

## CHAPTER 1

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# QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY IN BOTSWANA COLLEGE OF DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING (BOCODOL)

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### ABSTRACT

*This case study provides a disquisition of quality assurance processes at BOCODOL and how the processes have impacted on individual employees, organs and overall performance of the college. To set the scene, it briefly highlights the history of distance education in Botswana. The demographic data give a further insight into the country's status as a developing economy. The educational policy developments of 1977 and 1993 are highlighted as the foundations on which the current education system is based. The latter policy development, which resulted in the publication of the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE), has become the reference point for major educational advancements in Botswana. Issues of quality in education feature very prominently in the RNPE, whereas the 1977 policy had focused on quantity. As a result of the quest for quality education emphasised by the RNPE, BOCODOL was established with a mandate that mirrored this desire.*

*The study thus traces the origins of quality assurance within the college. The process and route that the college took to make quality assurance an integral part of the college business are outlined as well as the challenges encountered in the process and how they were handled and also an enumeration of the positive impact that the college has had as a result of the implementation of the Quality Assurance Policy. Clearly, quality assurance is not and should not be perceived as an end in itself within the context of BOCODOL. It is a means, and the end should rather be seen as the improved quality of life experienced by those who have had a brush with the interventions of the college.*

## 1. BACKGROUND

Botswana is a landlocked country at the centre of Southern Africa. The country covers an area of 582,000 square kilometres and has a population of about 1.7 million (Republic of Botswana 2001). Most people speak Setswana as their native language. English, the other official language, however, is used widely in government and business as well as in all post-primary education.

After 80 years as a British protectorate, Bechuanaland attained self-governance in 1965 and independence in 1966, thus becoming the Republic of Botswana. Botswana has, since independence, maintained a stable democracy and it has, since the 1970s, been able to diversify its economy away from marginal agriculture due to the discovery of diamonds and the development of nickel-copper matte and limited tourism (Pfothenauer 1990). At the time of independence 4 percent of the population lived in urban areas, whereas by the early 1990s the proportion of urban dwellers had risen to 30 percent with formal employment rising from 14,000 to 222,700 jobs (World Bank 1993). Whilst there has undoubtedly been rapid economic growth since independence, this has not been commensurate with the growth in the labour force. For example, between March 1991 and March 1996, the formal employment sector grew by 1.1 percent, while the labour force grew by 3.4 percent annually. Unemployment increased from 14 percent to 21 percent during the same period and had reached a record high of 34.6 percent by 1998 (Republic of Botswana 1998). Unemployment remains acute amongst the youth, who constitute 60 percent of the population. Be that as it may, a stable government and an expanding economy have made a steady growth in the educational system a reality.

As a result of the adoption of the National Policy on Education, 1977, educational development has been characterised by the massive expansion of school places. For example, between 1979 and 1991, enrolments in the primary sector, the secondary sector and the University of Botswana rose by 91 percent, 342 percent and 315 percent respectively. Literacy rates have similarly benefited from the expansion of educational facilities, and to date the rates stand at 80 percent and 82 percent amongst females and males respectively (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 2004).

As part of the Ministry of Education policy to increase access to post primary education, a ten-year basic education programme is being implemented. This consists of seven years of primary and three years of junior secondary schooling. After the latter three years, students sit the Junior Certificate Examinations and, depending on the availability of places, successful pupils proceed to senior secondary education, which lasts for two years. In 2004, 52 percent of students who completed the Junior Certificate successfully got admission to senior secondary schools. The transition rate is expected to increase to 100 percent by the year 2016 (as per the National Vision 2016) when Botswana will have been independent for 50 years.

Education in Botswana is currently free up to the senior secondary level, with the government meeting the full costs of tuition, books and students' meals as well as boarding in some remote rural secondary schools. There are, however, indications that, effective from January 2006, the payment of fees will be introduced at the secondary school level.

### *1.1 Policy initiatives within education*

Educational development in Botswana is attributed to two landmark policies, which are premised on the findings of presidential commissions of 1976 and 1993. The

Commissions, guided by their terms of reference, consulted widely as they reviewed the educational system. The first National Policy on Education (Education for Kagisano 1977), which emphasised *access* mainly to the basic education and to a lesser extent to the other levels, was adopted in 1977. Following its adoption, educational opportunities were substantially expanded as exemplified by the increase in enrolment between 1979 and 1991. The number of primary schools reached 700 from about 500, while that of secondary schools increased from 23 to 230 during the same period. Teacher training colleges increased threefold from two to six, whilst vocational institutions were introduced in most of the major population centres.

The second policy, commonly referred to as the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE 1994), based on the recommendations of the second National Commission on Education, was adopted in 1994. Unlike the first policy, which focused on the quantitative expansion in the system of education, the second policy calls for qualitative improvement in the system. Through the latter policy, the government has identified seven key issues that are considered vital to the development of education in the future.

The issues are as follows:

- (i) Access and equity, given the prevailing imbalances between regions and genders in terms of access to educational opportunity
- (ii) Effective preparation of students for life, citizenship and the world of work
- (iii) Development of training that is responsive and relevant to the needs of economic development
- (iv) Improvement and maintenance of quality in the system of education
- (v) Enhancement of the performance and status of teaching as a profession
- (vi) Effective management of the system of education
- (vii) Cost-effective financing of education with emphasis on cost sharing

These issues are supposed to form the focus of the educational policy and development for a period of 25 years, effective from 1994.

## ***1.2 Distance education provision***

The first traces of formal distance education date back to the pre-independence era of our history, when an elementary teachers' training project (1960–1965), facilitated by colonial masters, was undertaken. By the time the project came to its end, it had demonstrated the viability of distance education as an alternative method of training teachers. Accordingly, the government's attempts to overcome severe shortages of trained teachers caused by the post-independence (1966) demographic pressures for primary education should be considered against the backdrop of the success of the 1960–1965 project (Nhundu, Kamau & Thutoetsile 2002). Another project that aimed to upgrade the qualifications of primary school teachers was undertaken between 1968 and 1973, through which 700 teachers were trained. The success of this project encouraged the government to set up the Botswana Extension College (BEC) in 1973 with the assistance of the International Extension College (IEC). It was thus the first government secondary level correspondence education school ever to be established in Botswana. In collaboration with UNESCO and the Department of Extra Mural Services (DEMS) of the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland<sup>1</sup>, which later became the Institute

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland was a consortium owned and managed by the three countries. The University of Botswana evolved from this consortium and has been functioning since 1982. The consortium does not exist any more.

of Adult Education, BEC initiated consultations for a functional literacy programme that targeted about 250,000 adults and youths. A literacy project was consequently implemented by BEC from 1977 to 1978.

Experiences of the BEC resulted in the creation of the Department of Non-formal Education in 1978 following the recommendations of the National Commission on Education (1976). The department in turn created a unit, among others, to specifically look after distance education. The unit developed printed materials for its programmes and engaged serving secondary school teachers as part-time support staff at its learning centres.

The department, however, experienced several problems in the implementation of its distance education programmes; among them the more pressing ones were the following, as identified by the second National Commission on Education (Republic of Botswana 1993):

- Lack of resources—personnel, space, budget, etc.
- Understaffing and lack of expertise in distance education
- Lack of institutional and professional status
- Lack of relevant learning materials
- Inability to respond promptly to learners needs

With a view to these constraints, the Commission recommended the establishment of a semi-autonomous distance education college that would take over the activities of the distance education unit of the Department of Non-formal Education. Consequently, the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) was instituted by an Act of Parliament in 1998. In accordance with the provisions of the RNPE, the college was mandated to *expand education and training opportunities to out-of-school youth and adults, through the use of distance education methodologies*. To fulfil this mandate, and based on the shortcomings mentioned above, the RNPE identified the following key tasks for the college:

- To improve access to learning opportunities nationwide on a large scale to reach out-of-school young people and adults who need knowledge and skills to improve their quality of life
- To broaden the range of courses on offer by including vocational, professional, management and other programmes in addition to the Junior Certificate (JC) and General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) courses already on offer
- To improve the effectiveness of the teaching materials and learner support services by introducing new instructional design, multimedia approaches and the use of new information and communication technology
- To improve the efficiency of the distance education operations and introduce cost recovery strategies in order to achieve financial autonomy progressively

Undoubtedly, the mandate of the college and its specific tasks outlined above mirror the central theme of the RNPE which is “quality education.” Accordingly, BOCODOL’s operations are a) guided by a Quality Assurance Policy drawn within the framework of the referred central theme of RNPE and b) prompted by the college’s vision of becoming recognised internationally as an institution of excellence in open and distance learning.

## **2. THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE INITIATIVES IN BOCODOL**

Since its inception, BOCODOL has been aspiring to be a college of excellence in open and distance learning (ODL). There have been numerous challenges to the realisation of this ideal. One of the major challenges was that the college had to contend with the stereotype that distance education was substandard in comparison with the mainstream face-to-face education. This was premised on the history of extremely poor results of candidates who had hitherto studied by distance and/or correspondence. Very few would manage to complete their studies successfully, while even fewer attained pass grades in their programmes. Although the Government of Botswana, through RNPE, spearheaded the formation of a dedicated distance education institution that ultimately saw the birth of BOCODOL, skepticism about the wisdom of establishing the college in view of the history of distance education in Botswana continued among the various groups of government officials.

The college has had to justify its existence in view of this skepticism. It was therefore resolved that every employee recruited should “hit the ground running” to speedily dispel the stigma that has been attached to distance education. Since the challenge is multifaceted, the college had to use multi-pronged strategies in the pursuit of excellence and best practices in ODL. Capacity-building in ODL became a primary tool in ensuring that the college marched towards excellence. This was realised through the efforts of the British Department for International Development (DFID), which provided technical support and financed numerous consultancies and training programmes, and the Botswana government for the generous subvention that the college used for, among other things, training the staff on the job with the help of specifically relevant programmes and courses.

Another strategy that the college adopted in pursuit of excellence was to participate in regional distance education conferences, seminars and associations’ meetings with a view to learn from other ODL providers. During the meeting of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) held in Namibia Windhoek in 2002, quality assurance was discussed as one of the strategies that could boost the image of ODL and the confidence of citizens to embrace it. That meeting became a watershed for BOCODOL with regard to its pursuit of quality assurance in ODL. The college Director appointed a committee to develop a quality assurance policy for the college. This committee comprised three managers, an Editor and the Research and Quality Control Advisor. It should be noted here that, other than the Research and Quality Control Advisor, none of the committee members had any exposure to quality assurance in education.

The committee had to read extensively about the subject on the Internet and in libraries to understand the concept before attempting to do any work on the development of the college quality assurance policy. A couple of discussion meetings were held, after which the committee members felt confident to apply their minds to the task at hand, which appeared to be immensely difficult as the members were taking on the role of pioneers in the area of developing a quality assurance policy for education and in particular for ODL. First, the committee had to ensure that the policy they would develop did not demand the college to fit into it; instead, it should fit into the college operations. This was a crucial decision as the committee had to make sure that the policy enhanced college activities and performance and that it did not meet any significant resistance from the staff members.

In developing the policy, the committee agreed that each committee member should outline what his/her department is doing. It must be noted that members of the committee were drawn from all college departments and as such it was not difficult to put together all the specific functions of the various departments. This detail was necessary in the process of setting standards for each department. The committee set measurable standards and also listed the benchmarks/verifiers for each standard. This process proved to be very tedious as it required us to go into the nitty-gritty of the college business.

This, however, helped the committee to move on to work out the framework of the policy document. The first thing that was done was to define the roles and the responsibilities of the various organs/individuals within the college—Executive Management, Departmental and Regional Management, Research and Quality Control Advisor, Internal Auditor and Quality Advisory Committee (QAC), which is an entirely new body that was recommended by the committee working on the development of the quality assurance policy. The exercise of defining the said roles and responsibilities was very important as it is necessary that each cadre know exactly what their responsibilities are, so that they support the quality assurance initiatives without any hesitation or doubt. Also, the QAC's terms of reference<sup>2</sup> were developed, and the team started work in earnest.

The first task after the development of the draft policy document was to work with a consultant engaged to review the document and to make appropriate recommendations. The consultant blessed the draft policy but made a key recommendation that the standards should have quality indicators and verifiers. The committee reviewed all the standards before submitting the draft Quality Assurance Policy to the Director, who in turn had it circulated within the college to all the staff members for discussion and review before submitting it to the Board of Governors in May 2003 for their input and endorsement of it as a college policy document.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICY: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES**

Following the adoption of the policy by the college Board, the QAC started an extensive programme of sensitising all the college employees about the Quality Assurance Policy. The first group to be sensitised was the college Executive Management, whose role and commitment to the policy was emphasised strongly. The next group was the middle management and lastly each department and each regional centre (BOCODOL has five regions from which learners are serviced and a Headquarters which supports the regions) of the College was sensitised. The focus, in all the sensitisation meetings, was on the following:

- Definition of the terms like quality assurance, corrective action, preventive action, audit trail, non-conformities and quality control

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#### **2 Terms of Reference**

The Quality Advisory Committee will advise the Executive Management on all issues relating to Quality Performance and Documentation. The Research and Quality Control Administrator (RQCA) will be the Committee Secretary. The Internal Auditor and the Human Resources Manager will be ex-officio members of the Committee. Other members of appropriate seniority will be nominated by the Executive Management to fairly represent the College Departments and the Regions.

The Quality Advisory Committee will review the Annual Quality Report, and present it, with its recommendations, to the Executive Management. The Committee will advise the College on the acceptance of changes to the statements, standards and means of Quality verification in the Quality Assurance Policy.

It is a part of the brief of the Quality Advisory Committee to ensure that BOCODOL's Quality standards are aligned to National and International Standards and represent excellence in ODL practice.

- Explanation of how the policy fits into the college operations and not vice versa
- Benefits of a quality assurance policy to an institution
- The role of an individual in the implementation of the policy
- Explanation regarding the process of implementing the policy, e.g., documentation of processes and procedures, etc.
- Explanation regarding the audit instruments
- Explanation regarding the process of quality audits

In some departments, the QAC had to conduct more than one sensitisation meeting. At this stage, it was evident that work was being done throughout the college organs but there was very little or no documentation to verify what was being done.

The policy, therefore, heralded in a new practice of documentation for the management of data and information in BOCODOL. It was realised soon that sensitisation of staff about quality assurance issues was actually a continuous activity in BOCODOL and not just a one-off event, as experience has shown that there can never be a point where one could say that we have now sensitised all the staff and that we need not sensitise anyone anymore. As the staff appreciate the issues on which they are sensitised, they ask more informed questions about quality assurance which lead to the need for further sessions of sensitisation. Furthermore, refinement of and further developments in the quality assurance system warrant a continuous process of sensitisation by the organisation to enable it to continue to be productive and to improve the quality of its services to clients or customers.

Since the process of documentation is very laborious and slow, the QAC advised that departments should start by documenting their key functions/activities to prepare for the first quality assurance audits. Thus documentation became a conscious effort, although in a small measure, and documents such as the following were produced immediately:

- a) Course design manual
- b) Course development schedule (subject specific)
- c) Supervisor/tutor guide
- d) Learner support system
- e) Procedure for conducting vacation courses
- f) Enrolment policy
- g) How to plan a group tutorial
- h) How to induct/orientate new learners

The third step in the implementation strategy under the quality assurance policy of BOCODOL was to develop the instruments that were to be used in conducting quality assurance audits. These included:

- a) Audit schedules
- b) Non-conformities report form
- c) Format of the quality assurance report
- d) Audit trail

It was necessary that the above documents were developed and circulated to all departments so that they understood their use well before the implementation began. This process led

to the QAC receiving invitations to numerous staff meetings of different departments to elaborate further on how the quality assurance audits were going to be conducted. The major concern of many employees at this stage was whether the QAC was going to be policing or witch hunting departments and individuals. On this, the role of the QAC was clarified further as being purely developmental in nature, as good performance would be noted and efforts would be made to ensure that it was replicated throughout the college. Likewise, poor performance would be noted and corrective and/or preventative action/steps would be suggested and follow-up action taken to ensure that such corrective and/or preventative actions had been taken with the desired results.

Following these consultations, the QAC proposed that there should be two quality assurance audits in a year. The rationale was that the concept and process were new, and as such, staff had to be supported fully in a practical way before quality assurance could find a niche in the operations of individuals and departments.

### ***3.1 Reactions to the first quality assurance report***

The first quality audit report caused a stir as some managers felt that the auditors did not follow the prescribed audit process. Others felt that the *terminology used* in the report was ambiguous and thus it exposed departments to unfair criticism, and they naturally became defensive. This was not surprising as everybody had just started on the learning curve. The QAC had to examine their *expressions* critically in the next round of quality audit reports to avoid any traces of labeling or apportioning blame to any individuals and/or departments. Furthermore, members of the QAC checked each other's performances with regard to their adherence to the accepted quality audit norms/processes during the audits. These interventions led to the publication of acceptable quality audit reports that managers identified with. The focus of discussions on quality audit reports then shifted from pointing fingers to constructive issues of preventative and corrective measures that could be taken to bring around departments (that deviated from the standards) to proper compliance.

### ***3.2 Challenges faced in implementing the Quality Assurance Policy***

The quality assurance initiative that BOCODOL took proved to be quite phenomenal. Given below are some of the challenges that the College has had to deal with:

- a) Persuading staff to document procedures
- b) Dealing with the sense of insecurity among the staff who believed that the quality audits might be used to witch hunt
- c) Quality assurance activities viewed as an addition to individuals' workload
- d) Understanding quality assurance and performance management as complementary processes

All the challenges indicated that a lot more had yet to be done to educate the staff on quality assurance. Workshops for both the management and the staff had to be run on specific quality assurance issues by the QAC and Botswana Bureau of Standards to address effectively the needs emerging from the challenges.

#### 4. IMPACT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITIES

Ownership of the college Quality Assurance Policy by individual employees has been achieved through the extensive consultation and participation processes. This has also led to employees understanding their roles clearly. Consequently, the Programmes Development Department was able to develop the course development manual that has enhanced the quality of course development in the college considerably. The language used in the courses is now easily accessible to the various levels of learners. Furthermore, the interactivity of the courses has improved greatly as well as the quality of illustrations and the quality of assessment tools within the modules/units.

In Learner Support, the impact of the Quality Assurance Policy has been equally phenomenal as the documentation of several processes and procedures that led to improved learner support systems has been realised. The learner support systems have been refined as a result of the implementation of the policy. There are documented procedures for intensive monitoring of Study Centres that have yielded high performance output by both tutors and learners. A Learner Enrolment Policy has also been developed, the implementation of which has to date yielded positive results in the common understanding of enrolment issues and clear communication to those enrolled. The Learner Support Division is currently engaged in the development of some subject-specific training manuals to complement the general training manual that was developed prior to the implementation of the Quality Assurance Policy. These manuals are going to be used in the refresher programmes for tutors to further improve their delivery and productivity.

As a result of the successes achieved/recorded in the Programmes Development Department and Learner Support Division due to the implementation of the Quality Assurance Policy, there has been a visible overall improved performance in the college on various fronts. Since 2003 and the implementation of the Quality Assurance Policy, the percentage pass rate of the college results in the junior and the senior secondary programmes have risen quite significantly as compared to the period prior to 2003. In 2001, the junior certificate pass rate was 68.8 percent and this rose to 69.3 percent in 2002. In 2003, it was 78.6 percent, while it was 86.4 percent in 2004. The Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) examination results show a trend similar to that of the junior certificate. In the same vein, learner throughput rate has increased twofold between 2002 and 2004, and by so doing doubled the rate set for the National Development Plan 9 (2003–2009) prematurely. The college is confident that the pass levels and the throughput rate will be maintained or surpassed in future as a result of the quality assurance initiatives that it is pursuing.

Although BOCODOL depends largely on the print media in its operations, it recognises the importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in opening access to ODL and its impact on learner support. Audio and video tapes are currently being used to supplement the printed materials. Furthermore, the college has a radio programme every Monday on the national radio in which various aspects of the courses and services offered by the college are discussed. In addition, the college has strengthened its capacity in the ICT area by increasing personnel in its IT and Multi Media Department as the first priority before embarking on the introduction of online services, such as offering eLearning courses. The second step was to increase the capacity and speed of accessing the Internet by migrating to a frame relay system and paying for a broader bandwidth. Preparations are at an advanced stage for the college to offer ICT driven programmes to the public. These include a diploma in teaching with ICT and some short courses like teaching the Microsoft Office suite, and the basic computer course. The quality assurance

policy in place has set standards for ICT applications and utilisation. The department responsible is thus audited in the same manner as others. Recently, the department has started developing a new ICT policy that will define standards further and regulate ICT use. The QAC will necessarily have to reconcile the standards enshrined in the latter with those that form part of the quality assurance policy to ensure the two policies are complementary.

Furthermore, the college's performance management system, which incorporates performance-based rewards, has been enhanced greatly by the quality assurance initiatives as employees include quality assurance activities in their work plans and contracts leading to the identification of key performance areas (KPA) and elaborate outlining of strategies that would lead to successful achievements in the KPAs. As a result, there is an observable upward improvement in the whole organisational performance where an average employee grade is B. Grade B performance in terms of the grading system in use under the college performance management is described as a performance that exceeds expectations consistently and thus results in enhanced output. The quality of the college management has also been enhanced as the quality audit reports give the college Director an overview of the quality performance of all the departments and sections in relation to the set standards. He is therefore able to make necessary interventions to align performance with the vision and the mission of the college.

## **5. TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY**

It must be noted that the commitment to quality assurance principles and the pursuit of excellence by the staff have to be entrenched in the culture of the organisation and are not dependent solely on loyalty to the institutional leadership. This is in part possible through decentralisation, inclusive democratic and participatory management as well as the quest for excellence, which has to be embodied in the vision of the institution. BOCODOL's vision enshrines the mandate for it to strive to be an internationally recognised centre of excellence. The employees of BOCODOL have adopted this vision, made it their personal one and live it in most if not all aspects of their activities. The desire for continuous improvement, innovation and independence from government red tape, the confidence that the Board of Governors has in Management and the freedom that the latter enjoys as a result are among the key factors that have combined to usher in an appropriate environment for the college to pursue its culture of quality vigorously and effectively. To make things work and to establish this culture on a sound footing, there is also funding set aside on an annual basis for quality assurance activities, including training of staff to ensure they are up to speed with emerging quality trends.

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