

Institutional Open and Distance Learning Collaboration in Namibia

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Abstract : Social and economic development depends to a large extent on applicable knowledge, skills and attitudes. In this regard the Government of Namibia has given the highest priority to education in the national budget of the country since independence in 1990. Due to the fact that not all learning can be provided through formal education on campus at schools, colleges and institutions of higher education, open and distance learning have become a viable alternative. In recent years Namibia has seen a rapid expansion of open and distance learning, which provides many thousands of Namibians the opportunity to study part-time to improve their qualifications. However, in order to provide an effective and efficient service to the open and distance learning students in Namibia, the four publicly-funded institutions involved in open and distance learning activities embarked on a mission to collaborate. The result of this collaborative effort is the establishment of the Namibian Open Learning Network (NOLNeT). This article gives an overview of this collaborative effort amongst the four Namibian publicly-funded institutions.

Introduction

Namibia, formerly called South West Africa, was colonised by Germany in 1884. Like Germany's other colonies at the close of World War I, it became a League of Nations mandate whose administration was assigned to an allied power, in this case, Great Britain. Britain in turn delegated Namibia's administration to South Africa. South Africa administered the country until independence on 21 March 1990.

When Namibia became independent the main task of the Namibian government was to address the multifaceted and complex tasks of national reconstruction and development. The success of these undertakings by the Government of Namibia depends heavily on its education system. Education is therefore a central priority of the Namibian Government (National Planning Commission (NPC), 1998).

Namibia is a large country with a very unevenly spread population. Its previous education history has led to an equally uneven distribution of tertiary qualifications among its different communities. In addition, the institutional infrastructure at tertiary level that could permit a part-time alternative simply does not exist throughout the country, especially in the northern part of Namibia where the previously most disadvantaged and majority of the people live and work. These factors, size and unequal access to the education system make it essential to use open and distance learning

(ODL) facilities to reach out to all corners of the country and to redress the inherited inequities.

Importance of Open and Distance Learning in Namibia

At independence, Namibia inherited an education system that was characterised by gross inequalities in the allocation of resources to schools for different ethnic groups. However, the country's unique geographical circumstances, namely a surface area of 823,000 square kilometers, with a population of 1,65 million unevenly distributed over vast distances have posed additional barriers to overcoming this legacy of unequal access. Furthermore, the country cannot afford to release large numbers of its professional, managerial, and para-professional staff for extended periods of in-service full-time training or upgrading (Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology (MHEVTST), 1998). Such a strategy for redressing inherited inequities would prove too costly and too disruptive to daily activities.

Numerous studies undertaken within Namibia and government documents published since independence, 12 years ago, have highlighted the shortage of educated, skilled and experienced human resources in the Namibian labour market. According to official statistics, Namibia's population is dominated by young people, with over 42 percent below the age of 15 years (NPC, 1994). In recognition of the central role of education and training in the process of national development, the Namibian government has allocated some 25 percent of the 2002 annual budget expenditure to the Ministry of Higher Education, Training and Employment Creation (MHETEC) and the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture (MBESC) (Ministry of Finance, Annual Budget, 2002).

On the national level the Government of Namibia has laid down clear policy objectives to meet the needs and especially the educational needs of the people of the country. In this regard article 20 of Namibia's constitution, adapted in 1990 provides for education as the right of all residents and for compulsory primary education for all children. In order to achieve this goal a unified structure for educational administration was created and set up in 1991. By 1993 a basic document setting out the government's vision for education, culture and training was published, namely "*Towards Education for All*". This policy document focused attention on five main goals for the educational sector, namely, access, equity, democracy, quality and efficiency.

The main aim of the government of Namibia's strategy for the development of higher education is "to fashion a mix of central direction and control and an openness to innovation and diversity". (MHEVTST, 1998, p. 7) This policy ensures multiple pathways for students to enter and complete their studies at post-secondary level. In addition, it attaches a high value to the independence and self-governance of tertiary institutions, allowing them great latitude in determining which programmes are offered, who may be admitted and what standards must be achieved in order to qualify for academic awards (MHEVTST, 1998).

Even before Namibia gained independence, it was recognised that ODL had the potential to address Namibia's educational and training needs in a cost-effective manner. The experience of other neighbouring countries has shown that courses of comparable or higher quality can be provided through ODL. Furthermore, ODL has the flexibility to accommodate the varying levels of enrolments and the capacity to reach out to all corners of the country. Given the financial realities that constrains the development and maintenance of traditional education institutions, the only real prospects of significantly increased participation in senior secondary and tertiary education lies in the development of ODL programmes. According to the White Paper on Higher Education:

"...open and distance learning can in the very near future offer the majority of Namibian adults the most economic, effective, and available opportunities to seek tertiary level qualifications. Limited financial resources, family and professional responsibilities, and geography make other alternatives unaffordable or inaccessible" (MHEVTST, 1998, p. 68).

ODL can also play a very important role in the provision of opportunities for lifelong learning, which is central to the country's social and economic development (MBECYS, 1993). Since independence in 1990, the educational system in Namibia has been transformed at all levels. At secondary level, reforms have led to a balanced curriculum and dramatic increases in the number of students. However, according to the National Human Resource Plan over a quarter of a million secondary school leavers will be unable to find employment between 2000 and the year 2020 (NPC, 1995). Furthermore, the tertiary education sector in Namibia has been characterised as follows:

"Generally supply driven rather than need driven or demand driven, other programmes in our higher education institutions also seem out of touch with current realities. There is, therefore, an urgent need to synchronise tertiary education programmes with the rest of the education system and with the development needs of the country" (MHEVTST, 1998, p. 5).

Over the last decade, participation in ODL programmes has expanded dramatically. In 1998, over half (52 percent) of all Namibians studying at tertiary level were enrolled for ODL programmes with institutions in Namibia and South Africa. In addition, 47 percent of candidates, who entered for the two sessions of the International General Certificate for Secondary Education (IGCSE), (Grade 12) examination in 1999, had prepared through ODL courses (Du Vivier, 1999). Although ODL is currently seen as the "inferior" part of the formal education system, it is likely to play an ever-increasing role in the development of Namibia's human resources.

In recent years Namibia has seen a rapid expansion of ODL, which enables many thousands of Namibians to study part-time and improve their qualifications and economic prospects. For a developing country, Namibia is well endowed with publicly-funded ODL institutions. In addition, because of its historical ties and relative proximity to the South African market, a number of public and private sectors ODL institutions in that country also enroll Namibian students. Such South African public academic institutions include Vista University, University of South Africa (UNISA), Techikon Southern Africa (TSA) and Rand Afrikaans University. Amongst the South African private sector

institutions are Sukses Correspondence College, Lyceum Correspondence College, INTEC College, Rapid Results College and Damelin Correspondence College. It is estimated that over 30,000 Namibians are enrolled for programmes of ODL (Du Vivier, 1999, p.1).

Present Provision of Open and Distance Learning

In the public sector in Namibia, there are four institutions involved in offering ODL programmes, namely:

- the University of Namibia, (UNAM);
- the Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN);
- the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL); and
- the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED).

Each of the publicly-funded institutions in Namibia will be briefly described to explain their involvement in ODL.

University of Namibia

After Namibia became independent in 1990, the Namibian government appointed a Presidential Commission on Higher Education, composed of local and international scholars to address issues of concern regarding higher education in Namibia. The terms of reference of the Commission were to:

- establish the needs, demands and scope of higher education;
- determine the institution and structure of the higher education system, including the nature and location of higher education institutions;
- analyse the funding of higher education, both recurrent and capital;
- determine the qualifications for admission to and the duration of the various higher education programmes;
- define the control of higher education and its relationship with the government;
- determine the range and level of programmes in the higher education system;
- determine the extent of the higher education system in the medium and long term, in relation to national human resource needs;
- consider the financial support of students at Namibian and foreign higher educational institutions; and
- analyse the promotion, conduct and financing of the nation's research.

(Report of the Presidential Commission on Higher Education, 1991, p. 1)

The Presidential Commission submitted its report in September 1991 and recommended that the former Academy for Tertiary Education be dissolved and that a new national university and a polytechnic should be established. The Academy for Tertiary Education

was founded in 1980 to make tertiary and out-of-school education available to all the people of Namibia. The Academy at that stage consisted of three components, namely a university, a technikon and a college for out-of-school training (COST). However, the Academy for Tertiary Education Act, 1980, Act 13 of 1980, did not provide for the Academy to act as an autonomous university conferring its own degrees and professorships. Initially, the Academy was affiliated to UNISA. A formal academic agreement was reached between UNISA and the Academy in terms of which the Academy was recognised not only as an acknowledged tertiary institution under the statute of UNISA, but also by the Joint Statute of Universities in South Africa.

The Commission furthermore recommended that higher education in the country should be coherent and responsive to national development goals, needs, and employment requirements, especially taking into consideration the imbalances and malpractices of pre-independence regimes. The Presidential Commission on Higher Education also proposed that there should be a clear distinction between pre-tertiary and tertiary ODL programmes.

UNAM was established in terms of the University of Namibia Act, 1992, Act 18 of 1992. The university act affirmed the autonomy of UNAM and its commitment to the spirit and letter of free academic inquiry. The act stresses the intention of UNAM of being responsive to the social, economic, cultural, scientific and academic needs of Namibia. Indeed, UNAM's motto is "Education to Serve Development".

After the establishment of UNAM in 1992, UNAM took responsibility for the management and administration of the technikon and COST programmes until the PoN was established. The university administration also decided to reform and restructure ODL at the tertiary level in accordance with the proposals of the Presidential Commission on Higher Education in Namibia.

Open and distance learning at UNAM has been in existence since the establishment of the Academy for Tertiary education sixteen years ago. Initially the courses offered were either UNISA courses or courses very closely modeled on UNISA's correspondence courses.

As the rebirth of the new, post-independence UNAM came closer, the management of UNAM recognised the importance of ODL and decided to give ODL the prominence it deserves within the university structures. To this end the Centre for External Studies (CES) was established.

The mission of the CES is to make education accessible to all members of the community through the provision of ODL programmes. This mission is a sub-statement of the mission statement of UNAM, and is more precisely elaborated as to:

- develop and provide extension and ODL outreach programmes;
- identify and determine where needs exist for the provision of ODL programmes;
- provide professional ODL advice to all faculties of UNAM and other educational institutions and providers;
- develop and administer training programmes for all involved in the development and production of ODL courseware;

- design and administer programme delivery systems including materials and students support services;
- recruit, train, and supervise tutorial staff required for programmes delivery;
- develop and administer appropriate assessment systems for programmes in collaboration with other UNAM faculties;
- in collaboration with other faculties, determine programme content, syllabi, assessment and validation procedures before the writing stage; and
- coordinate the writing, editing and production, printing and distribution of courseware required for the delivery of ODL programmes.

(CES/UNAM Yearbook, 2002, p. 3)

As far as ODL is concerned the UNAM subscribes to a dual mode pattern and can therefore be classified as a mixed or dual-mode institution. At the time of its establishment, CES inherited a programme of distance education offerings from the former Academy. The Academy programmes consisted almost exclusively of certificate and diploma programmes in teacher education, while certificate and diploma programmes in public administration and police science were subsequently assigned to the PoN in 1995. The CES currently offers the following programmes through ODL:

- Diploma in African Languages ;
- In-Service Basic Education Teachers Diploma ;
- Diploma in Adult Education and Community Development ;
- Bachelor of Nursing Science (Advanced Practice) ;
- Bachelor of Education; and
- Bachelor of Business Administration.

(CES/UNAM Yearbook, 2002).

Beginning in 1999, CES also implemented a bridging programme in english, mathematics, physical science and biology on a pilot basis in northern Namibia. The aim of the programme is to assist students who need to upgrade their english language and mathematical skills in order to gain admission to UNAM's full-time programmes. CES also organises short courses, seminars, public lectures and radio broadcasts as part of its continuing education activities.

UNAM also maintains nine regional centres in the country. The management and control of the centres were assigned to CES. In 1994 UNAM introduced a number of initiatives aimed at addressing the support needs of students with a view to enrich their learning experience. To this end UNAM began to upgrade the nine regional decentralised centres. The aim of the decentralised centres is to create a supportive learning environment by providing students with a wide range of student support services.

In the context of drafting the second five-year plan for UNAM, a number of proposals have been made to expand the centres, role. These include:

- development of partnerships between UNAM and private and public sector employees to create tailor-made training programmes;

- introduction of a nationwide programme of UNAM outreach/lifelong learning;
- management and delivery of ODL programmes as a service agency for other tertiary institutions; and
- creation of a national facility for research, experimentation and training in distance learning, adult education, lifelong learning and communication.

(UNAM Draft Strategic Plan, 1999, p. 36).

Polytechnic of Namibia

The PoN has its roots in the establishment of the Academy for Tertiary Education. Classes in vocational, teacher and secretarial training started in January 1980. Five years later, in 1985, the technikon component of the Academy for Tertiary Education offered a total of 17 diploma and certificate programmes in agriculture and nature conservation, personnel management, public administration, cost accounting, secretarial training and communicative and legal training while COST offered a total of 13 certificate programmes in technical, commercial and pre-tertiary teacher education.

Although the Presidential Commission on Higher Education recommended the establishment of two institutions of higher learning, only the UNAM came into existence in 1992. This implies that the administration and management of both the technikon and COST were placed under the auspices of the new university until the promulgation of the PoN act.

Two years later, in 1994, the PoN was established. In terms of the Polytechnic of Namibia Act, 1994, Act 33 of 1994, the technikon and the COST merged to become the PoN. The PoN act defines its responsibilities as to:

- provide post-secondary education;
- provide continuing education at the post-secondary level;
- undertake research;
- ensure the existence of equal opportunities; and
- safeguard effective collegial governance.

The mission of the PoN is to contribute to Namibian development by providing tertiary technological career-oriented education at internationally recognised standards. The instruction programmes of the PoN are aimed at meeting the needs of industry. With emphasis on the transfer of technology, the PoN gives due regard to the professional human resources requirements of the country and those of the region and beyond. The PoN act also provides for the gradual phasing out of vocational training courses and the granting of degrees by the PoN.

The student enrolment profile of the PoN demonstrates a very wide diversity of teaching, PoN's commitment to working hand-in-hand with business, industry and the government to provide courses to meet the demands of a changing workforce, has resulted in a large and varied range of programmes. These include full-time, part-time, on-campus and ODL programmes. Indeed, there is a course to suit each and every student.

- encourage the PoN to provide more flexible study options, by reviewing and reducing administrative barriers.

The PoN through the COLL currently offers the following courses through ODL:

- National Certificate in Public Administration;
 - National Certificate in Police Science;
 - National Certificate in Business Administration;
 - National Higher Certificate in Public Administration;
 - National Higher Certificate in Police Science;
 - National Diploma in Public Administration;
 - National Diploma In Public Management ;
 - National Diploma in Police Science;
 - National Diploma in Marketing;
 - National Diploma in Human Resources Management;
 - National Diploma in Accounting and Finance;
 - B.Tech in Nature Conservation; and
 - B.Tech in Agriculture Management.
- (PoN Prospectus, 2002).

The bachelor of technology degrees (B.Tech) in nature conservation and agricultural management are offered in conjunction with TSA by a special arrangement.

Namibian College of Open Learning

Prior to 1990, two pre-tertiary distance education programmes served the needs of Namibian students. The Department of National Education offered educators in the country opportunities to upgrade their qualifications while the Namibian Extension Unit enabled those in exile to continue their education. After independence, these programmes were consolidated under the Department of Adult and Non-Formal Education in the Ministry. When NAMCOL was first created as a separate directorate within the Ministry in December 1994, it assumed responsibility for all non-formal programmes for Grade 10 and Grade 12 students. This was the first step towards the establishment of the college as a statutory institution under the direction of a board of governors appointed by the minister. This process was completed in April 1998 when NAMCOL took over all alternative secondary education programmes previously offered by the MBECYS.

NAMCOL was created specifically as an ODL institution to address the needs of out-of-school youth and adults who are unable to engage in conventional school-based education. Section 4 of the Namibian College for Open Learning Act 1997, Act 1 of 1997, provides NAMCOL with a broad mandate to design, develop and offer programmes intended to upgrade and enhance levels of general education, professional skills, vocational skills, managerial skills and economic self-improvement.

The act further enjoins NAMCOL to create learning opportunities using modern instructional techniques and technological equipment. Although the act does not place

any restrictions on the level of programmes NAMCOL may offer, to date NAMCOL has limited itself to pre-degree offerings in order to avoid competition with other publicly-funded institutions in Namibia.

Traditionally, NAMCOL's core activity has been its programme of alternative secondary education, which is, based on the same curricula and syllabi used in schools. Learners can opt to study through either the ODL mode or by means of face-to-face tutorials at one of approximately eighty centres around the country. Approximately half of NAMCOL's learners opt for face-to-face tuition. However, while these tutorials resemble teaching in a conventional classroom environment, learners are expected to spend a comparable amount of time in independent study if they are to pass the examination. In addition, NAMCOL offers an ODL programme leading to the Certificate in Education for Development in conjunction with the University of South Africa Adult Basic Education Training Institute. A recent report on market options for NAMCOL recommends further investigation of the following areas:

- bridging programmes to assist students to gain access to tertiary education;
- educational upgrading programmes for company employees;
- practical english programmes;
- training programmes for trade and craft workers;
- business and financial programmes; and
- computer and secretarial programmes.

(Du Vivier; 1999, p. 7)

NAMCOL currently offers the following programmes through ODL:

- Junior Secondary Certificate (Grade 10);
- International General Certificate in School Education (Grade 12); and
- Certificate in Education for Development.

National Institute for Educational Development

The NIED was established in 1991 to spearhead the reform of the formal education system through curriculum and materials research and development, pre-service and in-service training of teachers and general educational research.

Currently, NIED is a line directorate within the MBESC, reporting directly to the permanent secretary, though various options for increased autonomy are under discussion. With the introduction of the Basic Education Teachers Diploma (BETD) as the standard qualification for teachers in basic education (Grades 1 - 10), the four existing colleges of education in Windhoek, Rundu, Oshakati and Katima Mulilo were assigned responsibility for offering this programme for pre-service candidates. In addition, an in-service BETD through ODL was envisaged to enable unqualified educators to complete their studies while continuing with their teaching duties. However, because the colleges for education lacked a capacity for ODL, NIED became involved in the development and piloting of the in-service programme with funding from the United

Nations Development Program and the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organisation.

In 1997, a review of the BETD in-service programme was carried out by an external consultant. As a result of his recommendations, it was decided that the future development and delivery of this programme would be the responsibility of a consortium of institutions, involving NIED, UNAM, the colleges of education and teachers' resource centres. Beginning 2002 UNAM has taken over the management and administration of the programme while NIED will retain control over issues of policy and curriculum.

While the Government of Namibia wishes to encourage diversity in the higher education sector, centralised direction is still required to ensure that the public interest is not overloaded by institutions pursuing their separate priorities. In this regard the MHETEC provides centralized direction in terms of higher education within Namibia. Furthermore, the budgets of all institutions of higher learning, for example the PoN and UNAM, are approved by the MHETEC.

Collaboration Between the Four Publicly Funded Institutions

In late 1997, an external consultant carried out a critical review of distance education programmes at the request of the MHEVTST and the Working Group on In-Service Training of Teachers and School Managers. The report recommended, *inter alia*:

- that MHEVTST and MBEC jointly established a body that will review and coordinate the ODL offerings of public institutions in Namibia to ensure these offerings overlap to the minimum extent possible and that support services are provided collaboratively;
- that such a body include at least representatives from each ministry and each of the institutions involved;
- that it be empowered to review existing and planned ODL programmes from public institutions in Namibia and to ensure effective coordination among the provider institutions is achieved (Du Vivier, 1999, p. 12).

The recommendations made in the report were endorsed by both ministries of education in 1997. This resulted in the establishment of a high-level Steering Committee to guide the process. In addition, a Working Group was assigned the task of investigating practical ways in which the institutions could coordinate their ODL programmes and collaborate in the provision of services to students.

Partner institutions and functions of NOLNeT

Since all of these institutions previously described are dependent upon government subsidies, the development of ODL programmes is hampered by funding constraints in the current financial climate. However, during 1999 and 2000 the four publicly-funded institutions involved in ODL worked together with the MHEVTST and the MBECYS to coordinate their activities. These efforts resulted in the establishment of a National

Trust, to be known as the Namibian Open Learning Network (NOLNeT) in June 2001, which will act as the legal vehicle for joint initiatives. In July 2001, a charitable trust was established to coordinate and support this initiative. The Board of Trustees currently consists of the following bodies:

- Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture (MBESC);
- Ministry of Higher Education, Training and Employment Creation (MHETEC);
- Namibian College of Open Learning;
- National Institute of Educational Development;
- Polytechnic of Namibia; and
- University of Namibia.

The Board of Trustees determines broad policy and provides overall direction, while the responsibility for implementing NOLNeT's programmes has been delegated to a Management Committee. In terms of the smart partnership forged between the partner institutions, they will co-operate in terms of:

- encouraging the optimal use of ODL in the Namibian education system;
- enhancing public perceptions of ODL;
- building capacity for ODL institutions to address national priorities for human resources development;
- increasing the efficiency of ODL providers, in terms of both improved learning outcomes and enhanced employability of graduates in the labour market;
- increasing the cost effectiveness of ODL programmes, so that the State can obtain maximum value for the resources it commits, either through direct subsidies or by way of financial assistance to students;
- contributing to improved quality standards for the courses provided through ODL methods;
- broadening the range of courses available to the public through ODL;
- providing improved administrative and support services for students;
- working towards improved arrangements for recognition and articulation of programme offerings among ODL providers, and between them and other higher education institutions; and
- enhancing representation of ODL students and establishing procedures for addressing their complaints

One practical outcome of this collaborative effort amongst the partner institutions has been the support for a network of centres around the country, in order to provide improved study facilities for ODL students. With the financial assistance of the European Union-funded Namibia Human Resources Development Programme, over four and a half million Namibian dollars (US\$ 450,000) have been made available for equipping these centres with equipment and materials. In return for agreeing to affiliate to NOLNeT, these centres receive computers, audio-visual equipment, photocopiers, books and other material.

Categories of centres

Part-time study is not easy and ODL students face an uphill struggle to make a success of their studies. It is, therefore, of vital importance that there should be centres as near as possible to the students to provide resources, support, encouragement and assistance with communication between students and their tutors at the respective institutions. With support from the European Union-funded Namibia Human Resources Development Programme, NOLNeT has provided computers, audio-visual equipment, books and other resources to a network of open learning centres throughout the length and breadth of Namibia. NOLNET is also a network of open learning centres where students studying through ODL can gain access to the equipment, reference books and other materials they need to make a success of their studies. No new centres were established. However, the existing UNAM regional centres, NAMCOL centres, teachers resource centres, community centres and libraries all over the country are used as NOLNeT centres. This implies that the NOLNeT network currently includes all forty-five centres located throughout Namibia. These centres can be divided into three different categories of centres, namely:

- Category 1 or Regional Centres;
- Category 2 Centres; and
- Category 2 + Centres.

Category 1 or regional centres

Provision has been made for one highly resourced center in the principal town/city of each of Namibia's thirteen political regions. Support will be provided to existing centres, which already have one or more full-time staff, in order to assist them in providing the following facilities.

- reference library with books for tertiary and secondary-level programmes;
- photocopying facilities;
- audio tape players with headphones and a selection of educational cassettes;
- television and video cassette recorders with headphones and a selection of educational videos;
- two or more multi-media personal computers, linked to the internet and with a selection of software;
- computer printing facilities;
- telephone/fax machine for use by ODL students in connection with their studies.

Category 2 centres

Centres in areas outside regional capitals have also been considered for support through the Open Learning Network initiative. In general, such centres should have at least one full-time staff member and adequate space for students to study. The project can then supply the following resources as required:

- reference books (for secondary-level programmes only);
- photocopier;
- audio tape players with headphones and a selection of educational cassettes;
- telephone/ fax machine for use by ODL students in connection with their studies.

Category 2+ centres

Some rural centres already have all of the equipment listed above for Category 2 centres. In addition, however, these centres have been supplied with internet-linked computers through other projects. Such centres have provisionally been assigned to Category 2+ and will be invited to affiliate to the network. In return, NOLNeT will supply them with books and other educational materials for secondary-level courses and teacher upgrading programmes.

In each of the thirteen political regions of Namibia there is at least one centre with all the facilities where students of the partner institutions can get assistance. At these centres students will be able to:

- search the Internet for information they might need and tap into on-line databases around the world;
- communicate with their tutor markers by e-mail, fax and telephone;
- use audio and video tapes to supplement the written study materials and enhance their learning; and
- use the library to find print-based resources recommended for their studies.

The strength of NOLNeT lies in the fact that they did not create something new, but rather built upon existing structures and encouraged the sharing of resources in order to maximise the benefits of all users. The advantages of this collaborative arrangement amongst the four publicly-funded institutions can be summarised as follows:

- minimising overlap or duplication of courses;
- eliminating competition of courses and facilities;
- maximising potential economics of scale;
- eliminating competition for qualified staff (both full- and part-time);
- making the best use of new and existing infrastructure;
- improving courseware design and production;
- improving student support services;
- enhancing staff development (including part-time and contract staff);
- maximising capacity for research and development; and
- enhancing public perceptions of the value of open and distance learning

(Du Vivier, 1999, p. 13).

Furthermore, the purpose of the collaborative efforts through NOLNeT is to contribute to the social and economic advancement of all Namibians by building capacity within the publicly-funded institutions involved in ODL, and by the delivery, through

ODL of the better quality, more cost effective education and training that is responsive to the needs of diverse groups in Namibia.

Although all these facilities were put in place to be used by the ODL students of all the partner institutions, they are not for exclusive use. These facilities can also be used by any member of the community who can take advantage of the equipment and materials provided at the NOLNeT-affiliated centres.

Future Activities to be Undertaken by NolNet

Operating alone is expensive and time-consuming. NOLNeT believes that the core strategy for the cost-effective implementation of an integrated flexible learning system is inter-institutional partnerships as opposed to a fragmented and costly collection of learning institutions. Each NOLNeT partner will have to make strategic decisions with regard to its role in education. These will include a decision as to, which of the options on the flexible learning spectrum will be made available to students and learners. In this way the capacity of the whole system can be used to meet the diverse and extensive needs of more students in an affordable manner while ensuring quality. The strategic decisions will have to be made in the interests of the system as a whole and not solely from an institutional perspective.

Besides sharing of regional centres and facilities to provide a service to the ODL student, NOLNeT has identified the following areas of future cooperation, namely:

- Joint staff development;
- Extension of the range of administrative services;
- Student support;
- Instructional design services;
- Courseware design and development; and
- A menu of academic offerings.

Inter-institutional collaboration in an organisation like NOLNeT will definitely save costs for all partner institutions. The future activities to be undertaken by NOLNeT will definitely leads to the rendering of effective and efficient services to all ODL students in Namibia.

Conclusion

NOLNeT has made a significant contribution to the advancement of ODL in Namibia. Although the different partners involved in NOLNeT have different goals and priorities, common ground still exists to nurture and support inter-institutional collaboration. In the spirit of smart partnership, NOLNeT contribute to the development of the Namibian nation.

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