COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICAL SESSIONS ON THE

DISTANCE EDUCATION MODE

BY

*CHARLES KEYTER

The Steering Committee of this workshop request me to address you on the topic of Distance Education in general and how practical sessions could be incorporated and implemented as part of a course on the distance education mode. In this regard I would focus on the following aspects,

1.   The uniqueness of distance education,

2.   The components of a well functioning distance education system, and

3.   The arrangement of practical sessions on the distance education mode.

*Course Organiser at the Distance Education Centre, Polytechnic of Namibia.

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1.   THE UNIQUENESS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The key difference between distance education and conventional face-to-face education is, in the delivery of the syllabus or educational content - on the distance education mode, the syllabus is delivered through well-designed materials rather than by lecturing. This implies a separation of time and location between educator and student. Of course, although a significant proportion of communication between learners and educators is not face-to-face, but takes place through the use of different media as necessary, this does not mean that distance education involves no face-to-face contact. Importantly, though, the face-to-face contact which does take place does not involve simple transmission of knowledge from educator to learner; instead it involves various forms of learner support, for example tutorials, peer group discussion, or practical work.

Originally, it was assumed that replacement of some face-to-face contact with course materials was a 'second-best' option open to people marginalized from mainstream education for various reasons.

Increasingly, however, the history of distance education practice has demonstrated that capital investment in well-designed courses and course materials, the costs of which are then spread over large numbers of students, is not only cost-effective but can lead to significant improvements in quality of educational provision. Due to the necessity for published course materials and effective mechanisms to overcome the difficulties of greater degrees of separation of educators and learners, distance education places considerable demands on effective planning, management and administration of course design and development, student support and assessment. Well planned and managed distance education can be a cost effective way of ensuring access to education for larger numbers of diverse learners in more flexible programmes than is possible through conventional education.

Conversely, however, poorly planned and managed distance education wastes huge amounts of money. Furthermore, it does not ensure successful access to education and training appropriate to the individual and fails to meet the economic needs of the country.

Avoiding these types of pitfalls is essential in a country where the need to solve large-scale educational problems in a context of dwindling funding is paramount. Clearly, distance education practices have an important role to play in transforming Namibia's education and training system, a fact acknowledged in almost all recent policy statements. Given the above facts, however, there is clearly also a need for a set of quality standards to help educational providers put distance education methods to effective use and to avoid or reverse the dangers of poor planning and management.

This becomes more, not less, important as distance education and conventional education converge, convergence created by use of new technologies, the notion of the 'knowledge society', the assessment of experiential learning, and the development of distance education methods in conventional institutions. There is a recognition that education needs to be provided in a much more flexible way - using resource-based learning methods and distance education methods in increasingly open approaches to educational provision. As such trends gather momentum, the experience that has informed successful

distance education practice can be used to influence the quality of education as a whole.

2. THE COMPONENTS OF A WELL-FUNCTIONING DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM

A well-functioning distance education system will only be successful if it consists of the following four components:

- Course design/ and development
- Counselling and support
- Quality assurance, and
- Effective managed distance learning

Each one of these components will be briefly explained.

2.1 Course Design and Development

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2.1.1 Well-designed courses

In good distance education, the course, rather than the educator, provides an appropriate learning environment for students. Rather than simply referring to a set of materials, however, the course is the structure of learning that is designed into the materials. It has four basic elements:

- Conceptual pathways to command of its knowledge, conceptualising skills, and practical abilities.

- Educational strategies for helping the learner find his or her way through these pathways.

- Summative and formative assessment should be integral to the learning process.

- The materials and presentation of the course as a whole must excite, engage, and reward the learner. Courses should be designed to involve learners actively in their own learning and should allow learners quick access and clear movement through

them, for example the use of icons, activities, and self assessment questions in the study material. Although there is no need for courses to use advanced technologies, most but not necessarily all, will make use of a variety of media.

2.1.2 A team approached to be use in the development of courses

An essential component in the successful design of courses is collaboration. This can be achieved by using an approach where a group of people, each with particular skills, and competencies, develop a course as a team. Although there is no golden mean, nor indeed an absolute minimum, a substantial ratio of staff course design time to learner study time will be inevitable in developing courses. Some of the better courses in more challenging subjects, however, might have ratios of fifty to one hundred hours of design time to one hour of learner study time. The development of student friendly' and interactive study material, usually takes between 12-18 months to develop. Study

material that has been developed in a hurry is not acceptable.

The development of study material has clear implications for courses designed for small numbers of students. They are simply not financially viable if collaborative design processes are not used.

2.2 Counselling and Support

The nature of distance education request distance education students to have a positive attitude towards their study, and to act in a disciplined manner. Therefore distance education students need to be counseled and given the necessary support throughout their studies.

2.2.1 Counselling

Provision should be made by distance education providers to advise and help individuals who would otherwise be isolated throughout the learning process, and, in particular, to help them

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to make choices before enrolling for educational programmes. IT should be made easily available through a variety of devices including, most importantly, human intervention.

2.2.2 Learner support

If learners are to adapt to the special requirements of guided self-study, they require various forms of support, for example satisfactory access to tutors and facilitators, opportunity to interact with other learners, and access to the necessary facilities.

2.2.3 Provision of adequate administrative support to learners

The provision of adequate administrative support to learners would involve administrative support on a number of levels, for example, enrolment procedures, payment of fees, delivery of materials, and in keeping channels of communication open. The aim, throughout, should be to keep administrative procedures

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few and simple.

2.3 Quality Assurance

2.3.1 Quality assurance in all learning programmes

Several mechanisms need to be established to ensure the quality of learning programmes and their capacity for self-improvement. One of the most critical of these is a mechanism which enables meaningful and reliable feedback from learners and tutors into the ongoing performance of the institution.

2.3.2 Research, evaluation, and development

As with all aspects of education, continuing research, evaluation, and development is necessary for the improvement of distance education provision. Distance education providers also need to have effective research as the basis for improving the quality of their performance.

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2.4 Effectively managed distance learning

The success of a distance education course will largely depends on the way it was managed. An effective and efficient managed system should be in place to ensure the smooth running of a course on the distance education mode.

3. PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS REGARDING THE OFFERING OF DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSES

Any subject or course can be offered on the distance education mode. A student can even be taught to swim on the distance education mode, provided that the components of a well-designed distance education system is in place. The following is examples of how to address the issue of practicals on distance education:

1. Changing or adding additional requirements towards your present admission regulations to accommodate your distance education students, for example, Principals of Information

System or Computer Courses. As part of your requirements to enroll for this course, a student is obliged to sign a declaration to the effect that they do, or will have access to the required computer facilities, before they will be allowed to enroll. Students must have access to computer facilities, or have their own computer, with the specific software they will require. Technikon Southern Africa (TSA), and the University of South Africa (UNISA), has implemented this policy with success.

2.   Upgrading of regional centres to provided the required services as prescribed, for example, computer and other facilities.

3.   Arrangements for the attendance of compulsory vacation schools, where students will be exposed to practical and face-to-face training.

4.   A shift toward resource-based learning, which means that a significant but varying proportion of communication between learners and educators is not face-to-face, but takes place

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through the use of different media as necessary, for example, the use of videos, audio cassette, telephone conference facilities, interactive video and satellite broadcasting.

5. Collaboration between the various stakeholders, for example, the Polytechnic of Namibia, NAMPOL and the Traffic Departments of local authorities in Namibia. In this regard, arrangements can be made between stakeholders that students can use their facilities and equipment on pre-determined dates and times.

6. An effective learner support which include tutorials, mentor support, peer group discussion or practical work should be in place at the regional centres or at the workplace of the employees.

7. An effectively managed distance education system should be in place.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the fact that the effective running

of any course on distance education mode, can only be successful if we collaborate. Collaboration is the name of the game in distance education, and no one will survive in distance education, if we are not willing to collaborate.

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