integration and openness.

Integration and Blended Learning Approaches

Based on the principle of integration, the policy makes the case that both traditional face-to-face and ODL approaches to the provision of education should normally be regarded as substitutable. The design and delivery of programmes should be attuned to the needs of learners, industry and national development. The policy, therefore, encourages the use of blended learning approaches.

Human Resources Implications of ODL and Blended Learning

In ODL, there is commonly a division of labour between those who develop materials and those who deliver the course, depending on student numbers. Generally, a distinction is drawn between core staff who have a contract of service (permanent or short-term) and peripheral staff who have a contract for service (part-time staff). The division of labour in this way can easily be construed as a deskilling of the traditional rounded role of the academic, however others see an opportunity for professionalisation and skilling in new areas such as media development and presentation skills.

Credit Accumulation, Recognition of Prior Learning and Credit Transfer

The policy advocates for credit accumulation and transfer arrangements within and across institutions that take account of the prior learning undertaken by learners, subject to the protection of academic standards and the quality of awards. The Namibia Qualifications Framework (NQF), established under the auspices of the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), already facilitates credit accumulation, transfer and articulation of qualifications in the country. However, a set of complex issues still needs to be addressed in this process to ensure that accumulated learning experiences (and credit points) can be carried forward in order for each learner in the country to ultimately have a lifelong learning portfolio. The policy mandates NOLNet together with ODL providers to work with the NQA and the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) to achieve this objective.

Media and Technology

The choice of media and technology should be determined primarily by academic judgments regarding the best way of teaching a particular topic. The policy encourages course designers and those responsible for buying programmes to consider a number of factors when deciding on the use of appropriate media and technology, including the following: access, teaching and learning, usability, organisational issues, maintainability, sustainability and cost.

Learner Support

A key factor in learner success in ODL programmes is the provision of learner support services. The policy encourages providers of ODL to carefully consider the scope and nature of the learner support services offered having regard to the characteristics of the target audience, the means of delivery, the cost implication of services, and the likely benefits for learners – particularly in keeping drop-out rates low. Furthermore, providers need to find ways to support learners financially.

The importance of a network of local learning centres as part of a wider learner support strategy is emphasised. Institutions are encouraged, as part of the NOLNet initiative and through other means, to collaborate in this regard in order to provide a range of integrated services across a large number of programmes and avoid duplication and waste.

Training, Research and Development

ODL practice should be enhanced in the light of experience and the development of new opportunities as new technologies emerge. Staff in ODL will also need to develop a range of skills appropriate to ODL practice. The policy, therefore, recognises the importance of training and staff

development and the benefits to be derived, in terms of cost efficiencies, of shared innovation and development, shared research and shared training and staff development.

ODL practitioners are encouraged to work together and also with NOLNet in developing shared research, training and development programmes and to participate in professional organisations like the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA). Support is pledged by the Government to develop practitioner-led research and development and a vehicle, such as a practitioner newsletter, for the dissemination of research findings and good practice.

Quality Assurance

International best practice in ODL recognises that, arising from the essential separation of the learner from the teacher, and the use of media and technologies to bridge the gap of the distance between the learner and the teacher, the functions and processes in ODL are radically different from those found in traditional face-to-face education and training. Quality assurance initiatives in ODL should focus, amongst others, on the materials, teaching and learning processes, support services, logistics system and the quality of providers.

The policy directs NOLNet and individual providers to work with the NCHE in the development of appropriate quality assurance mechanisms for tertiary level higher education by ODL means. These mechanisms should be extended through NOLNet to cover non-tertiary level ODL provision as well.

Consumer protection against disreputable ODL providers is also addressed and specific strategies are outlined in the policy, i.e. formal regulation of the activities of ODL providers through relevant Quality Assurance bodies and the provision of advice to would-be learners on the standing of overseas providers offering study programmes to learners in Namibia.

Cost and Financing of ODL

The policy outlines critical issues with regard to the cost and financing of ODL. This is based on the notion that distance education has a different cost structure to traditional education and that each technology used in distance education has a different cost structure. Cost structures reflect the balance of committed versus flexible costs in a system – that is, the balance between those committed costs that have been spent in order to provide a capacity, whether the capacity is used or not, and the flexible costs that are paid for only in amounts used. In addition to committed and flexible costs, all cost structures also embrace costs related to the provision of capacity that cannot easily be attributed to particular products and services (referred to as indirect [common] costs), and other indirect costs (business sustaining) that are entirely independent of the decisions to provide a production or service capacity, but rather, sustain the organisation in being.

The policy highlights the implications of the above cost structure for the way in which ODL institutions ought to be funded. Specific pointers are given for the NCHE to consider in the process of reviewing the funding of tertiary education in Namibia.

THE OPTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

There were two main organisational options proposed, one retaining and developing the status quo and the other, creating a new institution, the Open University of Namibia.

Maintaining the Status Quo

This option involves maintaining ODL organisations as they are now, but strengthening the role of NOLNet in several areas such as the coordination of activities at local centres, sharing training, and conducting research and development. The challenge is for the dual mode institutions to

incorporate ODL fully into their organisational cultures and structures so that the needs of ODL students are recognised and met.

Creating the Open University of Namibia

This option involves closing the ODL units in the three dual mode institutions and combining them with NAMCOL, which offers secondary and some tertiary level courses. NAMCOL has the basic infrastructure to accommodate the Open University of Namibia, but would require strengthening in order to accommodate the new mandate. The dual mode institutions could benefit from such an arrangement by selling existing programmes and materials or developing materials and programmes on a contractual basis to the Open University.

Within the structure of the Open University, desegregation of the value chain into seven different options is possible. Programme development, programme production and distribution, learner admission, learner support, examination and certification, can be done in-house or out-sourced in different combinations to best meet the needs of Namibia, learners and the Open University of Namibia.

The Open University of Namibia was unanimously found by all stakeholders to be the preferred option.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Even though the ODL policy is still at the draft stage some important lessons have been learned as follows:

1. The ODL policy is a critical requirement for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the education sector in the country and it must enhance the quality of the lives of Namibians by promoting economic growth with equity.
2. Ownership of the process and product is a vital component of the policy development process. During the seminar, participants were very passionate about developing a user-friendly policy that defines the core values and the purposes of ODL in the country. They also requested that assessment and the philosophy of assessment be made part of the policy, because these have a bearing on accreditation and awarding of qualifications, teaching standards and the credibility of programmes and institutions.
3. Participation is a process and not just an activity. Enabling stakeholders to fully participate in the process and taking into account their different needs is very important from the start.
4. Collaborative partnership is an important undertaking in the development of a national policy. Working together with the consultants and as ODL institutions on a project of national importance has been beneficial to all. Even though the partner institutions have different institutional cultures, through developing this policy, they came to realise that having an organised and credible ODL system in the country is a better unifying element. During the consultative seminar, participants came out of their institutional cocoons and developed a policy that is appropriate for the country and not a policy that maintains institutional comfort zones.
5. During the drafting process and at the consultative seminar, quality assurance mechanisms were emphasised by all stakeholders and it was agreed that quality assurance issues should be built into the policy. Participants wanted the commitment to quality to be at the heart of the policy because ODL students deserve programmes and services of high quality. In practical terms it was recognised that this is the only way of

sustaining confidence in open and distance learning and in the overall education and training system of the country.

6. It was necessary to be pragmatic, realistic and build on strengths and past experiences as institutions and as a country. Even though the institutions have developed a strong ODL system in the country, it is only through policy that better programmes and services are developed. Thus, the policy development process presented an opportunity for ODL to receive the recognition it deserves, recognising that mechanisms of offering high quality and relevant ODL programmes had to be set at national level. This enables ODL institutions in the country to adhere to the quality criteria set and ensure that they are measured against the same criteria. Participants therefore wanted a policy that provides a regulatory framework for private and out of country ODL providers, because Namibia has a high number of degree milling and fly-by-night ODL institutions.
7. Managing the process and sustaining the gains requires forward thinking. In order to ensure the ODL policy does not just become a nice booklet, collecting dust on shelves, an implementation strategy is part of the policy. The NOLNet Board recommended that a thorough cost analysis based on the options for implementation be done. Furthermore, during the consultative seminar, participants recommended the ODL policy to recognise other policies that might assist in creating collaborative avenues for its full implementation, policies such as the ICT policy for education and training and the telecommunication policy.
8. Sustaining the process to completion required two things: involving the right mix of stakeholders and bringing all stakeholders on board and keeping them informed throughout the development process. Even though the partner institutions were represented at the Consultative Seminar, the NOLNet Board recommended the policy to be distributed to the four institutions for further scrutiny and comments. These comments would be workshopped in another half day seminar planned to take place sometime in May 2008.

CONCLUSION

Developing an ODL policy for a small country with a population of only 2 million and limited resources has been challenging. However, the process has shown that it is possible to develop a new and separate ODL institution that can be developed gradually from existing institutions and resources available in the country. Although consultations with the many stakeholders has made the process lengthy and time consuming, it was necessary to garner as much support as possible from all stakeholders. It is, however, recognised that there might be dual mode institutions that may resist implementing this policy and may not be prepared to lose their ODL units. After all institutions are consulted, the policy with all comments, including agreements and objections would be sent to the Minister for final decision.