

## **Open and Distance Education in Namibia: Students' Perceptions and Quality Dimensions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Higher education institutions in Namibia are mandated by various acts of Parliament to provide higher education and to enhance further training and continuous education to Namibian citizens. This entails providing quality education through teaching, research and advisory services with a view to develop a competitive human resources base capable of driving public and private institutions towards economic growth and improved quality of life. Institutions such as the University of Namibia and the Polytechnic of Namibia established open and distance education centres to meet the educational needs of citizens who could not access the conventional learning routes. The research paper examined the institutions' viability of fulfilling the higher education mandate of providing quality distance education to students. Following a qualitative approach, 20 distance education students under the Centre for External Studies (CES) at the University of Namibia, Zambezi region were purposively sampled to complete semi structured questionnaires and also to partake in focused group interviews. Reference to documentary evidence was also undertaken to validate findings on the quality of distance education provision. Despite the increased number of distance learners, evidence suggests that there is poor resource allocation and little attention given to distance learners' engagement compared to conventional fulltime learners.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Distance education, Quality, Students Perceptions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Distance education is a fast growing field at most levels of education covering a wide range of programmes from correspondence tuition, simple integration of ICT, to complete e-learning coaching and learning models (Bates, 2005). Its delivery has made evident its capabilities to reorganize the learning process with alternative and creative ways. Open and distance education offers its participants the necessary knowledge and skills to survive and grow in the knowledge economy (European Commission, 2010). It is against this background that Namibian tertiary and higher education institutions have put in place mechanisms and processes to fulfil their mandate of providing quality higher education and lifelong learning opportunities through various modes of learning such as open and distance education (ODE). Distance education programs have been viewed as complimentary to the Ministry of Education's goal of engendering a culture of lifelong learning among citizens outside the conventional education system. This paper evaluated the quality provision of higher distance education focusing on students' perceptions and experiences of service delivery in semi-urban and rural areas of Namibia, under the auspices of the Centre for External Studies (CES) at the University of Namibia (University of Namibia, 2011).

## **BACKGROUND**

Immediately after Namibia gained independence in 1990, the Government of the Republic of Namibia enacted constitutional provisions to allow previously disadvantaged Namibians to have free access to basic education and that all persons shall have the right to education (Namibia Ministry of Education, Culture & Training, 1993; Namibia Supreme Court, 1990).

Higher education in Namibia has been identified as one of the driving forces for realising the objectives of Vision 2030, which aims to transform Namibia into a knowledge-based economy (National Planning Commission Secretariat, 2004). Namibia has a relatively small population of about 2 million inhabitants and is sparsely populated with the majority of people dwelling in semi-urban and rural areas of the country. Distance education provision therefore became a critical factor particularly for areas until now unreached by the conventional education system or for professionals who needed to up skill themselves outside the confines of fulltime education. To effectively implement Open and Distance Learning (ODL) activities at both pre-tertiary and tertiary levels, publicly funded institutions were constituted to provide a variety of relevant programmes. These institutions comprised of the Centre for External Studies (CES) at the University of Namibia, the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) at the Polytechnic of Namibia and the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL). Students at tertiary and higher education centres comprise of people who, for various reasons cannot study full time or live and work far away from conventional education institutions (Centre for External Studies CES, 2014).

Through various acts of parliament such as The Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN) Act of 1995 and the University of Namibia (UNAM) Act of 1992, the government mandated these institutions to provide quality higher education through teaching, research and advisory services with a view to produce productive and competitive human resources capable of driving public and private institutions towards knowledge-based economy economic growth and improved quality of life.

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION PROVISION**

As stated above Namibia has three major distance education providers. The University of Namibia through its Centre for External Studies (CES) and the Polytechnic of Namibia through the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) which provide more access and equity to tertiary and higher education students from diverse educational needs and backgrounds. Most courses from these institutions are designed to meet the needs of students through flexible approaches which combine study and work experience blended in distance learning methodologies. The qualifications offered through the open and distance learning mode, include certificates, diplomas and degrees in various fields (Möwes, 2008). As open and distance learning divisions of their respective institutions, CES and COLL strive to become leading distance education providers in Namibia and beyond by enabling students to achieve their full potential through accessible, innovative and flexible learning.

At a pre-tertiary level the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) which was established by an Act of Parliament (Act 1 of 1997) provides education opportunities for adults and youth who dropped out of school. The College's services can be accessed throughout the whole of Namibia (South African Institute for Distance Education [SAIDE], 2005). For the purposes of this study the focus has been limited to higher distance education students.

## **Growth in Distance Education**

Over the last thirteen years the number of students enrolling in distance education programmes has risen by more than a third. Recent records show that CES for example had an intake of close to 4000 students compared to 2264 in 1998 (CES, 2014). To meet quality demands from the increasing student population, the centre created three major departments, that is, Materials Development/Instructional Design, Students Support services and the Administrative wing. There are ten regional centres across the country run by CES, which seek to provide student support at a more local level. Coupled with the rising student numbers over the years, CES records show that the level of students' retention and academic performance and course completion has also gradually improved.

## **Education Instruction**

Like most parts of Africa, the main medium of instruction in distance education courses is still printed materials. Due to the availability of local centres students in Namibia are also encouraged to attend weekend tutorials to supplement their learning through contact sessions. In some programmes students are provided facilities such as audio, audio-vision, video conferencing and telephone tutorials. As noted earlier, such modes of study enable students to access education anywhere in the country and beyond. It is noted that these medium of instruction are only accessible to students after full registration and having committed themselves to the payment of appropriate study fees. Further study materials such as textbooks can be accessed through libraries or purchased by students where necessary.

## **Support Services**

Most distance education providers are mindful of the challenges under which most of their students study, hence the need to design materials appropriately and to provide academic support to enable students to complete their study programmes. Also critical in the support of students has been the provision of tutors to facilitate learning and provide timely feedback to students' progress. Students who find themselves in difficulty at any given time during their study are advised to consult their module tutors for help (CES, 2014). It is noted that students tend to be more critical of the support services departments since this area constitute much of their interaction with the institutions and thus form their perceptions on quality provision or lack thereof.

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE**

There is a global realisation that distance education opens new alternatives for learning for those children and adults who do not have access to basic education. It is a functioning and independent pedagogical model which is more flexible than the conventional education model which is usually premised on rigidity. Nevertheless, there still exists a patchy and lukewarm incorporation of distance education as a complementing element to conventional fulltime education (European Commission, 2010).

According to UNESCO (2002), distance education (DE) provision is probably the only way to obtain a certificate or degree equivalent to that offered by mainstream public institutions for many citizens. In most developing countries, DE is a viable alternative to formal education because of lack of basic infrastructure and appropriate materials, lack of teachers, political conflicts, natural disasters and vast geographical distances. Developed countries, on the other hand may provide distance education for entirely different reasons such as learners' frequent travel on family holidays, chronic medical problems or learning disabilities and inability to attend classes in conventional schools for varying reasons.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON DISTANCE EDUCATION DELIVERY**

The All-Africa Ministers' Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education [AAMCOLDE], (2004) noted that 20% of 150 institutions offering DE programs in Africa were universities. Most universities with distance education programs like the University of Namibia tend to deliver their own programmes through external wings such as the Centre for External Studies (CES) or partner with other universities abroad. It is noted that integration often adds quality through well-developed programmes and adequate funding. Furthermore, students in Africa may also access courses and programmes otherwise not available in their local or national universities.

### **Delivery Systems**

Adults in distance and continuing education tend to require different approaches to their learning (Knowles, 1970; Kolb, 1984). The table below indicates different approaches largely used in most parts of Africa.

**Table 1. Percentage of African Institutions & Programs delivery using Various Types of Media**

<i>Type of Media</i>	<i>Anglophone Countries %</i>	<i>Francophone Countries %</i>	<i>Lusophone Countries %</i>
Print	96	88	90
Telephone	8	2	0
Audio Cassettes	17	15	20
Video	13	31	0
Radio	2	12	70
Audio Conferencing	3	3	40
Satellite	2	18	0
Internet/CD-ROM	5	34	0
Video Conferencing	0	0	0
Fax	0	0	0
No Info Provided	5	5	10
Number of Institutions	66	67	10

Courtesy of Leary & Berge, (2007)

The use of print, audio, and video in distance education has featured prominently over the years and this trend has continued in most parts of the world. The recent developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), have given rise to the use of video conferencing, internet sources and various multimedia facets, though much of Africa still lags behind due to poor internet and telecommunication networks. Despite these welcome technological advances, radio, print texts and education manuals are still the main mode of information delivery methods in distance education in most parts of Africa (ADEA 2002).

## **TRENDS IN OTHER REGIONS**

Silva et al (2013) noted that in South America, particularly in Brazil, for example, distance education has been gaining prominence in recent years, mainly as a vehicle to expand higher education. For a large country of the size and population of Brazil, it is almost impossible to satisfy all the demands for a traditional and conventional education system. While Brazil cannot address the great demand for enrolment of students in higher education through conventional institutional education models, there is also a reluctance to recognise increasingly significant models of private education in the country despite initiatives which strive to promote DE (Silva et al, 2013). In much of the world there are numerous questions about the value of distance education as compared to conventional classroom education. Distance education is sometimes regarded as a last resort for those who have dropped out from the conventional education model. There is a clash in society that pits conventional face to face classroom teaching methods against distance education (Gadotti, 2009).

In a study on Distance Education in China, Xiaobin Li (2009) observed that while there has been phenomenal progress in DE provision, it has fallen short in meeting expectations due to limited DE teaching models. He laments at the emphasis placed on content transmission and delivery and the total disregard for any attention on the learning environment. Content delivery is usually via lecturers' broadcasts with no interaction between instructors and students. The study also noted that although an opportunity exists for DE educators to share networked technology and resources, there is no established system in place for educators to implement this.

It is noted that when there is rapid growth in DE, quality often becomes a casualty. These observations have been noted both in China and India followed by recent effective and improved growth (Gong, 2007; Chen & Wang, 2007). Chen & Wang (2007) noted that in China, Network educators who are engaged in DE teaching are usually the same regular institutional teachers with limited or no expertise or experience in DE. Their involvement with DE is over and above their regular teaching loads, leaving very little time to commit to DE students. Few students receive proper guidance and meaningful feedback, a feature not dissimilar to Namibia and some parts of Africa. In China DE fees are sometimes exorbitant, telecommunication networks are not always reliable and there is a general negative view of DE.

Ozdermir & Loose (2014), explain that owing to technological improvement ODE in the United States of America has expanded and become popular in recent years. Notwithstanding, this trend has brought with it hordes of challenges. Of late there have been new approaches with educators taking new innovative responsibilities to deliver DE. Misconceptions such as the absence of face-to-face interactions, emphasis of content learning and the need for ICT proficiency are no longer a serious challenge anymore. Alongside other western nations such as the United Kingdom, there has been a phenomenal acceptance of DE as a convenient and affordable learning opportunity. There is currently a thrust towards quality assurance of DE courses and programmes with mechanisms for checks and balances for quality assurance reviews, (Boston, Ice & Gibson; 2011).

### **Information Technology and Distance Education Expansion**

According to Hannum et al (2009), distance education is offered as a complementary feature in most developing countries, particularly in seeking to enlarge and enrich the curricular content by making use of such tools as the Internet and computer applications. Cavanaugh (2010) observed that in Australia and in the United States of America many parents have a tendency of opting for distance education ahead of conventional schooling. Parents assume

the roles and responsibilities of both supervisor and mentor for their children in the form of home schools. In much of Europe, distance education continues to be largely complementary to the conventional education system despite shorter geographical distances and the concept of distance education is closely linked to information and communication technology (ICT).

### **Mass Online Open Courses**

The technological developments such as internet availability to most parts of the world have given rise to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). MOOCs are commonly referred to as globally-networked learning environments (GNLE) and several leading universities and organisations have incorporated these free course offerings in their online programmes. In some ways MOOCs have emerged in the recent past as a complement to ODL but not without challenges to some intended recipients particularly in the developing world. Course offerings from organisations such as Coursera are often corporate led and their content protected and may thus fail to meet the individual needs of students in developing communities, especially on knowledge application and adaptation to local business cultures (Boga & McGreal, 2014). It is noted that the unavailability of technological competencies in developing parts of the world may in itself exclude many who could otherwise benefit from MOOCs (Siemens, 2013). They may be need therefore for institutions offering MOOCs to design their instruction in ways that would not just be favourable to the developed world but also to developing communities in Africa. Some of the technologies favouring Africa may include the radio and mobile phones, since mobile phone ownership per household in Africa has risen sharply in the last ten years with seven out of ten Africans owning their mobile phone (Afro-barometer, 2013). While communication, entertainment, healthcare and banking have benefitted immensely from mobile phone technology the benefits in ODL provision are yet to be felt as pilot initiatives are still taking shape with the help of the World Bank and Coursera, for example in Tanzania (Trucano, 2013) and capacity building initiatives by South African Institute for Distance Education, (Juma, 2014). All the above stated initiatives on MOOCs are either non-existent or at infancy in Namibia.

### **METHODOLOGY**

An interpretive approach was employed in the study whose suitability helps to explore perceptions and meanings and their effects on studied participants (Grinnell, 1983; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The study purposively sampled twenty (20) CES distance education students based in semi-urban and rural parts of the Zambezi region of Namibia to complete semi structured questionnaires and also to partake in focused group interviews. The research questions mainly focused on generating data on students' perceptions on quality provision of DE in Namibian higher education. Document analysis was also applied on official documents to validate and strengthen research findings.

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The following research findings are a summation of ODL students' perceptions on the support services and the quality of distance education offered to them in Namibian higher education under the auspices of CES.

#### **Induction Programmes**

It was noted that DE students are seldom invited for induction programmes at the beginning of every academic year. Consequently, students are deprived of information right from the onset, e.g. of where to seek for help on study materials; which office to approach pertaining information technology, meeting fellow students undertaking the same study programmes etc. This problem is not experienced by students who are on fulltime programmes. First year DE

students noted this as an issue of great concern impacting on their time management skills once programmes resumed. According to one student, “Despite being in my second semester studying with CES, I still do not know to which office I should go to for help with my modules”. Distance education students can be invited to attend induction programmes or conduct these through video conferencing, as this may enable students to interact with fellow students, to explore all the resources at their disposal and to meet staff members responsible for various departments (Beukes, 2005).

### **Delays in Completing Study Programmes**

Although distance education students were content with their study programmes, two-thirds of respondents were generally unhappy at the pace it takes for them to receive meaningful feedback from their tutors and lecturers on submitted assignments or tasks. This was what one student experienced: “I waited for the whole semester and wrote exams without having received feedback on my assignment. How can I pass?” This is testimony that some lecturers delay marking students’ assignments and as a result deprive students of valuable information that could help them excel in their exams. One student echoed her state of anxiety while awaiting the final outcome of her thesis. “My thesis is still pending. And I do not know for how long I have to wait before I get feedback and as to whether I will graduate or not”.

### **Assessment and Feedback**

Twelve out of twenty students were dissatisfied with the manner in which their proposals are marked and assessed by their supervisors. Apparently, four supervisors are expected to assess students’ proposal at departmental level prior to three additional assessors at faculty level. This whole process consumes a lot of students’ time as they have to wait for long periods of time before receiving inputs on their research proposals. This trend has unfortunately caused some students including some university lecturers who are part of the system to opt studying with other institutions of higher learning outside Namibia. The following are opinions by some ODL students:

“I regret why I enrolled with UNAM, because, my friends who started the same program after me at a foreign institution have graduated already, while I have been waiting for long intervals to get feedback from my supervisors”. Another retorted, “I have made my decision, next year I am quitting my studies here for a South African university”.

It was noted that assessment and feedback were clearly an area of great concern to most distance learners, sometimes evoking emotions. Tutors and lecturers seemed oblivious to the notion that fair assessment and timely feedback often created positive attitudes to learning (Reece and Walker, 2007).

### **Students Participation**

Distance Education students are rarely involved in planning and organizing UNAM activities such as the Cultural Festival, Student Quality day, Graduation Ceremonies, etc. The students who are mostly involved in such activities are those studying full-time. This practice tends to belittle the ODL students by not involving them in major activities thereby making them feel as if they are inferior to their fulltime counterparts. According to one ODL student, “UNAM only knows of our existence when it comes to collecting money from us, thereafter, they abandon us. They forget that we are their students”. Such a segregated approach in treating DE students may also disenfranchise them from national socio-political discourses. Watkins (2000: 63) noted that ‘there is also a sense in which education can create an impetus towards democracy, even if this is not what governments have in mind.’ Educational institutions may therefore need to take a lead in the democratisation of their institutions through effective students’ participation in decision-making processes. Since both international and domestic

laws are in support of students' voices (Klein, 2003), it becomes imperative particularly in higher education to promote a forum for distance education students to exercise their voice.

### **Part-time Tutors**

The low-morale among tutors at the DE centres is often felt by students as they seem to lack commitment towards distance education students. There is also lack of effective collaboration between DE tutors and university lecturers who usually design modules and set examinations. Tutors only receive module guides from the centre offices. Lecturers in UNAM academic departments often make changes to the curriculum during the year without properly informing DE students and their tutors through CES. According to one student, "I have been disappointed many a times for writing exam papers set by lecturers on topics that we have never covered during the modules with our tutors. How can I pass when questions are based on topics that we did not cover? No! That's not fair!" As noted by Chen & Wang (2007) in China tutors who are engaged in DE teaching are usually limited or lack expertise in DE. This in turn impacts on their level of commitment and the ability to guide DE students.

### **Video-Conferencing**

Efforts have been made in the right direction by introducing video-conferencing facilities for distance education students. Nevertheless, the facilities are inadequate as only three satellite campuses are resourced with video-conferencing facilities, thereby denying access to the majority of distance education students in some rural and semi urban areas. Among the few campuses that are privileged to have such facilities, problems often arise as they only have a single room with video-conferencing facilities which compels some students to miss out on sessions because of limited space.

### **Administrative Services**

Despite having appointed support officers in all the campuses, services from such personnel are geared towards the full-time students. The services offered by the university continue to be of a conventional nature and less accessible to ODL students. These services include student counselling, quality assurance, student support services, information and technology. According on one ODL students, "How can the university support staff help us if they do not know us? Maybe, the university should avail our names to the Support staff because we also need guidance at times".

### **Student Representation**

Distance education students do not participate in the election of the student representative council. It was noted that all respondents were not aware of how they could effectively participate in student politics. This is further attested by remarks from two students who said the following: "Ah! I only thought that the SRC portfolios are only meant for full time-basis". "But, how come we are not invited to partake in the selection process and the election of the SRC?" DE students are hardly invited to attend various students' meetings including the election of the SRC or to give feedback on quality issues pertaining to their education. Students' representation is an important feature in higher education and its proper appreciation may help deal with many quality related problems experienced by students, will strengthen accountability, fairness and socially justice (Hoff, 1999; Chamberlin, 1989).

## **CONCLUSION**

This research paper examined distance education provision in Namibian higher education with a view to determine students' perceptions on quality. The role of higher education institutions, particularly CES at the University of Namibia was noted in spearheading the

socio-economic development of Namibia by enabling students to achieve their full potential through accessible, innovative and flexible distance learning. The paper further noted the challenges faced by higher education institutions in fulfilling their mandate of providing quality education, especially to distance education students in semi-urban and rural Namibia. More investment is still needed to recruit and train more tutors in distance education provision as lack of expertise in this area can easily be linked to most of students' negative perceptions on poor service delivery. Despite a steadily increasing number of ODL students being enrolled in higher education institutions over the years, there is ample evidence that poor resource allocation particularly on technological capacitation and competencies still lag behind and that little involvement is afforded to ODL students compared to conventional full time students.

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