

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 2 of the book,
Strategies for Sustainable Open and Distance Learning
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The case study has not been subjected to an editorial process.
The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the author.

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

The Establishment of the Namibian College of Open Learning: A Case Study

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Case Study of NAMCOL deals with two issues, the introduction of Secondary Education in Namibia through the provision of Distance Education, and outsourcing of the Directorate of NAMCOL.

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) is a state-supported educational institution established by an Act of Parliament, Act No. 1, 1997, which offers opportunities for adults and out of school youth to complete their Secondary Education, or to acquire additional qualifications.

At Namibia's Independence in 1990, "It was widely recognized that there was a need for a vastly expanded and improved provision of education in Namibia, both for economic and human rights reasons. The incoming Government was conscious of the fact that the expansion and improvement could not be realized exclusively by conventional education".¹ The establishment of NAMCOL can therefore be seen as the culmination of various initiatives that investigated the demand for, and the potential of, Distance Education.

2. BACKGROUND ON POLICY MAKING AND PLANNING

The following initiatives and studies influenced the Policy:

- 2.1. Senior Secondary level courses were offered to under-qualified teachers through the Distance Education unit of the Department of National Education prior to Namibia's Independence.
- 2.2. The Namibian Extension Unit (NEC), based in Lusaka, prior to Independence, offered basic agriculture and primary health care courses to Namibians in exile and it was assisted by the International Extension College (IEC) of Cambridge, UK.
- 2.3. In January 1990 a pre-Independence feasibility study on Distance Education was sponsored by the NEU, Dodds et al 1990.²
- 2.4. In February 1991, the Ministry of Education and Culture conducted a workshop on Distance Education (DE), which was attended by national and international participants. This workshop approved the establishment of a Core Planning Group, representative of the public, and private sector, the Unions and NGOs to examine the potential for Distance Education in Namibia. The findings of this group are reflected in the "Higher Education in Namibia, Report of a Presidential Commission" 1991. A concept paper for the Establishment of a Distance Education College was prepared which confirmed that the idea of a Distance Education College has wide acceptability among potential clients and sponsors³. After the Report of the Presidential Commission was published, the Government invited Florida State University in October 1991, to coordinate a consultancy review on the reports and proposals. The review group's report - "Taking Education to the People" - recommended the creation of a semi-autonomous, Distance

¹ Taking Education to the People, June 1992, Published by the Department of Adult and Non-formal Education. Ministry of Education and Culture – Namibia.

² Dodds, Tony et al. "Distance Education in Independent Namibia: The Report of a Feasibility Study conducted in January – February 1990" Namibian Education Unit, Windhoek, February 1990.

Education College and it provided a plan of action for its establishment.

In 1993, the Ministry of Education and Culture gained Cabinet approval to establish such an institution. An Interim Development Board (IDB) was appointed by the Minister in July 1994 to assist with the planning as well as for the drafting of legislation on drawing up rules for its Management.

The Minister together with the Board decided that the name of the new institution would be the Namibian College of Open Learning [NAMCOL]. The first step towards establishing NAMCOL was the creation of a separate unit within the Ministry with the sole responsibility for the functions that were to be outsourced. In November 1994 the Public Service Commission sanctioned the break up of the Directorate of Continuing Education into two. The Directorate of Adult Basic Education was tasked with the administration of adult literacy and basic skills development, while face-to-face and distance education programmes were allocated to a new Directorate, NAMCOL.

In 1993, the Ministry of Education and Culture published a Policy document “Towards Education for All,” which set out four key principles for the development of education in Namibia: access, quality, equity and democracy. The services provided by NAMCOL are central to this policy.” We are faced with the demand for expanded access to education at all levels. Much of this demand is from adults and young adults who have already had some education, formal or non-formal. Scattered throughout the country, they seek to upgrade their skills and to secure technical or professional certification. Distance

³ Higher Education in Namibia, Report of Presidential Commission, Unpublished Report. Turner J.D.

education is the most practical and cost effective strategy for addressing this demand and providing quality education.”

It was decided to establish the College on a statutory basis through an Act of Parliament. The Bill was introduced in the National Assembly on 25 September 1996. It passed all stages of Parliament in March 1997. By Proclamation of His Excellency, the President, the NAMCOL Act [Act no 1 of 1997] came into effect on 25 September 1997. The Interim Development Board was appointed as the first Board of Governors for NAMCOL.

Concurrent with the legislative process, the management and staff of the Directorate, in consultation with the Interim Development Board, prepared the groundwork for the establishment of the new institution. This work involved the following areas.

- Strategic Development Plan
- Logo and Distinctive public Profile
- New Structure and Staff Establishment
- Personnel Policies and Systems
- Other Rules and Procedures

3. OBJECTIVES OF ESTABLISHING A SEMI-AUTONOMOUS DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTION

3.1 Increased Efficiency

One of the primary concerns was that the demand for secondary education could only be met through DE, but how could DE be made credible? The institutional culture that existed in bureaucracies like the public service lacked an effective performance management system as

well as accountability. Through much discussion within the Ministry of Education and Culture, it was finally agreed that the Distance Education College should become a semi-autonomous institution in order to improve the efficiency, productivity and consequently, to gain credibility.

3.2 Cost Effectiveness

It was assumed that the Government would save money through outsourcing this service. However, in the case of NAMCOL, where services are rendered to a target group where resources are scarce, it is unlikely that full cost recovery will ever be achieved. It is hoped that improved staff efficiency and productivity would in the long run contribute to greater cost effectiveness.

3.3 Responsiveness to the Needs of Target Groups

Bureaucratic procedures inhibit an institution's ability to respond to changing needs of the group it serves. Distance Education is regarded as a very dynamic mode of teaching and the learner profile of a Distance Education institution is never stagnant. The changing demographics of the learner population therefore demand a very responsive and versatile institution.

4. CRITICAL CHALLENGES OF THE TRANSITION PHASE

4.1 Management

NAMCOL started its operations as a Directorate in 1994 with staff members assigned to the Directorate. It took just under two years to the search for a suitable Director and the first Director was appointed in May 1996. During this period a lot of work had been done by the existing staff. The new Director, appointed from outside the existing group, had to work very hard to acquaint herself with the work done since 1994 and to pull the team through the process. Despite the fact that there was some resentment to the appointment of an outsider, the

Director managed to build a strong and supportive team for a successful transition.

4.2 An Agreed Funding Formula

In terms of the NAMCOL Act, “the State shall provide subsidies to the College based upon principles to be agreed between the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Basic Education and Culture and NAMCOL.”⁴ This was the most difficult part of the policy to implement. Work on the formula for funding to the College started in September 1997, but an agreement was only reached in December 2001. During the transition there was no specific budgetary provision for a smooth de-linking. The newly established institution became fully operational only in April 1998.

4.3 Employment Status and Placement of Staff

Another major challenge faced by the institution was the disposition of existing staff. During the process of drafting the legislation, the Office of the Prime Minister advised that all existing staff could be seconded to the new institution for a start-up period of one to two years. However, during the final stages, they indicated that this was not possible. Furthermore, the post structure and the existing staff establishment of the existing Directorate was to be abolished with effect from take over of operations. Although no promises were made, many existing staff members were expecting to be seconded.

There was a certain degree of reluctance about resigning from the public service to take up new employment with an organization that was yet to be tested. This was the first time that a directorate was outsourced from the public service and as there was no precedent within the public service it was very difficult to identify solutions.

The Act also did not make any provision since the clause which intended an automatic transfer from public service to the new

⁴ Namibian College of Open Learning Act, Act no 1 of 1997

establishment, had to be removed on advise from the legal drafter. According to the legal drafter no person's conditions of employment could be changed without his/her consent. Each staff member must have a free choice as to whether they wish to join the new institution or to be placed in another part in the public service. Thus, it was necessary to advertise all posts, carry out a selection procedure and make offers of employment to staff. The majority of the staff members expected a good job offer, and this created a new challenge to the management, because it was clear at this stage that the performance of some staff members were below standard. Just as it was a risk for the staff members to take up a job with a new institution, it was a risk for the new institution to take non-performing staff member on Board. The transition of staff was the toughest challenge of all and it really put management to the test.

4.4 Staff Time required to Effect the Transition

Perhaps the biggest drawback in the process was the time required to effect the transition. The Management was tied up in numerous meetings with sub-committees of the Board, working groups, task forces for over a year and could not devote time to administer the activities of the College. Towards the end of the transition process, the productivity dropped considerably as staff members were busy consulting the personnel office, union representatives and each other.

4.5 Materials Development and Distribution

When the College started its operations no proper procedures were in place for development and distribution of materials. The staff were not properly trained to write Distance Education materials and the process to be followed for printing of materials in the public service took very long. The support-staff in the MBESC were not always appreciative of the dynamics of Distance Education and the consequent level of flexibility needed. All of this affected the timeous delivery of services.

4.6 Public's Resistance

There was public outcry against this mode of teaching as parents had their own expectations with regard to improved quality of education after Independence. The Government was expected to build more schools and boarding schools. The provision of Distance Learning was a rude awakening for they realised that all the learners who could not be accommodated in the formal school could be enrolled with NAMCOL.

4.7 Learner Support

The College makes use of qualified teachers from the conventional system to provide the contact sessions to learners on a weekly basis. But the public was not satisfied and was of the opinion that NAMCOL should have its own teachers. They were not happy with the limited contact with teachers.

4.8 Development of the Structure of Policies and Systems

The development of the structure of the college was challenging and it took a lot of time. No educational institution in Namibia, or the Region, went through a similar process that one could learn from. This was done on a trial and error basis.

5. STRATEGIES

5.1 Management

When managing change, one should remember that the person driving the process is a human being with limitations. It is therefore critical to ensure that the person is provided with a support structure. NAMCOL's Director was supported by two dedicated people, the former Supervisor and a Strategic Advisor from Irish Agency for Personal Services Overseas (APSO). This support proved invaluable. It provided a platform for the Director not only to develop, but also to draw inspiration from.. When going through such a process it is critical that a person with strong leadership and a vision direct the operations. These attributes ensured that the focus is on achieving the mission without getting derailed by micro politics.

5.2 Transition of Staff

The NAMCOL Board adopted a document “Principles and Procedures for Translation of Ministry Staff to the new structure”. This document was arrived at through various consultations with staff. Since the transition of existing staff was based on ‘agreed upon’ principles it was possible to finalise the appointments as planned. A number of committees were appointed to deal with the drafting of rules, regulations and development of systems on various related issues.

5.3 Staff Development

Different staff development activities were implemented. The British Department for International Development (DFID) funded a three-year staff development project, which was administered by the University of Bath. This project focused on capacity building in the areas of Management, Materials Development, Learner Support, Research, Evaluation and Marketing.

An evaluation of the impact of this training indicated tremendous development and improvement in the quality of materials.

5.4 Strategic Development Plan

The College finalised its Strategic Plan with assistance from the Bath Project. A theme was assigned to each year starting 1997 – 2002. Focusing on the different themes assisted the College to consciously work towards achieving the objectives as outlined in the Policy namely, Learner Support, Quality Assurance, Customer Service, etc.

5.5 Management Information System

The College lacked comprehensive statistics for performance assessment. During the process a Management Information System became a critical requirement. The process of developing a Management Information System was finally completed in 2001.

5.6 Marketing Strategy

Realising that most of the Public's dissatisfaction had to do with misconception on Distance Education, NAMCOL embarked on a vigorous marketing campaign. With the assistance of the NAMCOL/BATH Project a detailed marketing strategy on better understanding of Open and Distance Learning was developed and implemented.

6. CONCLUSION

For successful implementation of its plans, an institution must have a competent and focused management and staff complement. It is therefore critical for any institution to invest in its staff to ensure that they can confidently execute their duties.