

---

# Building Namibia for Competitiveness through Open and Distance Learning: A Critical Review

OO Asemota, Polytechnic of Namibia, Namibia

---

*Throughout human history, learning has been a continuous process acquired through the three methods of education, training and development. Traditionally, formal learning has been restricted to the classroom setting. But, as the society develops, a paradigm shift occurs in the system of impacting knowledge to people. In the older system, people move towards the classroom to acquire knowledge, but now education is brought to the people wherever they are and in whatever circumstances they may be. Every society is always confronted with one form of competition or another, and except countries develop their peoples through education and human capital formation, their economies stagnate. Consequently, the quality and quantity of all educational opportunities accessible to its citizenry determine their levels of industrialisation and human development indices. From the foregoing, the paper attempts to examine the history of the formal school system, open and distance learning vis-à-vis the primary, secondary and tertiary educational settings, in Namibia. More specifically, the paper will assess the strategies adopted by government in making education available to all, through open and distance learning and to further recommend ways on how open and distance learning could be managed for competitive advantage and optimum benefits.*

## Introduction

Education in its broadest sense refers to the way people acquire skills and gain knowledge (Belanger & Jordan (2000), and Tyson & York, 2000). "Education empowers", has been an axiom in the annals of history and it has therefore been shown that education is the fuel for development, industrialisation and competitiveness. For a nation to compete globally, the citizenry must acquire quality education. Consequently, every nation strives to make education accessible to all and sundry, in the form of an "investment deposit" upon which to draw for competitiveness in the global arena, in times of need. Ordinarily, education can either be formal, informal or non-formal, and which, can further be divided into four categories: General, vocational, special and adult education (Dell, 1997).

Dell (1997) further reports that education came to be, after the invention of spoken languages during pre-historic times. He continues by explaining that communication, through the medium of languages, made education to be possible, available and more efficient than the use of signs and gestures. Dell (1997) and Newman (1998) reveal that formal education started with the Sumerians of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, who invented a system of writing about 3500 BC. The Egyptians closely followed the Sumerians in the development of formal education when they developed a writing system about 3000BC. Civilisation later spread from Sumer and Egypt to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the Hebrews, or Semitic tribes.

Newman (1998) citing Grunn (1991) reports that the Babylonians advanced geometry and astronomy, the Crete had a standardised decimal system, Law codes, and medical and surgical practices; while the Hittite library had tablets in eight (8) languages and with the Chinese dictionary having 40,000 characters. She continues that recorded music appeared in sumerian cuneiform, Homer referred to advanced battlefield surgery and Indian medicine which was divorced from the priesthood, used training of anatomical models. Whereas, Dell (1997) explains that the ancient Greeks followed this trend as they later made the greatest educational advances of ancient times; western education today has been based on the ancient Greek model.

Newman (1998) citing Lamm (1996) described the foundations of modern education as the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome, Byzantine and other empires, using learning centres of the Guild system to model universities, where teachers and students form a legal body chartered by the Pope or King. As a result, professors (guild masters) awarded degrees (qualifying certificates) to students (apprentices) who worked to become master teachers in the University (Guild).

Lamm (1996) in Newman (1998) explains that Abbeys (monasteries or convents) which were self-sustaining institutions housed women who dedicated their lives and service to God acquired education, so much so that manuscript copying, research, theology, science, music and an encyclopaedia of world knowledge and history was written by these nuns. And, unfortunately, by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, universities began to replace abbeys and women's education suffered to the extent that it was almost inexistent for the 600 years that followed. Dell (1997), Newman (1998) and Belanger & Jordan (2000) suggest that other stages of educational development through time; were propagated by various peoples, groups, sects and movements, in the form of: Ancient Roman education, Religion and the spread of education, Christian education, rise of Western Universities, Renaissance, Reformation, Age of Reason and Rise of Universal State schools. Consequently, the paper attempts to examine the history of the formal school system, open and distance learning vis-à-vis the primary, secondary and tertiary educational settings, in Namibia. More specifically, the paper will also assess the strategies adopted by government in making education available to all, through open and distance learning and to further recommend ways on how open and distance learning could be managed for competitive advantage and optimum benefits.

## **Advent of Distance Education**

With the advent of new technologies, the nature of delivery and acquisition of knowledge has since changed and will continue to change with further improvements in technology. Consequently, that country which is able to embrace these changes in the context of Distance Education (DE) will undoubtedly exhibit competitive advantage over others (Belanger & Jordan, 2000, and Peters, 1998).

The evolution of technology has made remarkable in-roads into knowledge delivery to almost all nooks and crannies of the world. Before now and for thousands of years; learning through distance was conducted through forms of correspondence teaching, while refinements in the organisation and practice of learning and teaching occurred with the creation of the Open University in 1969, in England (Lockwood, 2001). Whereas, Belanger & Jordan (2000), explain that centres of learning ("Classrooms") developed around the physical locations of the teacher and within the precincts of the library, during the middle ages; Peters (1998), relates the "written dialogue" form of teaching shorthand in England by correspondence through the exchange of postcards between students and the teacher. Also that, the purest form of distance teaching occurred in Germany in the 1930s, where the teaching and instruction carried on between students and the "Leader" amongst National Association of Christian Trade Unions was completely, individual in content and context. But, Lockwood (2001) suggests that with the invention of computers, the "jinx" of physical limitations of time and space were broken, and gave way to the evolution of new technologies. Therefore, at the emergence of the new millennium, internet became the main instrument in enhancing distance education through virtual learning for academic purposes (Inglis, 2001).

Gooley et al, (2001) suggest that the realisation potential of lifelong learning in rural and remote communities poses special challenges, because the building and maintaining of technological infrastructure is foundational in providing learning access for people living and working in rural and remote areas and who are unable to attend sedentary and campus-based institutions, without information, computers and telecommunications technologies at their disposal.

Furthermore, Brown (2001) explains that learning is fundamental to individual employability, corporate competitiveness and that it should continue beyond when people leave the formal educational system. This is so because knowledge is increasingly outdated in a fast changing world, where periodic self-development and skills up-date remain the hallmarks of competitiveness. Wong & Ng (2001) relate the special circumstances and challenges confronted by a self-financing open university like in Hong Kong, in which it has to compete, retain, recruit, sustain and depend on a sizable number of distance education learners from the unpredictable pool of adult workers, and in contradistinction with those traditional universities and institutions that have depended and thrived on heavy government support, subventions and funding and which are assured of the number of students every year.

But, presently in Namibia, the universities and other institutions which exist offer both the traditional and variant hybrid forms of correspondence/distance/open education courses to learners, such that telephone/video conferencing (UNAM), some face-to-face tutoring and corresponding exchange of materials between tutors and tutees, equally occur. Similarly, NAMCOL was established to cater for remedial/extramural lessons for adult and out-of- school learners at the secondary school level in designated centres who are unable to engage in traditional formal education (Keyter, 2002).

## Namibia Education System

The primary objectives of the Education Policy in Namibia, promulgated in December 2001 provides amongst others accessible, equitable, qualitative and democratic national education service. According to that report, Education for All (EFA) was non-existent; hitherto, and pre-independence Namibia was characterised by the effects of apartheid policies that continue to have tremendous consequences in the present day independent Namibia. This was so because there was an extremely skewed and unequal allocation of resources, and access to education (Education Act, 2001). At independence, in 1990, Namibia inherited a society of inequities, inequalities and disparities in the quality and quantity of educational services which placed heavy burdens and challenges to the citizenry and government (National Report on the Development of Education in Namibia, 2004).

The report continues that the Ministry of education was established to combine the previous racial and ethnically based education authorities and undertook a comprehensive education reforms aimed at addressing and achieving these five cardinals: **access, equity, quality, democracy and lifelong learning** as principal means of investing in human capital to promote socio-economic development.

Furthermore, in 1995, the Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology (MHEVTST) was created to cater for higher education in Namibia, while the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture was to oversee the administration of basic education (MBESC). Subsequently, MBESC was administered through the departments of Formal Education Programmes (FEP) and of Culture and Lifelong learning. SACMEQ II Report (Makuwa 2004), conducted a survey on the conditions and quality of primary schools in Namibia and reported achievements made in offering basic education to the populace and National Report on Development of Education in Namibia (2004), further explains that the Department of Culture, Arts and Lifelong Learning is composed by Directorates of: Adult Basic Education; Arts Programmes; National Heritage and Culture, and National Library and Information Service. Because the formal school system in Namibia is divided into pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary levels; education through part-time and distance education programmes are only available to youths and other adults at secondary and tertiary levels, although adult basic education and literacy is also carried on (DABE, 2004).

Additionally, the National Plan of Action: 2001-2015 (2002) reports that the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) is the largest institute in Namibia that offers educational opportunities to both junior and senior secondary school learners. In order to achieve the objectives of Education For All (EFA) goals, education in the future needs to be made easily available and accessible to all Namibians regardless of their geographical locations, spread and economic situations. In view of the foregoing, therefore, the issue of distance and open learning, the challenges confronting educators and governments as to improve and develop strategies in managing open and distance learning, cannot be over-flogged (King, 2001). As a result, the future begins now and must be confronted headlong to address the human capital skills shortage (Asemota, 2004).

## Distance Learning Centres in Namibia

According to Belanger and Jordan (2000), distance learning, education or training is used for geographically dispersed individual “learners” by physical distance from the instructor using computer and telecommunication facilities. Keyter (2002) classified previous distance education providers in Namibia as: Namibian Extension College; Caprivi Correspondence College; Department of National Education SWA/Namibia; Distance Education Unit and Academy for Tertiary Education, and Distance Teaching Department; while present providers are: University of Namibia-Centre for External Studies (CES); Polytechnic of Namibia- Centre for Open and Long life Learning (COLL); Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL); National Institute for Educational Development (NIED); Colleges of Education (CE) and Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC).

## Need for Distance Learning Education

Several reasons have been adduced for the establishment of distance learning education (Lau 2000, Belanger & Jordan, 2000, and Peters, 1998):

**Learners point:** to open up new opportunities for learners that might otherwise be excluded from participating in the learning process; to strengthen autonomy and self-activity of learners through learning

by research activities, and people in remote areas, having the opportunity to pursue lifelong learning regardless of geographical location or lifestyle.

***Institutions point:*** to provide a cost effective method of delivery, and allow institutions to educate a large number of learners with relatively fewer instructors.

***Community point:*** to create equal access and opportunity, and for the overall benefit of society in increasing its literacy level through access to education.

## **Roles of Namibia Government in providing education**

The following constitute some of the structures and programmes put in place by the government in providing education access in Namibia (Sources: Education for All, National Plan of Action 2001-2015, 2001; National Report on Development in Namibia, 2004, Keyter, 2002):

- Replacement of pre-independence Bantu education with democratic pedagogical methods of education
- Total reformation of educational issues after independence with focus on “Toward Education for All” (TEFA) as the major goal
- Amalgamation of education authorities into a unified body
- Namibia Education sector fell under two ministries: MBESC and MHETEC (Re-combined, March, 2005)
- Free and Compulsory Primary education
- Introduction of semi-automatic policy in 1996, whereby learners are allowed to repeat only once in school phase, except in Grade 10
- Establishment of NAMCOL to cater for Grade 10 drop outs
- Institution of Continuous Assessment (CA) as criterion-based estimates of learners’ progress
- Establishment of National Inspectorate as watch dog to guarantee quality education in the school system
- Establishment of non-formal education through lifelong learning, which is targeted at adults and out-of-school youths, with literacy as focal point

## **Questions to ponder about distance education are:**

(Sources: Education for All, National Plan of Action 2001-2015, 2001; National Report on Development in Namibia, 2004, Keyter, 2002, Belanger & Jordan, 2000; Lockwood, 2001; Lockwood & Gooley, 2001).

- How open and accessible is education to all in Namibia?
- How can education be made more accessible?
- What strategies can be put in place to enhance open learning?
- What technologies are required and are available to achieve TEFA’s major goals of: access, equality, quality, democracy, efficiency, effectiveness and flexibility for lifelong learning?
- What funding arrangements are in place for the successful implementation of open, distance and lifelong learning?
- How sustainable will distance education be in the short, medium and longer terms in the face of dwindling resources; the re-classification of Namibia as a “medium income” earning country, coupled with the “resource sucking” implications of the scourge of HIV/AIDS?

## **Distance Learning Technologies (DLT)**

(Belanger & Jordan, 2000; Lockwood, 2001; Lockwood & Gooley, 2001, Harrison 1999, Thomas 2001, Bates 1995)

- Computer-Based Training
- Computer-Aided Instructions
- Web-Based Training
- Teleconferencing
- Videotape
- Video-Tele-Training

- Audio-media (radio, audio cassettes and audio-vision)
- Online Video Editing System-video recording of lectures combined with other visual, textual and computer-generated information that the academic edits (controls) (McGhee & O'Haran, 2001)
- Lotus Notes and Lotus Learning Space (Tyler et al, 2001)
- Electronic mail in conjunction with Web Teach (Hewson & Hughes, 2001)

## **Challenges of providing Open and Distance Learning Education in Namibia**

The underlisted represent challenges confronting open and distance education in Namibia: (Lockwood & Gooley, 2001; Robinson, 2001, ICAE 2002)

- Inadequate facilities
- Lack of appropriate technological infrastructure
- Funding problems
- Lack of expertise on the use of telecommunication facilities
- Inadequate quantity of resource persons
- Methods and modes of delivery problems/difficulties- postal, parcel, courier, speed-post, multi-media,
- Modifications, improvements and currency of open and distance learning education options available worldwide
- Sparsity of population, wide and far between locations and disparate economic circumstances
- Harsh and unfriendly terrains
- Different and diverse educationally readiness stages of local peoples that constitute the Namibian nation-state
- Reduced per capita funding for teaching and training
- Increasing competition
- Desire to increase access to disadvantaged groups
- Need to provide the most valuable learning experience possible
- Stakeholders willing to take risks and to innovate
- Danger of duplication and wasted effort
- Continuing professional development
- Organisational aspects
- Copyright issues
- Promoting the acquisition of life-skills
- Expanding adult literacy
- Enhancing educational quality

## **Strategies for achieving a Viable Open and Distance Learning Education**

Generally, achieving a viable open and distance learning education strategic benefits for Namibia involve constraints curtailment and resolution of: (Sources: Education for All, National Plan of Action 2001-2015, 2001; National Report on Development in Namibia, 2004, Keyter, 2002, Belanger & Jordan, 2000; Lockwood, 2001; Lockwood & Gooley, 2001).

- Costs
- Needs Analysis
- Budget
- Target audience
- Objectives of setting up Open and Distance Learning Education (ODL)
- Human Capital expertise
- Tools/Techniques
- Infrastructure
- Training

In order to accomplish that much, (Belanger & Jordan, 2000; Lockwood & Gooley, 2001; Robinson, 2001) the following are recommended for a viable and effective Distance Learning:

- Assess current infrastructure
- Conduct feasibility study to determine whether courses are suitable for DL
- Develop strategic plan for education and training

- Prepare budget to accommodate the required needs
- Identify all stakeholders
- Understand the interests, roles, responsibilities of each stakeholder
- Management of the Distance Learning programme/project
- Train personnel
- Upgrade infrastructure to support Distance Learning
- Establish learning centres
- Adopt change management techniques and organisational communication processes to sustain stakeholders continuous support

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The distance education offered in Namibia can be termed as distance learning through hybrid open and distance education courses because distance learning technologies or tools are either lacking, or inadequate. As a result, the use of e-learning as medium of distance learning service delivery is still posing a great challenge to distance education providers in the country. Consequently, school administrators should adopt flexible management systems, develop skills for managing people and also create enabling environments for effective and efficient performance of their staff, students and seek co-operation from parents/guardians and the community, at large, for the needed competitiveness and optimum benefits.

It is, therefore, strongly recommended that further research is carried out amongst and between the differing nation states that comprise Namibia with a view to understanding and establishing their special and peculiar circumstances, so as to bridge the gaps between different educationally readiness stages of each of these peoples for sustainable development and also for reaping the associated benefits derivable from access to open and distance learning education in Namibia.

## **References**

ASEMOTA, O.O. 2004. Managing human capital for optimum performance. 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference- Entrepreneurship in Africa: Sustainable Globalisation. Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa.

BATES, W.A. 1997. Technology, Open Learning and Distance Education. Routledge studies in Distance Education. Great Britain.

BELANGER, F. & JORDAN, H.D. 2000. Evaluation and Implementation of Distance Learning: Technologies, Tools and Techniques. Idea Group Publishing. USA.

BROWN, S. 2001. Campus Re-engineering. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK; 122-132

DELL, R. W. (ed) 1997. The World Book Encyclopedia. World Book International: A Scott Fetzer Company. London. Vol. 6 (E).

DIRECTORATE OF ADULT EDUCATION (DABE) 2004. Monitoring and evaluation subdivision. Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture. Windhoek. Namibia.

EDUCATION FOR ALL (EFA) NAMIBIA 2004. EFA Inception Report of Activities for 2003/2004. UNESCO, UNDP UNICEF, UNFPA. Geneva.

EDUCATION FOR ALL (EFA) 2002. National Plan of Action 2001-2015. Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture. Windhoek, Namibia.

GOOLEY, A. SKIPPINGTON, P & TOWERS, S. 2001. Lifelong Learning: Generating New Learning Opportunities. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 111-121

HARRISON, N. 1999. How to Design Self-Directed and Distance Learning Programs. A Guide for Creators of Web-Based Training, Computer-Based Training, Self-Study Materials. McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. N.Y.

HEWSON, L. & HUGHES, C. 2001. Generic structures for online teaching and learning. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 76-87.

ICAE 2002. The Right to Learn Throughout Life; Follow-Up of the Accomplishment of CONFINTEA'S Commitments and Education For All (EFA) Goals. Geneva.

INGLIS, A. 2001. Selecting an integrated learning environment. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 88-99.

KEYTER, A. C. 2002. A distance education management model for the Polytechnic of Namibia. Ph d. Thesis, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

KING, B. 2001. Making a virtue- a low-cost, comprehensive on-line teaching and learning environment. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 51-62.

LAU, L. 2000. Distance Learning Technologies: Issues, Trends and Opportunities. Idea Group Publishing, USA.

LOCKWOOD, F. 2001. Innovation in distributed learning: creating the environment. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 1-14.

LOCKWOOD, F. & GOOLEY, A. 2001. Innovation in open and distance learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK.

MAKUWA, K.D. 2004. SACMEQ 11 Report: A study of the Conditions of Schooling and the Quality of Primary Education in Namibia. UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), Paris.

MCGHEE, P. & O'HARAN, C. 2001. VESOL: cost effective video production to support distance learners. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 189-200.

NATIONAL REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA 2004. International conference on education. Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture. Republic of Namibia, Geneva.

NEWMAN, R. M. 1998. A History of Formal Education. Henderson, MI: <http://www.shianet.org/~renew/HUM501.html> (accessed 07/30/2005).

PETERS, O. 1998. Learning and Teaching in Distance Education. Analyses and Interpretations from an International Perspective. Kogan Page, London.

ROBINSON, B. 2001. Innovation in open and distance learning: some lessons from experience and research. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 15-26.

THOMAS, J. 2001. Audio for distance education and open learning. A practical guide for planners and producers. The Commonwealth of Learning and the International Extension College.

TYLER, S. GREEN, M. & SIMPSON, C. 2001. Experimenting in lotus learning space. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 63-75.

TYSON, S. & YORK, A. 2000. Essentials of human resource management, (fourth edition). Butterworth Heinemann Publications. Great Britain.

WONG, D.S.N. & NG, T. C. Y. 2001. Student recruitment and retention in a self-financing University. In Innovation in Open & Distance Learning: Successful Development of Online and Web-Based Learning (Lockwood, F. & Gooley, A.; eds.), Kogan Page Ltd. UK: 133-147.