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# The Role of Open and Distance Learning in Institutional Transformation: The Polytechnic of Namibia Experience

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*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.*

*This paper reports on the changed nature of the role of universities in developing countries. Specifically, the author argues that the Polytechnic of Namibia, while remaining a university of academic excellence and creative thought, was prepared to transform its conventional role of transferring knowledge to the number of students it could accommodate in classrooms. The Polytechnic of Namibia, through its Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning, has become within the short period of ten years an institution that seeks to provide knowledge and academic expertise to a much wider community than could be reached through on-campus teaching. The Polytechnic of Namibia can now, through distance learning techniques and open learning philosophies, reach out to the whole community in which it serves. This required not only new initiatives and approaches to teaching and delivering degrees, but also an acceptance that the most sophisticated concepts can be taught in formats that off-campus students can understand. The Polytechnic of Namibia transformed into a truly dual-mode university, recognising the equal importance of open and lifelong learning programmes to the more conventional programmes of full-time on-campus studies and research.*

*Through its Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning the Polytechnic of Namibia indicates that open and distance learning has the ability to provide a rich learning environment in a flexible, effective and interactive manner, provided careful design and implementation approaches are adopted. This paper specifically examines the recent initiatives and the major design and implementation strategies at the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning. The author concludes that the Centre's initiatives have clearly proven that there can be little doubt that instructional design and provision of sound administrative and academic support can effectively meet the training needs of off-campus students and is at the centre of quality distance education.*

## **Introduction**

Pursuing higher 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 university campus, either at home or in a local community or regional setting, can provide the flexibility required by adults 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 (Möwes, 2005). 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, the

Polytechnic of Namibia has been challenged to transform its policies and procedures to accommodate the ever-growing number of students.

**Table 1: Application and Enrolment Statistics over 5-year period**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<b>Nr of applicants</b>	5140	5632	7200	7596	7991
<b>Nr of new students enrolled</b>	1851	1918	1792	2044	2295

The above account is a clear indication that the Polytechnic has been generating extraordinary interest amongst prospective students. In this context, Dr. Tjama Tjivikua, in his Rector's Review of the Polytechnic's 2003 Annual Report stated:

*The Polytechnic's steady transformation from a diploma-granting technikon into a degree-awarding university of science and technology has been driven by a new thinking, a realisation of the necessity to create opportunities and find solutions for society through human capacity development.*

(Polytechnic of Namibia, 2003:3).

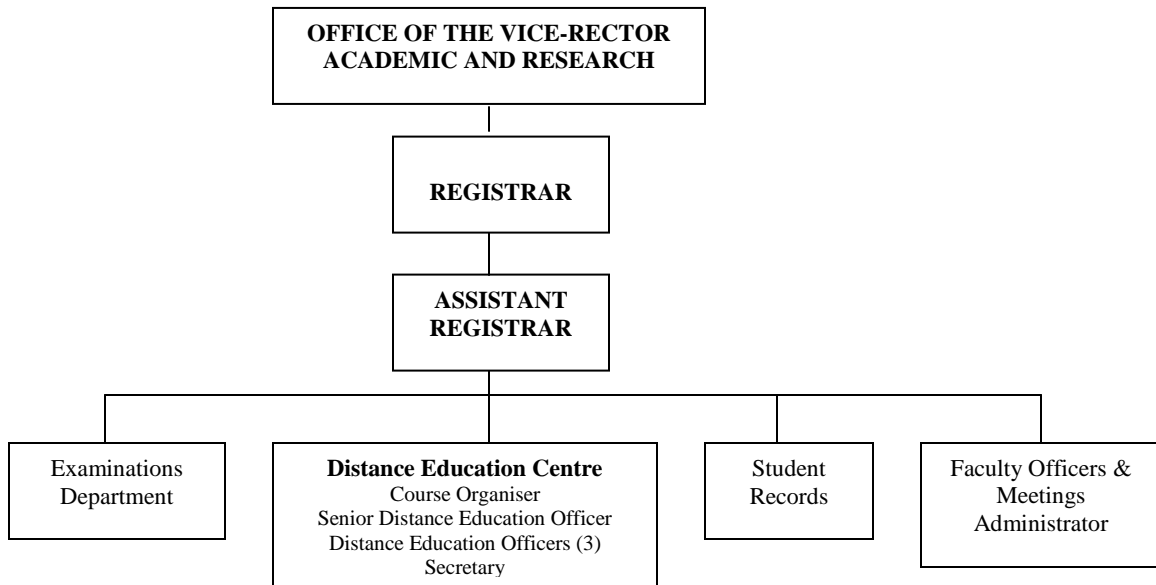
Fundamental to this steady transformation, in an attempt to drive Namibia to become a knowledge society as defined in Vision 2030, and in justification of its position as Namibia's university of science and technology, the Polytechnic capitalised on both old and new approaches to teaching to put in place an effective nationwide delivery structure that ensures much wider access to higher education than has been achieved previously.

## **Institutional Transformation at the Polytechnic to Meet Demands for Higher Education**

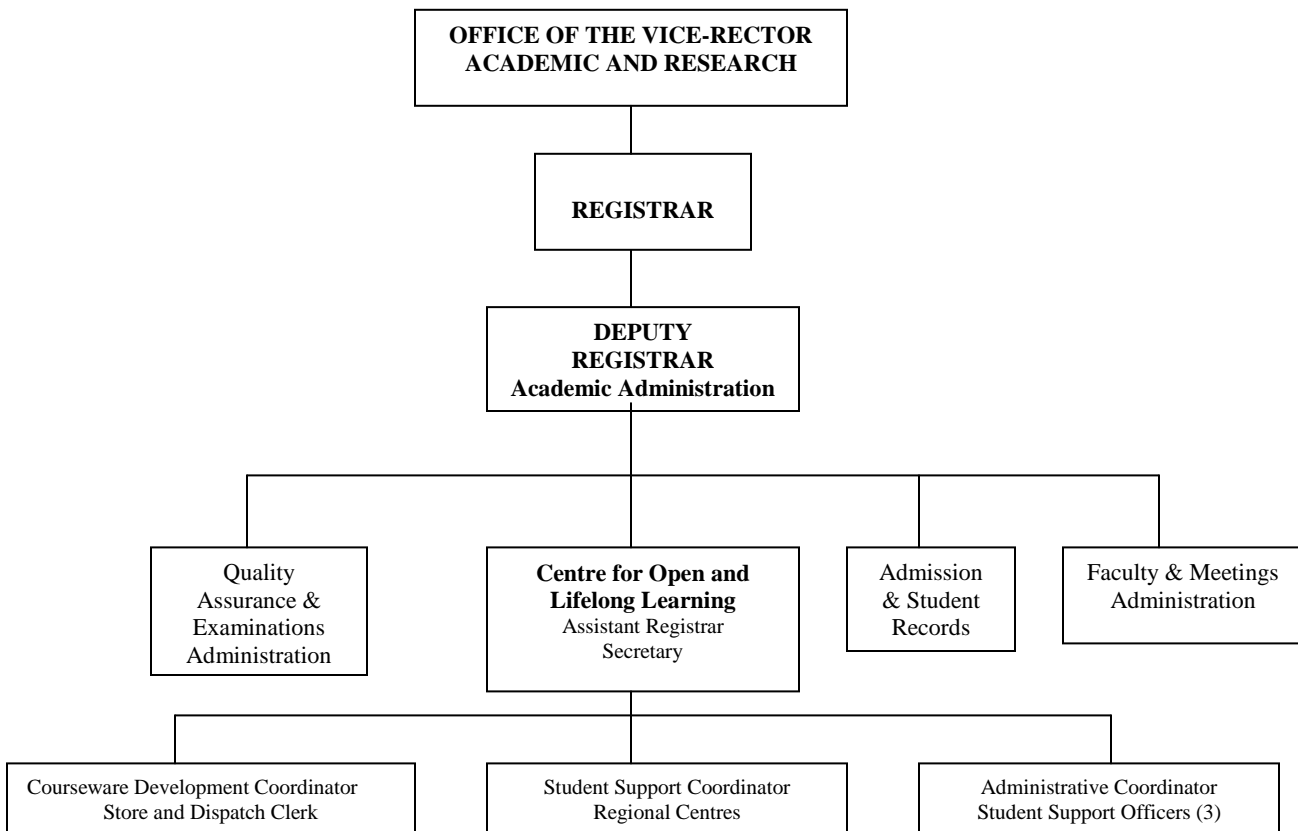
Spurred by continuing growth in the demand for higher education, especially among adults, the Polytechnic adopted methods of open and distance learning to transfer knowledge to a much wider community than could be reached through on-campus teaching only. However, initially and for some time, the emphasis on distance education at the Polytechnic has been on preparing courses and then on finding and implementing means of making them available off-campus. In recent years, though, there has been evidence of increasing critical reflection on an approach that may have given access prominence over success, quality and the needs of students. Today, the Polytechnic's Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) is demonstrating greater concern with human questions relating for example, to access and participation going hand in hand with students' needs, persistence and factors that contribute to success and satisfaction for distance education students. As a result, the Polytechnic's second five-year strategic plan provides evidence and clearly articulates strategic goals geared to steer COLL to become a very significant partner in the provision of quality higher education. Fundamental to these strategic goals is the objective to not only produce highly acclaimed instructional materials, but to complement it through the provision of sound administrative and academic support services to ensure students' success.

The main task of COLL is to design and offer a distance educational experience that encourages meaningful learning. As such, COLL moves swiftly, purposefully and productively to embrace the notion of equality of opportunity through its implementation of a holistic approach, attending to three interdependent sub-systems, i.e. a courseware development sub-system; a student support sub-system and an administrative sub-system, whereby all three sub-systems function as an integrated whole (Erdos, 1975). As such, this approach emphasises the systemic structure of COLL so that it is designed to, and actually does, meet the needs of its distance education students. Figures 1 and 2 shows the transformation in organisational structure to facilitate this systemic structure.

**Figure 1: Organisational Structure of the Office of the Registrar (1997-1999)**



**Figure 1: Organisational Structure of the Office of the Registrar (2000 onwards)**



## **Reforms and Quality Assurance Practices**

To fulfil the aims and objectives of COLL's systemic structure, several reforms and quality assurance practices have been put in place since 2003.

The academic standard of distance education programmes at the Polytechnic depends to a large extent on the quality of teaching carried out by full-time faculty involved in the programmes. Currently, the quality of this teaching function is performed and evaluated in three ways:

- i) writing instructional materials;
- ii) tutoring distance education students through tutor-marking, week-long vacation schools, regional face-to-face tutorials, one-on-one telephone tutorials and communication with tutors via e-mail; and
- iii) research and evaluation.

### ***Writing Instructional Materials***

It is apparent from experience that 70-80% of distance education students' study-time is spent studying instructional materials. The importance of the careful, professional and effective design of these materials is central to quality programmes. In this context, it has been noted that the British Open University (OU) has started a new era of distance education, and it has set new standards ever since its establishment in 1969 (Peters, 2001). Among these standards is the production of originally combined and professionally constructed instructional materials developed by course teams with special attention to the learning requirements of distance education students. In an attempt to develop good quality instructional material, benchmarked against international best practices, COLL made the following changes to its operations to ensure improvement of the quality of courseware:

- writers must attend a compulsory training seminar before they start with the production of instructional materials;
- writers and content editors are introduced to the method of team approach for writing distance education courseware to replace the single-writer-moderator approach;
- roles and responsibilities of the content editor, instructional designer and desktop publisher are clearly illustrated;
- checklists were developed to generate reports in order to evaluate the quality of services provided by content editors and instructional designers;
- a House Style Manual was developed to clearly guide and ensure consistency and adherence to open and distance learning principles for the development and design of instructional materials; and
- the position of Coordinator: Courseware Development has been activated and filled to drive the process of developing good quality instructional materials.

This change of approach resulted in a measurable reflection of both the quantity and quality of work produced. In addition, parity of standards and interactive, student-centred instructional materials of good quality is ensured.

Seventy-eight semester courses and a certificate programme in environmental education have been developed and revised since the institutionalisation of COLL's House Style in January 2003. This led to a remarkable change in the negative perception of ODL and an acceptance that the most sophisticated concepts can be taught in formats that off-campus students can understand. As a result, course teams in the School of Business Management are in the process of developing fourth-year level courses to be offered for the first time on the distance education mode as from January 2006. A considerable increase in student enrolment is foreseen as the demand and need for fourth-year level distance education courses are long overdue, considering the fact that many diploma graduates from the face-to-face mode are currently employed and would like to continue their studies through the distance education mode.

Furthermore, the Polytechnic's Centre for Entrepreneurial Development (CED), with its mission to support and enhance small business development and entrepreneurship through special and tailor-made programmes, is currently using the distance education instructional material for its Commercial Advancement Training Scheme (CATS) programme offered to working adults in the transportation sector. CED also makes use of COLL's Auditing study guides to offer a short course in this field. In fact, it is now common practice that students from the School of Business Management demand that COLL make instructional materials available through the Polytechnic's Printshop.

### ***Tutoring Distance Education Students***

Given that such a high proportion of students' study-time is spent on studying instructional materials and that isolation is the most prevalent characteristic of our student profile, the crucial nature of effective dialogue and tutorial support cannot be exaggerated. As in the courseware design process, much of this is carried out by a large number of part-time faculty, whose full-time professional responsibilities, qualifications and experience do not primarily relate to teaching distance education students. In order to address these professional needs, COLL embarked on professional training seminars to support and enhance capacity development among full-time faculty, responsible for tutoring distance education students.

Part of the training included the principle of using assignments as a teaching tool to improve the quality of tutoring and to facilitate dialogue between tutor and student. Furthermore, it is evident that the quality of tutorial support can be maintained by a system of moderation. As such, COLL implemented a quality control mechanism by monitoring tutor-marked assignments. The following aspects are evaluated during this process:

- comprehensiveness of tutors' comments;
- relevance of tutors' comments;
- encouraging nature of tutors' comments;
- recognition of students' originality in their answers;
- encouragement of students towards critical thinking;
- reinforcement of learning through feedback tutorial letters;
- clarification of concepts and misunderstandings through feedback tutorial letters; and
- promptness in administrative liaison with COLL.

Based on the evaluation of the above aspects, the lack of teaching through assignments, negative/unhelpful comments, delays in marking and the overall turn-around time of assignments are addressed. A report of the monitoring exercise is compiled and one-on-one counseling sessions are held with tutors in case their tutor-marking is not up to standard. This monitoring and evaluation system is not a fault-finding exercise. On the contrary, it helps COLL to motivate and appreciate the tutor-marking of faculty and to continually improve and keep up the standard of teaching through assignments.

To further assist students to study with a reasonable chance of success, the Polytechnic signed a service level agreement with the University of Namibia (UNAM) in 2003, which has been revamped and renewed in 2005. This agreement ensures decentralised student support networks at regional level throughout the country to provide, amongst others, face-to-face tutorial support and to meet the growing need of students for access to ICT facilities. This account of creating partnership and networking is regarded as a sound one as synergies are created, economies of scale are achieved and resources, both human and material, which are usually scarce in a developing country like Namibia, are optimised.

Open and distance learning provision at the Polytechnic is an ambitious attempt to provide adults in full-time employment with a university education. As has been the case in many African countries, the development of dual-mode institutions is conditioned by a variety of factors. One such factor remains the opposition and scepticism from conventional/full-time faculty about the possibility to do real academic teaching through distance education. In the case of COLL, some of this opposition and scepticism has been eradicated through tutor- and writer training seminars. Furthermore, in line with the principle of parity of standards, which underpins most dual-mode institutions (Möwes & Siaciwena, 2000), full-time and distance education students register for the same diploma and degree programme and follow the same curriculum. The content of the various study programmes is determined by full-time faculty to ensure parity and uniformity of standards between residential and distance education courses. In addition, residential and distance education students have to meet the same admission requirements and are subjected to the same examinations. It is therefore common practice and accepted at the Polytechnic that students move in and out of the different modes of study or between them. For example, students who started as distance education learners have the opportunity to enrol as full-time students when they have completed courses to a point where they could easily fit into the full-time schedules. Similarly, students who start as

full-time students have the opportunity to transfer to distance education if their circumstances or their preferences lead them to wish to do so.

### ***Research and Evaluation***

An important component of COLL's day-to-day activities is that of research and evaluation to guide its operations. To this end, COLL adopted the quality criteria for distance education, developed by the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), to conduct an internal audit through a Self Evaluation Report. This was done in preparation for an external audit, carried out in August 2003, by the Committee for Technikon Principals (CTP). As a result of this external audit and based on the recommendations made, COLL's first Coordinator for Courseware Development has been appointed to drive the process of developing good quality instructional materials.

Feedback on student progress for residential students is normally received through the regular in-class face-to-face dialogue. This is largely missing in open and distance learning. It therefore has to be created through regular and carefully designed monitoring and evaluation instruments. To attend to this, COLL embarked on carrying out research by way of an evaluation of all services provided by COLL, both at headquarters and at regional centres. A questionnaire was administered during visits to the Otjiwarongo, Tsumeb and Oshakati Regional Centres and during the April 2004 vacation school in Windhoek. All administrative and support services as well as the effectiveness of the instructional materials were evaluated on a Likert scale of 1-4 to capture distance education students' needs. Based on the preliminary results of this evaluation, the following initiatives were implemented to follow up on problems identified:

- upon registration, all students receive full contact details of their tutors to facilitate one-on-one telephone tutoring and email communication between tutor and student;
- rules on submission of assignments were revised to include electronic submission of assignments;
- two additional examination centres were established to minimise travelling and accommodation costs for students living in the south;
- two student support officers were enrolled for and successfully completed the Certificate Programme for Distance Education Practitioners offered through the University of South Africa (UNISA) and sponsored by the Commonwealth of Open Learning (COL) as support to members of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA);
- more local face-to-face tutors were recruited, which resulted in tutorials being available at regional centres where it was never offered in the past;
- orientation seminars were introduced during the April vacation school to alert students to the challenges peculiar to the distance education mode of study and to introduce to them available support services. These seminars were introduced in order to give students a sense of belonging and a solid foundation to start with their studies; and
- COLL's own website was developed and launched to offer students electronic access to vacation school timetables, contact details of tutors, COLL- and regional staff members and the various support services they are entitled to. Since the launch of the website, many prospective students also send emails to enquire about open and distance learning programmes available at the Polytechnic.

These initiatives are indeed evidence that evaluation findings are used and reflected upon and are itself one of the indicators of a quality open and distance learning system.

### ***Future Prospects for COLL***

The above account indicates that COLL has the basic structure and expertise for the provision of distance education programmes and that academic standards can be maintained in open and distance learning. COLL therefore strives to:

- improve performance and retention rates for distance education students through quality teaching;
- increase student numbers by providing more attractive and responsive curriculum through improved instructional materials, student support services and meeting students' needs;
- supplement print-based instructional material with other media such as tele-conferencing, interactive and pre-recorded radio- and video broadcasting as additional delivery mechanisms;

- achieve both quality and economies of scale through three interdependent professional functions of courseware development, student support and research and evaluation;
- change the perception that open and distance learning is a second-best alternative to residential education; and
- demonstrate and confirm that in many circumstances, for many people, and to meet national priority goals, open and distance learning are preferable, more effective and more economic than residential education.

## **Conclusion**

Though many challenges were faced and some still need to be addressed, the above account of growth, development and effectiveness in open and distance learning 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. These reforms and quality assurance practices were successfully implemented, because of the Polytechnic's responsiveness to its students' needs and expectations and senior management's recognition of the equal importance of open and distance learning programmes. 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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