

The role of open schooling in improving the quality of life of young Namibians

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ABSTRACT

An effective education and training system is fundamental to generate skills and knowledge that are critical for any country to prosper and to compete in international markets. In the absence of an education system that caters for the various sectors of the society, it is always difficult for the country to create employment, reduce poverty and to attain equitable social development. A pressing challenge for Namibia is to break the bottleneck of inadequate places at senior secondary level. Below 50% of learners completing the Junior Secondary phase each year are able to proceed to Senior Secondary Schools. The best way of addressing this challenge was the establishment of the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) through an Act of Parliament in 1997. The College has been mandated to increase access by providing educational opportunities to adults and out-of-school youth who are unable to attend traditional schools.

Since its inception in 1997, the College has been successful in providing education to over two hundred and seventy three thousand (273,000) learners. Over the years, the College was faced with the challenge of assessing its effectiveness in contributing to the supply of qualified, productive and competitive members of the labour force for the country. To examine its contribution to the national development goals, the College commissioned a tracer study in 2006 on former learners who studied for the exit level of secondary education between 1999 and 2001. The study confirmed indeed that NAMCOL was making a significant contribution to its learners by providing opportunities to improve on their grades in order to pursue further studies or to seek employment.

This paper will present the results from the tracer study to show what contribution Open Schooling makes in Namibia in improving the quality of life of many young Namibians and also to dispel the myth that open and distance learning is inferior.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Namibian government recognises the importance of education in its endeavour to address national development goals. Education is therefore regarded as the first national priority amongst the many other priorities. Despite the government's commitment to education, the current secondary school education is inadequate both to effectively support development goals and to provide access to education for some disadvantaged groups. In its efforts to address the expansion of education provision at secondary school level and also to ensure education for all its citizens, the Government of Namibia, by an Act of Parliament, established the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) with the mandate to provide learning opportunities for adults and out-of-school youth. Through this mandate, since its inception, the College has offered alternative secondary education for those who are unable to continue with formal secondary education.

Poor public perception about open and distance learning is one of the challenges the College is confronted with. The perception is that open and distance learning systems are inferior and not as good as conventional schooling. Overall performance of learners, as well as future career and employment opportunities of learners will eventually change the general public perceptions about NAMCOL. In order to address this, there was a need to develop a strategy of informing and educating the public, politicians and high profile people about the role of the College. Such marketing and information sharing campaign could use success stories of the former learners who have gone through the College and who are doing well somewhere or who have pursued further studies through institutions of higher learning.

In order to challenge the negative perception of ODL, a tracer study was commissioned in 2006 to find out what former learners who enrolled with the College did after they completed subjects at senior secondary level. Did they continue on to higher education? Are they employed? Have their experiences at NAMCOL assisted them in their current position? These were some of the questions posed and answered. The study focused on Grade 12 learners who registered with the College between the years 1999 – 2001.

The tracer study capitalised on work that was done during 2004 when the International Research Foundation for Open Learning (IRFOL) invited NAMCOL to make use of available funds to develop a research proposal. This proposal was successfully submitted to the Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building Facility (ISCBF) in the Ministry of Education for funding. IRFOL tendered to assist NAMCOL with the project and appointed one of its staff members to conduct the research together with NAMCOL. The results of this study are presented in this paper.

2. THE TRACER STUDY

2.1 Objectives of the tracer study

The objectives of the study were to establish the contribution the College has made to its former learners in finding employment or gaining entry to institutions of higher learning, as well as to view the perceptions of learners on the success of its programme offering in order to determine the areas for improvement. Furthermore, the study aimed to establish the relevance of the alternative secondary education programme to learners in furthering their career possibilities or job opportunities.

2.2 Methodology

Learners who study at the Senior Secondary level at NAMCOL have three outcomes after completing their studies. They can enroll for further studies at another institution, they can find employment or remain unemployed. This study was aimed at establishing the whereabouts of learners from all three categories. The following resource tools were used to collect data from the targeted population.

- **Questionnaires** were deposited at all NAMCOL Centres and all Higher Education Institutions for the volunteering sample. Data collection points were established at all of the identified centres and institutions.
- The Directorate of National Examinations and Assessment provided information from their **database** on the number of part-time learners who registered for examinations and their outcomes. In most cases, part-time learners are NAMCOL learners.
- **Interviews** were conducted with a sample from the respondents and others were traced by word of mouth or from contact details on completed questionnaires.

A database was set up and a coding manual was devised for the data entry of the completed questionnaires. The data from the questionnaires were entered into an EXCEL database for analysis.

2.3 Findings

The total number of completed questionnaires was 478; and from that sample, 75 learners were interviewed in depth. The number is lower than originally anticipated. Some of the reasons for the low number include the unwillingness of former learners to come forward to take part in the study, the short time frame of the research, and the limited budget for the research.

The data below is a reflection of both the questionnaires and in-depth interviews conducted with former NAMCOL learners. The aim of the interviews was to gather detailed information about their experiences at NAMCOL and feedback about the quality of the materials, teaching, and administrative services. The answers from the questionnaires show that the majority (95%) of learners enrolled in NAMCOL to improve their grades or "points" at Grade 12. Significantly, a few respondents discussed how their secondary education was disrupted during the liberation struggle and that NAMCOL provided the only opportunity for them to continue their secondary education because they were too old to return to formal or conventional school.

2.3.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Females comprised 76% of the tracer study sample and males 24%. This proportion is fairly consistent with overall gender distribution of learners enrolled for the secondary education programme at the College. Three quarters of NAMCOL's students enrolled in Grade 12 are female.

The study showed a wide age range of learners with the highest concentration being in the age range of 26 – 30 years. It is worth noting that the age range reflects the learners current ages and not the ages they were when they enrolled with the College. The majority would have been between 20 – 25 years when they were enrolled. The age distribution of the majority of learners enrolled with the College on an annual basis is between 19 – 29 (NAMCOL 2007).

Prior to 2003, NAMCOL offered a dual mode of study which consisted of distance education and face-to-face modes of study. The study revealed that 46% of the respondents had enrolled for the distance education mode and 48% enrolled for the face-to-face mode. A small portion of learners (6%) opted to take some subjects on face-to-face and by distance.

The study revealed some very important and significant data which provided the foundation for further empirical and evidence-based research at NAMCOL. Although the sample was small, it was consistent and representative of the broader findings in the NAMCOL Statistical Digests of 1999-2001 (for example, the learner profile- gender, age and region; the percentages of learners enrolled in the two distinct modes of learning; and the most popular subjects). The data confirms that NAMCOL is making a necessary contribution to its learners by providing them with an opportunity to improve their grades or points in specific subjects.

2.3.2 Further Studies

The study aimed at establishing whether learners managed to enter institutions of higher learning to improve their qualification beyond secondary education. This section presents data on further qualifications of former learners and the institutions where they were enrolled.

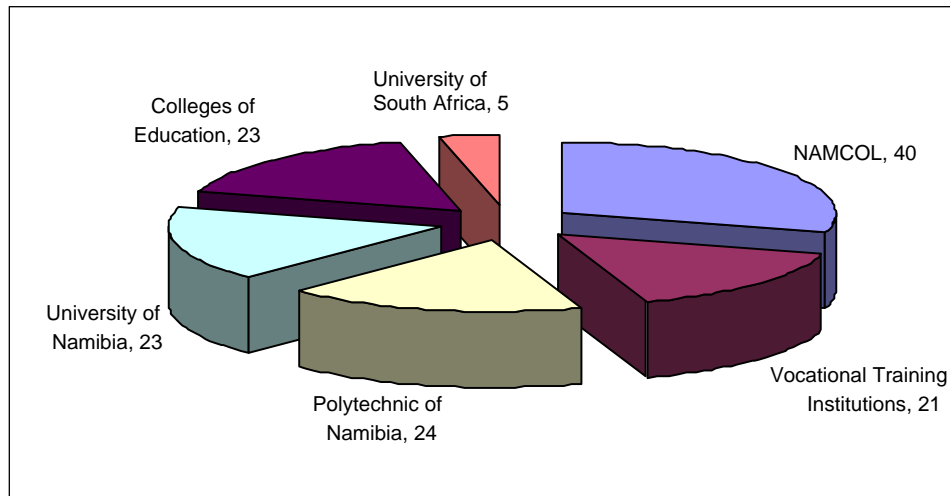
The majority of the sample did not progress beyond Grade 12; however a significant group reached the diploma level. This slow progression to tertiary education creates an excellent opportunity for NAMCOL to diversify its programme offering to retain these learners. The table below indicates that there is specific opportunity for NAMCOL to offer vocational courses and other tertiary certificate and diploma level courses.

Table 1: Highest Qualification achieved by sample of learners

Highest Qualification	Number of Learners
Grade 12	351
Vocational	14
Tertiary Certificate	25
Diploma	40
Degree	6

Figure 1 below presents data on the institutions where former learners were enrolled for further education. At the time of the study, 39% of the sample was enrolled in further education.

Figure 1: Institutions of Enrolment



The study showed that learners were accepted at a variety of institutions of higher learning with different entry requirements. Some of them studied at the University of Namibia and others at the University of South Africa, which is a distance education institution. However, a larger portion of this group enrolled at NAMCOL for further studies. Apart from the secondary education programmes, the College offers professional and vocational programmes, in the fields of community development, youth development, local government administration as well as a variety of computer literacy programmes. It is evident from the study that former learners opted for a whole range of career fields, including teaching, human resources management, computer studies, business administration and HIV/Aids counseling.

One of the main reasons the former learners gave for not studying further is the lack of funding. Only 13% of those who did enroll for further studies got funding from other sources than themselves or their families.

The following remarks by former learners highlight the significant contribution that NAMCOL has made in improving grades and assisting in securing places in higher education:

"I had less points in English and after attending NAMCOL I upgraded and passed the subject. Luckily, I qualified to go on to college."

"Qualifications helped me to get to UNAM and then get employment"

"I did all my subjects at NAMCOL which enabled me to get accepted for further studies at Polytechnic of Namibia."

It is clear from these direct quotes that NAMCOL contributed significantly in securing access of former learners to higher education.

2.3.3 Employment Status

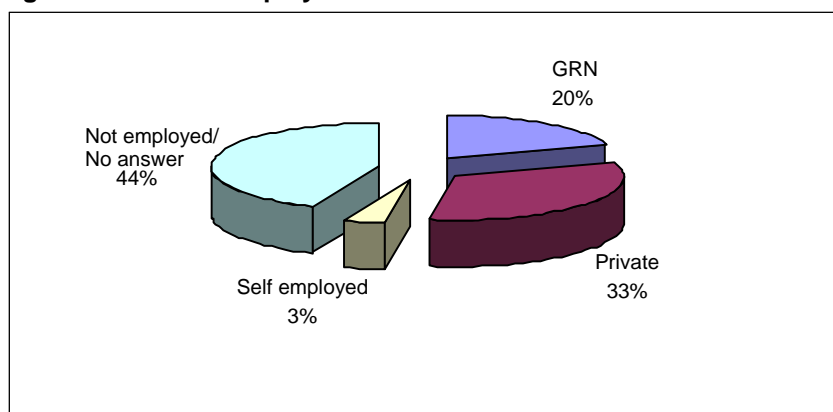
According to the 2001 Population and Housing Census, Namibia has an unemployment rate of 31% (National Planning Commission 2003). The 2000 Labour Force Survey indicated that most of the unemployed (32%) have been without a job for more than two years. The majority of the first time job seekers (39.8%) have attained junior secondary education followed by primary education (30.4%). A higher number of the first time job seekers (38.9%) were between the age group of 20 – 29 years (Ministry of Labour and Child Welfare 2005, p.3). This data is consistent

with NAMCOL's learner profile for the secondary education programme since the majority of learners are unemployed and in the age bracket of 19 – 29 years (NAMCOL 2007). This profile of the learners places a huge responsibility on NAMCOL to provide learners with skills and knowledge to be able to compete in the job market.

The study showed that 56% of the sample was employed whereas 41% were unemployed and 3% did not respond. The unemployed figure does not take into account that some of the learners who were 'unemployed' were engaged in further education. In the total sample, 44% worked full time and 12% were employed part time.

The chart below shows that 20% were employed by the government, 33% in the private sector and 3% were self-employed.

Figure 2: Place of Employment



It is evident from the study that a low percentage of learners were self-employed, therefore, the College should implement programmes that secure roots into self sustainable livelihoods for the youth.

On the question whether NAMCOL did help in finding employment, the following responses were received:

One learner responded, "The IGCSE I got from NAMCOL did convince my employer that I was worth the job".

Another responded, "My enrollment and qualification that I obtained at NAMCOL contributed to my understanding and boosted my self-esteem".

A self employed businesswoman offered this remark, "As a businesswoman, I believe that the knowledge I gained with IGCSE business studies in NAMCOL is helping me a lot in my current business"

It is clear from these quotes that the respondents were pleased with the qualifications they obtained at NAMCOL.

2.3.4 Support Systems

The success of any distance education institution depends on the quality of its learner support, course materials and its logistic systems. A recent study on NAMCOL by the Commonwealth of Learning indicated that its management and logistical systems are well-defined and function well. The study further revealed that the course material are of good to excellent quality, while the

College has room for improvement in the effectiveness of its learner support system (Rumble & Koul 2007).

The tracer study revealed the following about the College's support systems:

Accessibility

Accessibility to the college was not a significant problem for most respondents; however those living in more remote rural areas experienced greater difficulty in attending the contact sessions because of the lack of transport and the distance to the study centres.

Quality of Materials

Overall the quality of the material was good. Some of the respondents remarked that they had problems understanding the accent on listening materials. Only 5% of the sample thought the materials were of poor quality, biology was specifically mentioned in this instance.

Quality of teaching

There were mixed views about the quality of teaching. 72% of the sample was pleased with the quality of teaching whereas 28% thought the teaching could have been improved. The questionnaire did not factor in the regional differences and the varied levels of teachers qualifications. Many of the respondents would have liked to have more face-to-face teaching.

Logistical Support

Overall, the learners were pleased with the support they received from the administration. 78% thought the quality of administrative support was good, but some respondents experienced difficulties in receiving materials and their assignments on time.

2.4 Limitations of the Study

Although the College enrolled more than ten thousand Grade 12 learners over the three year period, only four hundred and seventy eight former learners could be traced. If more time and funding were allocated to undertake a larger and more intensive tracer study, the research could have ensured a more representative sample. This low sample can be attributed to the following factors:

2.4.1 Time Frame: The original time frame for the research was too short. Dates of the original research design had to be revised in order to capture more learners and to acquire an acceptable sample.

2.4.2 Tertiary Institutions: Locating former NAMCOL learners in tertiary education and higher educational institutions was a daunting and difficult task due to data protection policies at the institutions.

2.4.3 Database: Although this group of former learners were on NAMCOL's old database (prior to 2003), their addresses and contact details were out of date, which made it difficult to trace them.

2.4.4 Suspicion of Former Learners: Even though the tracer study was advertised extensively throughout the country, former learners were suspicious of the research and wanted to know why they were being targeted.

2.5 Recommendations

This study has laid the foundation for further tracer research. Therefore, NAMCOL should continue tracing learners from other years in order to compare and contrast the similarities and differences with the initial tracer study. The challenges of undertaking a tracer study have been identified and it is desirable to build upon the lessons learned.

In addition, it is imperative to capture as much information on each learner and to create a new field in the current database of former learners and keep track of their contact details.

3. CONCLUSION

This tracer was the first of its kind to be conducted by the College. In spite of the limitations associated with this study, the results revealed positive and beneficial impact to more than fifty percent of this sample of former learners. A follow up study with a more representative sample would inform the College on the impact it has made to thousands of learners who could not be accommodated through the formal system. The positive outcomes of a more representative study would dispel the myth that open and distance learning is inferior. Open schooling should be regarded as a first choice for learners, especially after the junior secondary phase. Providers of open schooling programmes have the responsibility of ensuring that the quality of such programmes and support systems exceeds the quality in conventional schools.

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