
OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN NAMIBIA
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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUALISATION

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. Open learning through distance education has come to be accepted as a well-recognised mode of education and training relevant to, and necessary for meeting the emerging demands of the Namibian society. Areas until now unreached by the conventional education system are gradually being taken care of by the open learning system in Namibia.

To implement ODL activities at both pre-tertiary and tertiary level in the Namibian public sector, four publicly-funded institutions 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).

The **University of Namibia** (UNAM) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1992 to serve as a centre of higher learning and research. According to Section 4 of the Act, the University aims 'to provide extension services' and 'further training and continuing education'. These clauses provided the statutory basis for the development and management of ODL activities through the University's Centre for External Studies (CES). CES meets the needs of people who, for a variety of reasons, cannot attend any of the University campuses to further their studies on a full time basis. Currently, CES offers the following programmes:

- Bachelor of Business Administration
- Bachelor of Education
- Bachelor of Nursing Science
- Diploma in Adult Education and Community Development
- Diploma in Education (African Languages)
- Diploma in Education (specialising in Mathematics, Biology or Physical Science)
- Basic Education Teachers Diploma
- Specialised Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership
- Specialised Diploma in Education (Home Economics and Fashion and Fabric)
- Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE)
- Certificate in HIV/AIDS Counselling
- Certificate in Midlevel Management

In 2008, UNAM-CES had 1 535 ODL students registered for the above 12 study programmes, representing about 18% of the total student body, which was 8 320.

The **Polytechnic of Namibia** (PoN) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1995. In terms of section 4 of the PoN Act, it is mandated to provide "post-secondary career education and continuing education at a post-secondary school level", though no specific reference is made to

distance education. Nevertheless, in 1997 a decision was taken to establish a separate distance education centre, the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL), in order to facilitate the delivery of ODL programmes. The following study programmes are currently offered through COLL:

- Bachelor of Technology: Accounting and Finance
- Bachelor of Technology: Agricultural Management
- Bachelor of Technology: Nature Conservation
- Bachelor of Technology: Public Management
- Bachelor: Hospitality Management
- Bachelor: Travel and Tourism Management
- National Diploma: Business Administration
- National Diploma: Human Resources Management
- National Diploma: Marketing
- National Diploma: Office Management and Technology
- National Diploma: Police Science
- Certificate: Community Based Natural Resource Management
- Certificate: Namibian Environmental Education

In 2008, the Polytechnic of Namibia registered 1 853 students in the 13 study programmes that are available on the distance education mode of study, representing 21% of the total enrolment of 8 829.

Building on earlier initiatives, the **Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL)** was established by an Act of Parliament in 1997. The primary goal of NAMCOL is to contribute towards the social and economic development of the country by providing opportunities to out-of-school youth and adults to acquire general education and upgrade their professional and vocational skills. NAMCOL offers a selection of distance taught junior and secondary school courses to enable school drop-outs, those who have failed to pass their subject examinations in a sufficient number of subjects to qualify for junior or senior secondary school certification, and those who never have studied at secondary level, to complete or embark on secondary school education. In addition, NAMCOL offers the following professional programmes at further education/tertiary level:

- Certificate in Education for Development
- Certificate in Local Government Studies
- Commonwealth Diploma in Youth in Development Work.

In 2007 there were 27 805 students enrolled in NAMCOL programmes (of which 190 are enrolled in tertiary level programmes and 27 615 are enrolled in the Alternative Secondary Education programme).

The **National Institute for Educational Development (NIED)**, which was established in 1991 to spearhead the curriculum reform of the formal education system through curriculum and materials development, pre-service and in-service training of teachers, general educational research, offers a distance-taught Basic Education Teacher's Diploma, which is the standard qualification for teachers in Grades 1–10, to enable unqualified teachers to complete their studies while continuing with their teaching duties. The programme is currently running down, but had a student enrolment of 1 620 for the 2007 academic year.

The above programmes provided a sound base to further develop the provision of ODL within Namibia in order to better meet the development and educational needs of the country as laid down in *Vision 2030, the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP)*, and other key statements.

In addition to the four-publicly funded ODL institutions there are a number of private and commercial educational institutions that offer a variety of programmes through open and distance learning at different educational levels.

THE NAMIBIAN OPEN LEARNING NETWORK – A MODEL TO FOSTER COLLABORATION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

For a small country like Namibia, in terms of population, and with limited resources, the Government opted for collaboration and sharing of resources in order to strengthen ODL activities at publicly-funded institutions. As such, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the coordination of ODL in the country was signed in 2000 by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and the Heads of NAMCOL, the Polytechnic of Namibia and the University of Namibia. 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). In order to ensure the successful implementation of ODL programmes, coordinate ODL activities in the country and put quality control mechanisms in place, NOLNet's activities are managed through its Board of Trustees, the Management Committee and many standing committees that characterise the operations of NOLNet. Under the auspices of NOLNet the ODL institutions have so far managed to strengthen their collaboration and current activities. To a large extent, the mandate of NOLNet includes:

- Assisting in defining appropriate policies for the promotion and implementation of ODL activities in the country;
- Promoting cooperation between publicly-funded ODL institutions and their equitable sharing of resources for mutual benefit;
- Developing quality control mechanisms and structures for standard setting in ODL;
- Advising ministries and other funding bodies to ensure equitable and effective allocation of resources to ODL activities;
- Assisting in the promotion of a good image of ODL in Namibia;
- Providing advocacy for ODL activities at all levels;
- Collaborating in institutional capacity-building and training of staff, both part-time and full-time, to provide open learning services and support to the students of all signatory institutions;
- Ensuring access for the students of all signatory institutions to the facilities and services of each institution through the establishment and expansion of a national network of open learning centres;
- Supporting e-learning initiatives to supplement existing ODL print-based programmes;
- Developing radio programmes and audio-visual material;
- Coordinating to publish and provide information and documentation about the activities, courses and services of all signatory institutions; and
- Cooperating to provide advice and/or counselling to prospective students.

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS AS A RESULT OF COLLABORATION IN ODL

1) A Network of Regional Centres

Since its establishment 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. Currently, a network of 48 multi-purpose learning centres had been upgraded by NOLNet to afford ODL students the opportunity of access to library resources, internet and email services and other study facilities as follows:

Category 1 Centres: (17 of 48)

Tertiary and secondary level text books, internet and email access, photo copiers, fax and audio equipment and trained staff are available to support both tertiary and secondary level students.

Category 2+ Centres (15 of 48)

Secondary school level text books, computers, photo-copy and fax facilities, audio-visual equipment and trained staff are available to support tertiary and secondary level students.

Category 2 Centres (16 of 48)

Secondary level school text books, fax facilities, photo copiers and trained staff are available to support secondary level students.

2) e-Learning Centre

Making headway with a recently launched Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Education policy, e-learning technologies and implementation at institutional level, as well as country level are receiving considerable attention in Namibia. According to Beukes-Amis (2006), various public and private institutions are already implementing individual strategies towards the use and application of e-learning technologies and capacity building. She consequently argues that: "the introduction and existence of an e-Learning Centre (eLC), with the aim of supporting all educational institutions in their endeavors with e-learning could immensely cut down on huge technological start-up investments and avoid duplication of efforts" (Beukes-Amis, 2006: 1).

With all institutions at different levels of the implementation of their e-learning strategies, and UNAM and PoN, as well as other stakeholders, each using their own Learning Management System (LMS) and running their own in-house e-learning courses, a fact-finding mission by InWEnt was launched just in time. InWEnt, a German capacity building institute, with a strong focus on developing countries, already trained several Namibians through its eLDI – e-Learning Development and Implementation course, and through its alumni members started to work on the establishment of one common e-Learning Centre (eLC) to cater for all stakeholders.

A task team with support from InWEnt was established to consult all stakeholders and to decide on strategic decisions. A technical audit was further conducted to determine existing equipment and infrastructure available at all stakeholder institutions that could together help the eLC to come off ground. Specifically, the task team had to bring all e-learning activities of the envisaged eLC in line with the ICT for education policy implementation plan. The technical audit team reached consensus on the use of a common LMS by all stakeholders, namely Kewl.NextGen. Following the recommendations of the task team and the agreement to a common LMS, the eLC of Namibia was established under the auspices of NOLNet and operates as the e-Learning Standing Committee of the NOLNet Management Committee. The assistance and support from InWEnt, led to a signed MoU between NOLNet and InWEnt. The first training cycle of 40 members from stakeholders, to bring all on par in terms of e-learning training courses, offered by InWEnt, is already completed. These e-learning courses cover the following content:

- Instructional Design
- Content Development
- E-Learning Management
- Support and Tutoring of Virtual Learning Communities (VLC).

Beukes-Amis (2006) foresees that through InWEnt's support, immense help will be provided to Namibian educational institutions to use the eLC for all e-learning training activities, hosting and availability of all e-content at all levels, and most importantly, the use of one common LMS. This could lead to the sustainability of such an entity with a focus on regional collaboration, i.e. to become a SADC wide e-Learning Centre. Furthermore, eLC Namibia, InWEnt, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), and other cooperating partners could work together and focus on overall improvement of the

country's e-learning endeavors and place it at the forefront of new technologies, and most importantly achieve the anytime, anywhere education notion.

The establishment of the NOLNet eLC for Namibia was a national achievement, in that all stakeholders are jointly responsible for the future of the eLC, which in turn would ensure large scale take-up of e-learning activities that are successfully brought in line with the ICT for education policy in Namibia.

3) **Education Radio**

Beukes (2005), noted that the radio initiative is aimed at enhancing education radio broadcasting in the country and NAMCOL has been assigned to manage this project on behalf of the Ministry of Education and other partners. A forum, known as the Education Radio Project Team (ERPT) has been created to oversee implementation of the project and membership is currently drawn from the following participating Ministries and educational institutions: Ministry of Education (Directorate Adult Education and NIED); Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture; Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry; Ministry of Health and Social Services; UNAM (CES and Department of Non-Formal Education); PoN-COLL; NOLNet; NAMCOL and the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). The objectives of the partner Ministries and institutions vary, i.e. most Ministries intend to use radio for information-sharing purposes and to pursue diverse community development agendas while educational institutions plan to use radio to supplement print-based distance education study materials.

Beukes (2005) further highlight the following achievements that have been recorded to date:

- A MoU was signed in August 2004 between the Ministry of Education and NAMCOL to institutionalise the management of this project. NAMCOL is required, inter alia, to submit annual work plans and execute these while there is an explicit undertaking on the part of the Ministry to provide financial resources to ensure successful implementation of this initiative.
- A process of wide consultation took place in 2004/2005 to establish the interest and assess the needs of potential partner Ministries and educational institutions. This process culminated in the development of a detailed discussion document that outlines the background, rationale and modalities for implementation of the project. The discussion document was circulated to all participating Ministries and educational institutions at the beginning of 2005 for their inputs and acceptance.
- Following this, the ERPT was created with representatives from all participating Ministries and educational institutions. Members of the ERPT are involved in project implementation, but they are also required to keep the management teams of their respective institutions informed about developments related to the project. The ERPT meets bi-monthly.
- A state-of-the art recording studio has been constructed on NAMCOL's campus and digital recording equipment have been acquired for the studio. The facility is available for use by all the partners and additional equipment has recently been acquired to facilitate the recording of music. Three members of NAMCOL's staff have been trained on use of the studio equipment.
- A core group of staff members from participating Ministries and educational institutions received intensive training (both theoretical and practical) in the production of educational radio programmes. This included two one-week interventions in 2005 and 2007 respectively and a one-week refresher course in 2006. The training was generously sponsored by COL. These members are continuously busy scripting and recording a series of programmes which were first piloted in 2005, before the project was taken to scale in 2007.
- NAMCOL, NIED, PoN-COLL and UNAM-CES have conducted needs assessment studies among their students to determine, amongst others, how often students listen to radio, when they are able to listen, the radio stations they listen to, and the programmes

- they like. The findings were used in discussions with the NBC to facilitate informed decisions about the duration of programmes, appropriate time-slots, etc. Also, a formal MoU has been signed between NOLNet (on behalf of all participating institutions) and the NBC to ensure commitment from the national broadcaster. As part of this agreement, programmes are broadcast free of charge, while institutions provide pre-packaged programmes to the NBC for this purpose.
- A Project Coordinator was appointed in August 2005 on a one-year renewable contract to take responsibility for the day-to-day running of the project. Funding is also available to recruit additional part-time staff as and when the need arises.

4) **Development of a National Policy for Open and Distance Learning**

Pursuing education through open and distance learning offers a great deal of promise in Namibia, a country of vast geography, and a widely distributed population. The opportunity to learn away from a physical campus, either at home or in a local community or regional setting, can provide the flexibility required by students who wish or need to continue their education, but have multiple roles and responsibilities that do not allow full-time study or on-campus attendance. With emerging arguments like these that open and distance learning is increasingly being regarded as a viable policy option for developing countries with limited educational resources for buildings, books and teachers, seeking to increase accessibility for large numbers of students in education and training opportunities, Möwes (2005) contends that Namibia has been challenged to transform its policies and procedures to accommodate the ever-growing number of students.

While many countries manage without national policies for ODL, Beukes, Möwes, Murangi and Nekongo-Nielsen, (2008) indicate that a number of factors have encouraged Namibia to develop a coherent policy covering open and distance learning. These include:

- The challenges that face all countries in positioning themselves to exploit the opportunities and challenges brought forward by the development of twenty-first century, globalised, knowledge-based economies
- The key importance of education in meeting the demands of the emergent global knowledge-based economy for trained human resources
- The need to exploit technologies to provide high-quality education efficiently and at a lower unit cost to meet the needs of expanding populations and the emergence of lifelong learning needs
- The need to provide flexible educational opportunities that meet the highly variable needs of a heterogeneous population of students, as opposed to the provision of education through frameworks that students have to fit into in order to participate
- The need to integrate ODL and traditional education provision into a coherent framework that meets the needs of a heterogeneous population of students, which is reflected in the convergence of traditional and distance education practices to produce a hybrid blended learning solution aimed at providing students with flexibility and choice
- The need to acknowledge through policies and practice the growing tendency to exploit the ability of e-based knowledge economies to break up the value chain among partner institutions, and the provision of global, international learning opportunities through international consortia and partnerships
- The need to ensure that any ODL system is fit for purpose and able to provide high quality learning opportunities via efficient and effective management and delivery systems in ways that support students to achieve their aims effectively and efficiently, having regard to the personal circumstances and needs of each student

- The need to integrate ODL provision with national Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policy and frameworks
- The fact that many of the standard features related to ODL practice are powerful and challenging vehicles for engineering change and driving through efficiencies and reform in the education sector.

In addition to these factors, Beukes, et al., (2008) argue that Namibia has over the last few years produced a number of policies and plans that refer to open and distance learning without in themselves either defining these two very different concepts, or articulating in a meaningful way the role that ODL could play in furthering other policy areas and national level plans. Accordingly, there was a need for the development of an Open and Distance Learning Policy for Namibia that sets out a policy that is coherent both in itself and in relation to such plans and policies as the following:

- Vision 2030: Office of the President, *Approach to Namibia: Vision 2030*, Windhoek, National Planning Commission, 2001
- ETSIP: Republic of Namibia, *Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP), Planning for a Learning Nation: Programme Document Phase I* (2006-2011), February 2007. ETSIP “represents the education and training sector’s response to the call of *Vision 2030*. Its key purpose is to substantially enhance the sector’s contribution to the attainment of strategic national development goals, and to facilitate the transition to a knowledge based economy” (ETSIP, para. 10)
- National Policy on Adult Learning 2003: Republic of Namibia, Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, *National Policy on Adult Learning*, Windhoek, Solitaire Press, July 2003.
- ICT Policy for Education, 2005: Republic of Namibia, *ICT Policy for Education*, Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture/Ministry of Higher Education, Training and Employment Creation, Windhoek: Republic of Namibia, ICTs in Education Steering Committee, *ICTs in Education Implementation Plan Guide 2006*, Windhoek.

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 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 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 in the light of the consultative processes that took place during the seminar and advice from external experts in ODL, and a strategic framework was drawn up to develop the seminar’s clear consensus in favour of the founding of the Open University of Namibia.

According to Beukes, et al., (2008), the purpose of the ODL policy is to state some general principles that will, over the next decade or so, both indicate what it is that Government wishes to achieve and what Government would like other agencies to do with respect to the development and implementation of ODL in Namibia. The policy is further 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.

Even though the ODL policy is still at the draft stage Beukes, et al., (2008) highlighted some important lessons that have been learnt:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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

Though considerable achievements have been made, challenges are faced and some still need to be addressed. However, the above account of growth, development and effectiveness of ODL in Namibia have resulted in a move towards student-centred learning, promoting the intellectual development of the distance education student through continuous interaction and students' active participation in the learning process. Several reforms and quality assurance practices were successfully implemented, because of individual institutions' responsiveness to students' needs and expectations and NOLNet's recognition of the equal importance of ODL as a method of delivery. This responsiveness, however, calls for the current integrated and holistic approach to be continuously modified and refined as institutional and government policies and procedures change and new student needs and expectations emerge. According to Tait (1997), this is essential in order to move on from the reputation of poor provision derived from the historical legacy of correspondence education where that was often indeed the case.

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