

https://dspace.org/

Open and distance learning staff development : an impact evaluation of a southern African collaborative programme.

Nonyongo, Evelyn Pulane

2008-06-18T10:06:15Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/4961

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study is an evaluation of the first southern African formal certificate level staff development programme involving a collaboration between four partners: the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), the University of South Africa (UNISA) Institute for Continuing Education (ICE), the South African Committee for Higher Education Trust (SACHED) Distance Education and Training Unit (DETU) and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). The programme concerned is the Certificate for Distance Education Practitioners (CDEP), an introduction course to open and distance learning (ODL) theory and practices which is also offered through the mode of ODL. An evaluation of the impact of this programme is aimed at assisting its providers and users to arrive at informed decisions about the programme's future.

1.2 AIM

The aim of this study is to evaluate, from a qualitative research perspective, the impact of the CDEP. The CDEP is a multi-faceted Southern African Development Community (SADC) region collaboration programme. The programme providing partners in this collaboration are a non-governmental organisation, the SACHED-DETU and a public university, UNISA-ICE. The users are member organisations of a regional professional association, DEASA who are

supported financially by COL, an international organisations fostering collaboration in the Commonwealth. The overall intention of the study is to provide a description and interpretation of the CDEP collaboration, its impact on institutions' conceptions and practices in ODL and its contribution to ODL practices in southern Africa.

This study is part of a three-pronged strategy aimed at investigating the impact of the recent changes that UNISA has introduced to shift its ODL provision towards more learner-centred and decentralised approaches. The first study investigated institutional management of learner support and its key finding was that despite the limitations highlighted in the study there were "definite signs that UNISA has taken the quantum leap towards a learner centred approach to distance education" (Ngengebule 1995: 58). The second concentrated on decentralised tutorial support and its main finding was that the impact of the tutorial programme was its significant contribution to changes in UNISA's tuition policy and improvement in ODL practices within the organisation (Chadibe 2000: 17). The third, that is, this study focuses on staff development and training.

Learner-centred ODL assumes, inter alia, decentralisation, but also integration of all aspects of provision. Decentralisation is one mechanism for increasing learner access to support services. Because South African ODL has until recently been mainly centralised at institutional headquarters, decentralisation presents major challenges for the management of learner support services, staff development practices and professionalisation of ODL. These three studies are, thus, interlinked and central to changing UNISA's ODL provision towards a more integrated, decentralised, learner-centred model.

The focus of this study is only on the staff development part of the three-pronged strategy. It is, in contrast to the other two strategies mentioned above, evaluating a programme that is Southern African in outreach, involving twenty one ODL organisations: nineteen ODL providing organisations in five SADC countries (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland and South Africa); a regional ODL professional association, DEASA; and an international organisation that fosters ODL collaboration, COL (see Chapter 3, Figure 3.2: List of CDEP participating organisations for names and categories of organisations involved).

1.3 RATIONALE

The reasons for this study are four-fold.

The first reason is that the study will inform the providers, users and sponsors of the CDEP on the impact of the programme including its strengths and weaknesses and, thus, contribute to their decision-making by presenting a comprehensive understanding of the CDEP. This will enable them, where necessary, to find measures for improvement and/or changing the nature of the innovation. A well researched demonstration of the impact of the CDEP is important for the partners for several reasons. Face-to-face staff development programmes are costly and take practitioners away from their work stations for protracted periods of time, resulting in the need for alternative staffing arrangements during staff's period of absence. As an ODL programme, the CDEP averts these disadvantages and could be a cost-effective method for large scale institutional staff development and training and, thus, enabling institutions to provide greater

access to training for staff, especially part-time and lower level staff. In addition, the collaborative nature of the innovation involving several southern African countries and a variety of organisations (that is non-governmental organisations, higher education institutions, a regional association and an international organisation), is a new system of ODL provision for the region whose impact both the providers of the programme and the users would like to see evaluated as collaborative ventures are not easy to implement and sustain. For the providers, UNISA-ICE and SACHED-DETU, the evaluation of this programme is one of the mechanisms for quality promotion and assurance. Feedback from the evaluation should give valuable information on the issues emerging from the implementation of the programme including suggestions on how to improve various aspects of the CDEP, a central requirement prior to institutionalisation and wider marketing internationally.

The second reason for this study is that it will add to the limited body of knowledge about ODL in Africa by, specifically, documenting the impact of the CDEP. The study's contribution should be in the areas of impact evaluation and ODL staff development at lower levels of the qualifications framework. Formal programmes for the professional development of ODL practitioners are generally emerging areas of provision. The CDEP is the first formal ODL staff development programme at the certificate level in the DEASA member countries, and its target audience is lower level and part-time ODL staff. The other two programmes available in the DEASA member countries during the period of this study, 1997-2000, were the UNISA Postgraduate Diploma and Masters in Distance Education, both of which have since been discontinued. All these courses are relatively recent innovations, introduced between 1995 and 1997 and to date no systematic research has been conducted on them.

The third reason is that there is to my knowledge no existing systematic impact evaluation of similar programmes internationally. Although similar ODL staff development programmes at diploma and higher degree levels were introduced from the 1980s in the United Kingdom, India, Australia and British Columbia, from the literature search only descriptive case studies of the founding and collaborative aspects of these international programmes have been found (Moran & Mugridge 1993, Nonyongo & Ngengebule 1998). A recent case study on the collaboration between the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany and the University of Maryland in the development and delivery of an Online Masters in Distance Education (Bernath & Rubin 2003) incorporates aspects of systematic evaluation of this innovation. A systematic evaluation of the impact of the CDEP, through its focus on a southern Africa print-based programme, that is not online, will introduce a new element to the existing international body of knowledge on ODL staff development and training and collaboration programmes.

The last reason is that this study of a collaboration programme on ODL staff development and training in five SADC countries will address some of the ODL research needs identified in the SADC Protocol on Education and Training and also by DEASA. The SADC Protocol on Education and Training acknowledges research as crucial for sustainable development and it recommends that Member States should encourage universities to strengthen basic and applied research and also facilitate the creation of professional associations through which the sharing of ideas and experience on research can take place (SADC 2004: 4 & 20). Since initiation DEASA has also emphasised the need for research in southern Africa and has organised several research workshops. Recently a DEASA Research and Publications Committee has been established and

according to the Chairperson of DEASA the aim is to "encourage DEASA to produce its own knowledge, instead of being mere consumers of knowledge and slaves to those whose knowledge we consume" (DEASA 2006: 3). In pursuance of this aim the DEASA Research and Publications Committee is planning to conduct during the 2007/2008 financial year a collaborative research project on enhancing academic performance through quality learner support provision. This, if successful carried out, will add other dimensions to the ODL knowledge being generated within the SADC region.

This study's contribution to research and staff development and training through ODL methods should, thus, be worthwhile for South Africa, the SADC region and internationally. The elements that contributed to the success and or failure of the CDEP, including lessons to be learnt should provide useful information to providers, users and researchers of such programmes and contribute towards increasing research outputs in ODL in the Africa region.

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Broadly speaking, the problem for investigation in this study links to what has become a more or less universal concern in curriculum development for establishing programme impact, for example, on clients, on programmes, on institutions and on professional associations and so forth. More specifically, I wish to establish, for the purpose of feedback and further development of the programme, the impact the CDEP has achieved on its learners (that is ODL practitioners employed in various DEASA member organisations and who were enrolled on the CDEP between 1997 and 2000 and on the institutions in which these learners work.

Underlying this concern is the real need for both SACHED-DETU and UNISA-ICE to demonstrate impact of the CDEP on practitioners' conceptions of ODL in relation to learner-centred conceptions and practices internationally and whether and how this programme impacts on ODL providers (specifically DEASA member organisations) in ways which help participating organisations to shift from pure correspondence to new forms of learner-centred conceptions and practices. Put more simply, does the CDEP make a difference to the way practitioners think about ODL provision, and does the CDEP contribute to changing conceptions and practices of the participating DEASA member institutions in southern Africa?

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Questions addressed in the study are:

1) What conceptions of ODL inform the CDEP and its practices in distance education institutions in Southern Africa, and what differences are commonly perceived to exist between the two?

2) What contributions are CDEP participants making in their institutions and which of these contributions are as a result of participation in the CDEP?

3) In what way/s are these contributions informed by learner-centred notions of ODL?

4) What problems are CDEP participants encountering in their application of CDEP ideas/practices/approaches in their job situations and how are DEASA member institutions assisting or hindering participants' application attempts?

5) What issues surrounding CDEP delivery, for example materials, teaching and learning, learners' responsibility in the learning/teaching process and collaboration in delivery, need to be addressed in the CDEP for feedback purposes?

Question 1) focused on conceptions only, that is, conceptions of ODL as espoused in the CDEP and also in participating DEASA member organisations and with particular reference to professional development of practitioners and collaboration in delivery. The purpose here was to establish different positions and practices in southern Africa, especially those of organisations participating in the CDEP through the DEASA sponsorship. The intention was to compare and contrast institutional conceptions and practices of participating DEASA member organisations with current and emerging regional and national policies in the five Southern African countries of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland and also with international policies, conceptions and practices of ODL. The participating organisations ranged in terms of ODL provision from basic education to higher education; in terms of status from non-governmental to governmental or parastatal organisations; in terms of means of provision from radio to mainly print-based and in terms of audience from children to adults. Answers to this question provided the basis for the development of Chapters 4, ODL Policy and Implementation and Chapter 5, CDEP Instructional System. Question 1), thus, provided the starting point for investigating the philosophical underpinnings of ODL provision with particular reference to collaboration, intents

and practices internationally, regionally, nationally, institutionally and programme-specific, that is CDEP. It is within this global picture of collaboration policy and practice as described fully in Chapter 4 that the CDEP instructional system and implementation were located and interpreted in the subsequent chapters. The required understanding of the issues related to this question emerged from the literature review, reading of institutional and programme documents and subsequent clarification of emerging issues during fieldwork and interviews.

Questions 2, 3 and 4 shifted the focus and concentrated on the learning milieu, that is, the social, psychological and material environment (Parlett & Hamilton 1975) of the DEASA organisations in which the CDEP learners are employed in order to establish what trained practitioners do in their organisations. The intention was to uncover organisational expectations and practices, the problems encountered and/or avoided by practitioners and how the CDEP prepared them for their work and for institutional change in order to identify matches and mismatches between plans and implementation.

Specifically, Question 2 sought to uncover contributions that CDEP participants were making in their work contexts as ODL practitioners, to see which of these were informed by the CDEP aims, approaches, ideas, practices and how all these impacted on practitioners' conceptions and implementation of day to day activities and responsibilities. Question 3 analysed whether and/or how these contributions were learner-centred. Both questions, thus, aimed to establish matches and/or mismatches between the CDEP instructional system, that is the formal plans and statements that provide the programme blueprint (Parlett & Hamilton 1975) and the participating

institutions' systems, on the one hand, and the learning milieu, within which the CDEP learners worked and learned, on the other.

Though similar to Questions 2 and 3 in its focus on the learning milieu, the emphasis in Question 4 differed by concentrating on application of knowledge and skills acquired from the CDEP by participants in the delivery of their institutional programmes. It sought to establish approaches and practices used in job contexts, the kinds of problems encountered and strategies implemented to resolve these.

The above three questions (2, 3 and 4) formed the foundation for the analysis and interpretation of the CDEP in terms of McAnany's (1975) criteria of "performance", "adequacy" and "efficiency". Performance covers what has been accomplished through participation in the CDEP; adequacy is about the relevance of this performance to personal, institutional and regional needs while a comparison of effort and performance indicates the extent of efficiency of the CDEP in achieving the staff development needs of DEASA member organisations, of individual staff members and of the region.

Question 5) shifted the focus to CDEP issues, to needed content, pedagogical, delivery and assessment methods and collaboration issues. The CDEP is delivered through ODL methods. Some of the central issues considered were to what extent is that an effective method for delivering a staff development programme and in relation to conceptions and practices highlighted in Question 1 above, to what extent this programme is open or closed and where is it located on the openness - closure continuum of ODL. The underlying focus was an evaluation of

how the CDEP equips practitioners for changing institutional provision towards more learner-centred and open systems of ODL.

Question 5 also made provision for the eventual analysis and interpretation of the CDEP's "effort" (McAnany 1975) from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, for example, participants' views on the quality of the CDEP materials, administration and management, learner support and other aspects of delivery and also numbers of participants, success and attrition rates and so forth. Included here was the contribution of the co-operation in the quality of the programme. The data collected from Question 5 provided the feedback on CDEP impact as described and interpreted in Chapter 8.

Collectively, these five questions finally provided data for the interpretation of the impact of the CDEP according to McAnany's (1975) criterion "process" which is about why the CDEP has succeeded or failed. Process takes into consideration both quantitative and qualitative factors from all the above-mentioned criteria to arrive at an answer to the question of failure and/or success of a programme.

1.6 ORGANISATION OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 is a general introduction and it contains the aim, rationale, statement of the problem and questions addressed in the study.

Chapter 2 covers the literature review and includes the main themes that have a direct bearing on this study, namely: conceptions of ODL; ODL policy; staff development; and evaluation of impact.

Chapter 3 describes the research design, sample, and methods of data collection, analysis and impact interpretation.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of ODL policy (especially collaboration) and implementation internationally, regionally in Africa including SADC and nationally within the five DEASA member countries.

Chapter 5 describes the CDEP instructional system and shows that the programme was from the beginning developed as a collaboration programme, though the intention was to deliver it nationally and not regionally as it has since become.

Chapter 6 provides feedback on the CDEP implementation. It demonstrates the high regard of the CDEP by all participants and the kinds of contributions made by CDEP learners in their organisations.

Chapter 7 discusses problems the CDEP participants are encountering in their application of CDEP knowledge and practices. It also discusses the issues and paradoxes surrounding the delivery of the CDEP.

Chapter 8 interprets the effectiveness of CDEP using McAnany's five criteria of effort, performance, adequacy, efficiency and process. These criteria are internationally recognised as quality criteria (Cookson 2002) and are also very similar to the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) ODL quality criteria.

Chapter 9 is a general conclusion of the study.