

Providing Productive and Sustainable (ODL) in (SADC) member states: First things first

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Abstract

The paper aims at providing providers of open and distance learning with information on what is needed if an open and distance learning institution is to provide a productive and sustainable service. The paper premises its discussion on the principle of 'First things First' as a strategy to achieve productive and sustainable open and distance learning. There are institutions facing operational challenges because students are shunning them due to dissatisfaction with service delivery. Their dissatisfaction relates to components in the delivery system which can be addressed before service delivery to ensure productivity and sustainability of the service. The paper is based on literature analysis of articles that highlight challenges of providing open and distance learning. The paper concludes that open and distance learning provision is a system which requires all components to be well positioned to enable the system to operate productively and sustainably. It also concludes that if all components are in place, open and distance learning can provide service to learners at any level of educational engagement.

Introduction

The writing of this paper has been influenced by the realization that steps being taken by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to popularize the provision of ODL in SADC member states require sufficient guidance and caution to avoid unnecessary false starts. The guidance ensures that providers of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) are doing the right thing while caution demands that there is due care in the manner ODL will be provided. These measures help to make the provision of ODL both productive and sustainable.

The formulation of the SADC ODL Regional Policy framework (SADC ODL framework 2012) is a milestone in the realization that ODL is an effective and reliable education provision strategy. The Regional Policy will be strategically supported by the ensuing national policies in member states which will inevitably usher new ODL institutions while at the same time strengthen existing ones. These noble efforts will, unfortunately, be in vain if the resultant processes and initiatives cannot guarantee a productive and sustainable education provision strategy.

To avoid the false starts on ODL provision mentioned earlier, this paper will argue that a productive and sustainable character of ODL in the SADC member states and elsewhere can only be achieved by adopting the Policy of 'First Things First' which encourages ODL institutions to make sure that all that needs to be put in place before commencing provision of ODL is in fact in place before they go about popularizing ODL). If first things are done well, ODL will become a deep rooted and credible education provision strategy whose efforts will obviously be productive and rewarding to the institutions, clients and all stakeholders.

First Things First

The first things that need to be satisfactorily attended to first from the viewpoint of this paper will be discussed under the following sub-themes:-

- the level of the ODL institution
- the human resource base
- the module provision state
- learner support strategies in place
- quality assurance systems in place
- and
- assessment methodologies of the institution

The SADC ODL policy framework (SADC ODL Regional Framework, 2012) outlines 4 sectors which should be targeted by the various country policies.

The 4 sectors are:

- Primary Education
- Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)
- Teacher Education
- and
- Higher Education (SADC Policy framework 2012)

Guided by the order of arrangement of things that need to be put in place first before providing ODL, it makes it clearly important that before any activities commence at a proposed ODL institution, there should be a clear understanding of why an ODL institution is being developed. The bottom-line is that first and foremost, the level at which each ODL institution is operating or going to operate should be clearly spelt out so that the institution can put in place measures to successfully execute its duties to the satisfaction of its clients and stakeholders. Its operations will also be guided by the existing regulations of that sector to avoid compromising expected standards.

In the case of the University Eduardo of Mozambique (Ramos, Taju & Canuto, 2011 pp. 159-175), it is clear that the imbalance between demand for places and the capacity of the University created the need for an ODL wing. This gave the providers of the ODL strategy a clear instruction on the level at which the ODL wing's operations were going to be pegged. In the case of the ODL wing at the University Eduardo, it was going to be pegged at the level of a university. Similarly, ODL institutions created to address the other three sectors should have a clear mission in order to become useful providers of productive and sustainable ODL.

The same applies to the recommendations of the then University of Zimbabwe Vice Chancellor which called for the establishment of an Open and Distance Learning institution in Zimbabwe due to the imbalance between demand for university education and places available at the University of Zimbabwe (Matshazi 1991). There was a clear understanding that the ODL institutions would operate at the level of a university.

Clarity on the level at which an ODL institution is pegged has implications on its benchmarking strategies. This kind of understanding enabled the Open University of Mauritius to benchmark itself against Napier University (Dhurbarryllal, 2005, pp. 185-197) and not against a teachers college or a primary school.

Besides providing benchmarking clues, clarity on the level of operation affects partnership and collaboration programmes which are very critical in sharing of ideas, personnel and programmes (Badat, 2005, pp. 183-204; Beaudoin, 2009 pp. 113-126). Such collaborations at times end up with the formation of consortia that involve bringing together a number of ODL institutions for the purpose of sharing resources in order to become formidable forces in the provision of ODL. (Beaudoin, 2012; American Distance Education Consortium, 2006).

It is equally true that when an ODL institution has pegged itself at an appropriate level, it will be able to determine the nature of its resource requirements, both human and material. Such resources will also affect the caliber of students who will apply to study with the institution as well as the impressions and opinions of the generality of the population within any of these SADC states about the products of that institution.

The issue of pegging an institution appropriately arises from the observation that some ODL institutions see themselves first and foremost as being ODL institutions as opposed to being either a university, a teachers' college or a primary school, which only uses ODL as a teaching/learning strategy. It means that if an ODL insti-

tution sees itself as an ODL institution without reference to a level, it is bound to lose focus and would even end up trying to do everything and anything which it believes it can do. It might even end up attempting to offer things it does not have expertise to offer. This results in products which might fail to satisfy expectations of employers and stakeholders resulting in an unjustified blanket condemnation of the ODL strategy. Disorder becomes the defining identity of such an institution resulting in stakeholders condemning everything that is provided through ODL.

This recommendation should not be misunderstood to imply that a university utilizing the ODL strategy cannot offer programmes in the other sub-sectors. The emphasis is on the identity and operations of the institution. If an ODL institution pegged at the level of university decides to offer programmes in teacher education and TVET, it will do so guided by its principal identity which is that of a university. This means that it will utilize resources, material and human, which will not compromise standards. It will also use assessment procedures which do not lower standards and which will ensure that its products are the best in whatever area of study the institution would engage in. The university status remains protected by the nature and quality of activities happening in those areas related to other sub sectors.

It is also critical that the issue of resources, material and human, be sufficiently addressed before an ODL institution starts providing service because of their overall impact on the sustainability and productivity of the ODL delivery strategy. There is need to make sure that the resources are appropriate, of an acceptable quality, are suitable and adequate.

Where face-to-face tutoring is done, the infrastructure should be good enough to give both learners and stakeholders the confidence that they are doing and witnessing something fruitful. This will encourage students to attend their tutorials (Dhurbarry-Llal, 2005, pp. 185-197). If ODL students find themselves attending their tutorials at a small primary school whose facilities are dangerously holding together, their esteem and confidence in the institution would be greatly compromised. This is bound to affect attendance at tutorials and even the enrolment itself. Stakeholders will also look down upon products from such an environment thereby jeopardizing their chances of getting jobs, respect and recognition. Other material resources are equally important and need to be available before an ODL institution launches its programmes.

The human resource component makes or breaks an ODL institution. De Simone (2006, pp. 183-184) refers to Moore and Kearsley (1996) who say that the majority of faculty or lecturers teaching in ODL institutions, whatever qualifications they hold, have little knowledge about what distance education is, what it entails and

how it is successfully taught. This can create an operational vacuum which in turn breeds discontent among ODL students. Worse still, according to Dooley (1995) and Gehtauf, Shatz and Frye (1991) referred to in De Simone (2005, pp. 183-184) the lack of training in distance education management can result in lecturers being underprepared, frustrated, isolated and disillusioned. If these feelings are then rubbed on to the ODL students, the result could be irreversible dysfunctioning of the whole system in the affected ODL institution.

Bhalalusesa (2006, pp. 49-58) strengthens the point given above by stating that competencies and experiences of lecturers in conventional systems of education are not automatically transferrable to an Open and Distance Learning environment. Bhalalusesa (*ibid.*) further argues that the key to successful teaching in open and distance learning is the acquisition of special skills and ability to communicate through comments, constructive and supportive advice coupled with the ability to perceive the students' present state of knowledge and conceptual framework which are useful components that promote independent learning among ODL learners. Moore and Tait, (2002, pp. 1-91) also emphasise the need to train teachers in ODL methods to enable them to deal with learners effectively because the ODL environment is different from the conventional one. These skills and abilities are only realized if the lecturers undergo intensive training to handle ODL processes and learners.

It is in view of these observations that Ramos, Taju and Canuto (2011, pp. 159-175) strongly advocate for the training of both teaching and non-teaching staff in an ODL institution because, by its nature, ODL demands the full involvement of both teaching and support staff. Ramos, Taju and Camuto (*ibid.*) further argue that training of staff in ODL delivery is essential because it helps staff to avoid using pedagogies that fail to address the situation of the learner. The training also equips ODL personnel with abilities to properly counsel learners, support and motivate them and to provide them with appropriate evaluation and assessment inputs that enable learning to successfully take place. This augurs well with Patyan's argument which is in Ramos, Taju and Canuto (2011, pp. 159-175) where he says student support and assessment require greater attention because experience informs him that more people question the credibility of distance education on the basis of student support systems in place and assessment procedures employed. The emphasis on the importance of support systems arises from the realization that the ODL learner cannot engage in successful learning if left to himself or herself without the support of well trained personnel who will provide appropriate interventions whenever and wherever the need arises.

The arguments above boil down to the fact that personnel involved in ODL should be appropriately oriented and trained to discharge their duties in a manner that makes ODL productive and sustainable. It is equally essential that these persons should be highly and competitively qualified as opposed to being known rejects of conventional institutions. With the right qualifications, training and experience, ODL personnel will help to popularise ODL and make it the only strategy of choice among many other learners.

While student support has been mentioned in passing when the human resource issue was being discussed, it will be discussed in detail now because it stands out as one of the first things that need to be established first to enable ODL to be both productive and sustainable. Ukpo (2006, pp. 253-261) says learner support is a critical component in the service delivery of an ODL institution as it ensures that ODL students are given the support they need in order to succeed in their studies. Ukpo (*ibid.*) further argues that developed and developing countries have to have learner support systems which, fortunately, take various forms depending on the level of development of the countries and locations hosting the ODL institutions.

The need for learner support is further emphasized by Moore's theory of Transactional distance (Falloon, 2011, pp. 187-209) which postulates that the separation of the teacher and the learner in an ODL set up can create, among other things, communication gaps, a psychological space of potential misunderstanding behaviours of the teachers and learners, hence the need for a strategy that perpetuates contact between the learner and the teacher, regardless of the extent of the separation.

This learner support is aptly defined by Tait (2000, p. 289) as:

The range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions.

Examples of this range of services falling within the realms of learner support which are given by Tait (2000, pp. 287-299) include tutoring, telephone services, organized study centres and any other interactive teaching mechanisms which could be the radio, the television or computer driven interactive mechanisms.

The variety of the learner support systems and methodologies described above gives ODL institutions an opportunity to choose those that they can constantly use and those that can be easily accessed by the majority of their students. The variety also gives individual students options they can afford and which they can also easily access.

Among these support systems are those that allow students to talk to both their lecturers and their colleagues while others enable ODL students to get the much needed interventions of their tutors. In short, these methodologies enable students to consult, discuss and share experiences to enable them to have a better appreciation of their areas of study. If they are not available, it means the ODL student's learning environment is deprived of very critical components. This implies that the learning cycle becomes incomplete thereby rendering it unproductive and unsustainable.

Badat (2005, pp. 183-204) emphasizes the importance of a quality focused providers of ODL learner support services by arguing that ODL institutions should pay special attention to quality of learner support services to avoid providing ODL graduates with underdeveloped knowledge, competences and skills. Badat (*ibid.*) further suggests that while poorly supported learners might end up getting private benefits as individuals, the benefits for the society they will serve would be very limited. Indirectly, Badat (2005, pp. 183-204) is warning providers of ODL to avoid producing graduates who are not useful to any service area in the society they are meant to service, a situation which is only avoidable if learners are given effective and quality focused learner support services which ensure that learning is actually taking place and is doing so in a qualitative way.

It can be further argued that an ODL learning environment devoid of these support systems is likely to scare away students. It is also likely to cause serious underperformance of students which will result in a high dropout rate. One can confidently assume that an ODL learning environment without support systems results in no ODL taking place because support systems are indispensable scaffolds of the open and distance learning strategy.

The need for support systems is further necessitated by the negative forces that are always at play to shoot down the learners' efforts to succeed in their studies. These negative forces, among others, include:-

- age – either being young or old
- distance
- isolation
- learning rigours
- challenges related to accessing reading materials
and
- work related challenges (Ukpo, 2006, pp. 253-261; Olofsson, 2007, pp. 28-38)

Olofsson (2007, pp. 28-38) emphasises the impact of some of these negative forces by giving a narration of an ODL learners experiences which provides first-hand information on the feelings of those engaged in ODL. The student vividly described the experience of being an ODL learner as follows (Olofsson, 2007, p. 33):

In distance education we are isolated. The teachers are far away so you are far away from each other. We have learnt to give and take from each other and that we need each other.

The impact of these negative forces will obviously be fuelled by the absence of support systems. This naturally requires that something be done to avoid registering avoidable failures in ODL institutions.

It is also important to point out that ODL students have a right to access an education whose quality is comparable to the kind of education received by students in conventional learning settings. This quality is in fact affected by the processes described earlier which include well trained personnel, suitable infrastructure and both appropriate and effective support systems. The issue of quality is further highlighted by Harris and Gibson (2006) referred to by Maritim, (2009, pp. 241-254), when they say one of the greatest challenges affecting institutions offering distance learning is the maintenance of standards. These standards can only be maintained if all components within the ODL system are perfectly installed and are of a high quality.

Harris and Gibson (2006) referred to by Maritim, (2009, pp. 241-254) also argue that factors that actually affect the standards and the quality of education attained through open and distance learning include, among others, the following:

- The quality of the learning environment
- Learner support services available
- and
- The quality of personnel who are advising students, especially their level of qualifications and experience

The implication of what Harris and Gibson (2006) in Maritim, (2009, pp. 241-254) say is that quality is internally generated and, as such, should be regularly monitored and evaluated to ensure maintenance of quality in ODL institutions. This means mechanisms to ensure quality in all that an ODL does is not negotiable so are mechanisms to assess the relevance of programmes in a continuous manner. It is thus critical to ensure that measures that promote quality are given due consideration before an ODL institution starts operating.

It is equally important for ODL institutions to realize that quality is a marketing force which either attracts students to the ODL institutions or prevents them from enrolling with them. This means quality should be paramount in the minds of

those providing education through ODL if their operations are going to be productive and sustainable.

The learning process in an ODL environment is module based. Modules give ODL learning the continuity it so much requires because they take the place of the physical lecturer found in a conventional system. However, Ukpo (2006, pp. 253-261) observes that many ODL institutions fail to produce and distribute learning materials on time. This implies that ODL students who are made to commence studies before modules are produced and distributed are comparable to conventional students who are asked to commence a lecture before the lecturer arrives. This kind of situation is unattainable and deactivates students who, ironically, would have enrolled because of their intrinsic motivation to learn.

The need for readily available modules logically calls for module production means which an institution can sustain. It would be unfortunate for an ODL institution to fold because of unsustainable module production costs especially when production is outsourced. There is, thus, an obvious need to establish affordable module production strategies to ensure sustainability and productivity in the operations of an ODL institution.

The products of an ODL institution should be confident that they went through a process that gave them deserved academic awards. This becomes attainable when there is an appropriate and rigorous assessment process that is also watertight. This means that a credible ODL institution should, at its onset, have clearly laid down assessment procedures that make institutional awards worthwhile and acceptable to all stakeholders.

Badat (2005, pp. 183-204) agrees with Pityana, the former Vice Chancellor of UNISA, who says there is need to have watertight assessment procedures in ODL in order to ensure graduates produced are of an acceptable quality. To achieve this, Badat (2005, pp. 183-204) and Gujjar, Adhlaque and Hafeez (2007, pp. 152-171) suggest the use of continuous and formative assessment processes which are either peer or self-based and which could also involve production of portfolios as evidence of learning having taken place. This goes a long way to help remove the inferiority stigma that is normally associated with qualifications from ODL institutions.

Bhalalusesa (2006, pp. 49-58) suggests that comments and constructive advice should be the hallmark of any assessment regime in an ODL environment. Rowntree (1992) referred to by Bhalalusesa (2006, pp. 49-58) describes these comments as the life-blood of learning because they have a bearing on the im-

provement of the learning ability of the ODL student. According to Rowntree (1992), in Bhalalusesa (2006, pp. 49-58), if well-thought out and well-articulated, these comments become the connection between students and their learning process as they inform students on effective learning strategies. This can only be realised if those who assess are trained to assess objectively and appropriately.

These comments, according to Kulhavy (1997) quoted by Bhalalusesa (2006, pp. 49-58) also enable students to identify their mistakes and misunderstandings in order to perfect their learning and knowledge acquisition processes. This ensures constructive learning which ultimately results in the production of quality graduates. The production of graduates of a high quality can only be achieved if there is a clear assessment process that sees the student gradually developing into a well-informed learner who can withstand both academic and work related rigours which are necessary litmus tests for quality in graduates from higher education institutions, open and distance learning institutions included. Thus, an ODL institution worth its salt should establish an assessment agenda that tells stakeholders how it will determine the value and quality of its graduates. This will convince stakeholders that the products of the concerned ODL institution were properly assessed and will be able to give a good account of themselves, if challenged to do so.

Issues to take note of

The discussion in this paper highlights issues of importance to providers and would-be-providers of ODL in the SADC member states. It can be discerned from the discussion that ODL is a total package whose components have an ecologically indispensable relationship. Any weaknesses or deficiencies in one component of the ecological system render the whole system dysfunctional. For example, weaknesses in the human resource base affect service delivery, the module writing process, provision of effective support systems and the provision of an effective assessment regime, among other processes.

The discussion also reveals that the principle of 'first things first' protects the credibility of ODL qualifications by ensuring that quality is given due attention before an ODL institution starts operating. It can be argued that the things that need to be done first before an ODL institution commences service delivery have a bearing on the maintenance of standards which Maritim (2009, pp. 241-254) raises as a big challenge confronting providers of ODL. If the first things are done first, an ODL institution is sure of being competitive in its service delivery systems, thereby ensuring productivity and sustainability of the service delivery process. Quality becomes an expected downstream result because enough preparation would have been made for its attainment.

The first things that need to be done first before provision of ODL are also clear indicators of the state of preparedness of an institution to offer such a service. Some of the critical indicators of the level of preparedness discussed are human resource, modules and student support systems without which an ODL institution cannot survive. This implies, that the 'First Things First' principle gives an ODL institution an opportunity to be undoubtedly ready to offer a service which has the potential to be productive and sustainable. Absence of these critical components renders an institution ill-prepared and unsuitable for the pursuance of ODL provision.

Information on the human resource expertise required in the provision of ODL reveals that academic and administrative staff are of equal importance to the successful execution of ODL programmes. This stems from the argument proffered earlier which portrayed ODL as a system whose components are ecologically related. Their ecological relationship can also be detected in the manner which academic and administrative staff closely relate, and in the way their roles are interdependently related. Such a situation calls for highly qualified and well trained personnel in their areas of responsibility in order to realize sustainability and productivity.

Conclusion

The popularisation of ODL in SADC member states is a noble decision whose success hinges on doing the right thing in the right way at the initial stage before a service is provided. This helps to do away with the credibility tug that seems to characterize most ODL products and their qualifications. If first things are done first, then quality becomes easily realisable and productivity and sustainability become logical inheritances of a seriously and purposefully conceived ODL provision strategy. Institutions that will eventually be mandated to provide services to ODL learners should pass the litmus test of having in place things that need to be done first before commencement of service delivery is authorized to guarantee quality, efficiency, sustainability and productivity.

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