

NOTE:

This case study has been used to inform Chapter 5 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.
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**Systems for Sustainability: Professional Development
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We share a strong belief that professional development for staff is a key component of organizational development (a critical aspect of sustainability) for ODL organizations – just as it is for other organizations. ODL involves a complex division of labour requiring functionally interacting parts – these parts don't work optimally if those working in these systems don't fully understand, and are not fully committed to the underpinning values and understandings implicit in a methodology that is essentially about student access to learning. And in this sense DE, whilst an industrialized means of educational provision, has never been a simple mechanistic means of educational production and delivery, which the concept of industrialization conjures up.

Helen's reflection on the Critical Role of the Tutor in ODL systems

In 1979 I was appointed Social Sciences staff tutor in the East Midlands Region of the UK OU. Staff tutors are faculty staff responsible for their faculty in their geographical region and this includes tutor recruitment and supervision. In reviewing the tutoring staff I inherited I identified the following characteristics:

- Tutors who were working for the OU to augment their income – perhaps to cover a family holiday. Usually middle aged men.
- Tutors who were engaged in domestic care. Invariably women, who had, until their first child was born, held an academic post, and who regarded their OU tutoring as keeping them connected and involved.
- Retired academic staff from conventional universities, who still wanted to continue to be active in education.

I decided that I was going to develop as many professional development opportunities for the tutors as possible and my vision was to empower the tutors and give them a voice to define their professional practice. Through this process the community of tutors would define what constituted “good correspondence teaching”, “good tutorials”, and so forth, and would gain the confidence to implement these ideas and share their evaluations of their practice. To be quite frank – I was going to achieve what I saw as good practice by the back door. My experience in the OU East Midlands has profoundly influenced my subsequent work in ODL and has confirmed my view that tutors are the frontline of sustainable ODL. In my view there are some key issues that require attention when thinking about creating sustainable systems.

- “Teaching at a distance on a national scale entails division of labour, mass production of courses and complex teaching systems.” (Open Teaching” UK OU 1988.) One of the common features of ODL is that many administrative and organizational functions are dispersed. Thus for example functions like course choice and student advice and guidance, which in campus based provision, might be carried out by the registry, or the counseling services have to take place elsewhere. (Interestingly this is one of the challenging aspects of single mode institutions moving to dual mode provision – how to recognize e.g. that posting the exam results on a central site notice board will not enable

students who live many miles away to find out their results. It is very challenging for providers moving to distance education provision to think through how these services will be provided.)

- In many instances ODL has turned to its part time tutors to take on these roles. The tutors role can broadly be defined as:
 - *Academic* (or tutorial support), which deals with supporting students with the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses or sets of courses, e.g. developing general learning skills, numeracy and literacy.
 - *Non-Academic* (or counseling) support – the support of students in the affective and organizational aspects of their studies.(Simpson, O, *Supporting Students in Open and Distance Learning* Kogan 2000. Page p6.)
- Given these responsibilities it is not surprising – (and there is a considerable amount of evidence to suggest this) - that tutors are the critical mediators of students learning, and that good tutors make the difference for students – success or failure, completion or non completion, whether or not they become ambassadors for distance education methods and “their” distance education institution or detractors. In this regard tutors are the frontline for their institution. (See e.g. Patricia Lunneborg (1997) “O.U. Men Work Through Lifelong Learning” The Lutterworth Press)
- But this poses serious issues for the distance education provider. How can they ensure that the tutors (and students) understand what is required of them? And how can the provider ensure that an appropriate quality service is provided to learners? For tutors are typically recruited from conventional educational institutions where they are responsible for academic support and not the affective and organizational support of learning.
- Most distance education providers take seriously the need for initial briefing and training of their tutoring staff. And in this regard distance education has been well in advance of contiguous education with regard to induction and training. Tutors are not cheap to recruit and train. So it is clear that it makes sense to minimize turn over, and to invest in them to ensure that they perform well and represent their distance education institution professionally. (Paradoxically as the economists of DE have pointed out – tutors are a ‘variable’ cost in distance education, and are, inevitably the soft target if “belt tightening” is required. This is a false economy in our view.)
- Professional training and development of tutors in distance education with respect to their administrative and organizational roles need to address:
 - Policies, procedures and programmes of study.
 - Establishing and maintaining communication with central and/or regional staff.
 - Identification with the distance education provider
 - Advice and training to assist in the development of professional judgment with regard to the variety of tasks and demands on their time.
- The critical learner support needs are around applying for the course, the start of the course, the first assignment, towards the exams, after course completion and withdrawal/failure. All of these stages of study are associated with system requirements and it is invariably the tutor who must guide and support the student through these until they are competent and confident to navigate the processes themselves. In addition distance education places great demands on the tutor to ensure up to date and full student records.

In 1986 the UK OU introduced a staff development policy for their part time tutoring staff. At that time some 7,000 staff but now many more. There had always been a requirement to induct part time tutors – into their role and course - but this new policy recognized both an institutional and tutor need for ongoing professional development. Moreover it recognized the need to produce materials that supported the tutors in their role and saw that their academic and administrative roles were not discrete mechanical functions but complexly interwoven, requiring the development and exercise of judgment. Two core staff development documents were produced – Open Teaching and Open Teaching File to underpin this approach. These have long since been replaced but the policy with the publications ensured that the tutors were supported – in particular in the recognition that efficient administration at the national, regional and personal level is vital to student success. (At the time there existed, and some might say still exists, an academic disdain for administration.) The publications, included good practice guide lines from other tutors, and made it clear that understanding the administrative and organizational system was a requirement for all – and that without educational administration students would suffer – good teaching relies on good administration. The policy ensured an entitlement to tutoring staff to participate in staff development events at least bi annually. In implementing this staff development policy the university begun to foster a community of practice among it part time staff with all the implications for quality improvement this creates.

Interestingly this policy of professionally developing tutorial staff began to impact upwards – with implications for staff development for the full time staff in both the regions and the faculties – the need to train the trainers. Staff development is indeed a key component of organizational development in distance education as elsewhere.

Christine's reflection on the importance of a professional development strategy for staff involved in administrative systems

The message is really quite simple: Without well functioning administrative systems the wheels of distance education provision grind to a halt and access for students is severely impaired. Two people with whom I have worked in my capacity as a professional development coordinator at SAIDE share a strong conviction that the people who drive ODL systems must have a thorough understanding of the important role they play in creating enabling learning environments. Apart from the technical skills required to work the systems they also have to monitor systems in operation closely, be responsive and have problem solving skills to turn potential disasters to advantage. I interviewed Evelyn Nonyongo, Director of the Institute for Continuing Education (ICE) at UNISA and Frances Mensah, Director of the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) recently and was able to tap into their vast experience of delivering professional development activities for people involved in establishing and maintaining systems in their respective institutions.

Evelyn Nonyongo has championed the cause of training and developing people involved in administrative systems long before she became the Director of ICE. As far back as 1995 I had the privilege of working with Evelyn and a small team from SACHED (South African Committee for Higher Education) to establish a Professional Development Consortium whose first task was to create a South African Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education. It was felt that such a Diploma course would be accessible to more people in the region and could contribute significantly to capacity building in ODL. Alongside the Diploma Course, the Institute for Continuing Education (ICE) at UNISA under Evelyn's leadership developed and presented the Certificate for Distance Education Practitioners (CDEP). From the outset the Certificate Course was viewed as a first step on the ODL career path and accessible to all practitioners, especially those involved in administrative systems. From 1997 until the end of 2003 some 344 students enrolled on the course. Of these, 75% completed the course successfully and 95% of the graduates were from member institutions of DEASA (Distance Education Association of Southern Africa) located in South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland,

Lesotho and Botswana. COL has promoted this regional capacity building through generous sponsorship.

The delivery systems for the Certificate Course have been designed to cater for the diverse contextual needs of those who enroll for the course. Every effort is made to deploy available resources optimally and where necessary ICE forges partnerships both within and outside UNISA. 'We have to practise what the course teaches', is how Evelyn puts it. As a result the ICE staff coordinate two parallel systems: a linkage with pertinent aspects of UNISA's administrative systems and the ICE specific ancillary systems. The materials are distributed to learners through UNISA's distribution system and ICE staff negotiate a link with the examination system. The ICE tailored systems offer students flexible registration and a decentralized transnational tutor system that relies on alliances with specified institutions in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia. I was interested in the approach used to train staff to drive these systems. Evelyn is adamant that all staff must understand the context in which the Certificate Course is delivered. Most of them have either completed the Course or are enrolled as students. This gives them first hand experience of what is involved in distance education provision. Training is ongoing and regular reflections by experienced mentors help staff to monitor how the systems are working and identify what improvements are necessary. This ongoing cycle of planning, implementation, reflection on actions and planning improvements is helping staff to understand what works and what does not.

¹NAMCOL boasts an enrolment figure of more than 30 000 students and is the single largest education institution in Namibia. Frances sketched how they went about establishing registration, distribution, assignment handling and tutor support systems. A very helpful professional development activity for Frances and two of her senior managers was a study visit to England in October 1998. This was organized as part of the capacity building project known as the Bath-NAMCOL Partnership Project. During this visit the management team was able to investigate at close quarters best practice in UK institutions such as Bath University's Distance Education Unit, the Open University and the National Extension College. While this provided the team with a useful framework they still faced the challenge of establishing systems that would work within the Namibian context. From the outset the Executive Management Team incorporated the development of systems as an integral part of their strategic plan. They started with an in-depth analysis of their situation in order to get to grips with exactly what kind of systems would be most suitable. Individual members of the Executive Team took responsibility for investigating different options for systems from both distance education and technical perspectives. Proposals were formulated and submitted to the Executive Team who made decisions based on what was most relevant and cost effective. An action plan was then compiled to facilitate the establishment of the various systems. This included the training of staff by technical people to use the necessary hardware and software programmes.

According to Frances the maintenance of viable systems requires ongoing monitoring and ability on the part of managers and staff to detect and deal with problems as and when they arise. Staff at NAMCOL are encouraged to be proactive in finding alternative ways of addressing problems timeously in order to reduce the risk of major systems breakdowns. Frances reminded me that managers and staff alike should be constantly vigilant and not expect that systems will necessarily run smoothly. 'Expect that systems will need ongoing attention', is her advice to anyone starting out and 'Create suitable contingency plans'. For example by making back up copies of important documents such as marked assignments and

¹ NAMCOL is a parastatal that came into being with the proclamation of the NAMCOL Act on 25 September 1997. The college became active on 1 April 1998 as a semi-autonomous organization. It grew out of a programme initiated in the early nineties and located within the Directorate of Adult Continuing Education

examination scripts the students are not compromised in any way. Putting the students and their access first is a good principle on which to build robust systems.

Frances believes that involving staff in documenting systems and procedures that are continuously reviewed and improved is not only a way of building quality in the organization but also helps staff to understand the interrelationships between the different systems. She cautions against over reliance on one or two people. Every supervisor should have practical understanding of the programmes and how they function so that remedial steps can be taken immediately when things go wrong or when a key person drops out unexpectedly. Forward planning is necessary to accommodate any technical upgrading of systems in good time. Frances says she would have welcomed this advice when she first started.

It may be trite but true that systems are as good as the people who design and drive them. Through our collective experience in professional development in different geographical and educational settings Helen and I have come to realize that people who understand the interrelated nature of academic and administrative systems within distance education provision are better able to play the distinctive roles required to create learning environments supportive of students. From the tutors in the field to the staff responsible for setting up information systems, each one is a crucial member of the team responsible for helping learners to access quality learning. Institutions intent on establishing viable systems will regard staff who carry out administrative and systems related functions as full members of the 'learning promoting' team and will invest in their ongoing professional development.