

SUPPORTING OPEN LEARNING STUDENTS IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: A SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Mr Paul Beneke, Organisational developer, Vista University, Pretoria, South Africa

Beneke-p@acaleph.vista.ac.za

1 Introduction

In the Age of the Information Explosion, it is no longer possible to empower learners through an oversupply of knowledge. The generally accepted approach is to intercede between the open learner and a confusing plethora of knowledge, by acting as an interpreter of knowledge and as a guider of the learning process. As such, it is incumbent on the learning facilitator to assist the lifelong learner in developing skills to access the information and knowledge available through a wide range of media and modes of learning. This in itself suggests the use of high technology and the ability to apply a highly flexible mode of learning as we approach the next century.

The process of empowerment mentioned above is based on certain assumptions. The first assumption is that the society in which the learner functions has access to the many sources of information and knowledge. The second assumption is that the learner possesses the technological infrastructure to access these media, and the third assumption is that the individual learner commands the skills required to obtain the knowledge from these sources, and the skill to interpret and apply or transfer the knowledge now at his or her disposal.

The case study presented here will illustrate that open and distance learners in South Africa are frequently situated in the deep rural areas where they cannot readily access the knowledge media. Based on previous and current research, it will demonstrate that these learners can only depend on very basic technology to gain access to these knowledge bases, and that they have a lack of language and other processing skills to adequately use these basic print bases. This is also supported from a comment from the University of Namibia: "...modern technology will not be available to every person in the world in the next ten years. If developing countries still experience difficulties regarding student support to distance education students, one may ask questions about the situations in the underdeveloped countries." (Beukes 1998:9)

Lastly the study will suggest a few strategies to overcome these impediments, to ensure that a disenfranchised section of our commonwealth community become increasingly empowered to participate in the global society of the future.

2 Concept Clarification

The first imperative is to declare a point of view on open learning. Extensive reading indicates that there is a wide divergence of opinion regarding this concept. The author has adopted the interpretation provided by Field (1994:7):

Open learning is used to denote both an educational philosophy and a set of techniques for delivering knowledge and skills. As philosophy, open learning implies greater accessibility and student centredness: it implies placing learner rather than provider at the core of educational practice. As a set of techniques, it is characterised by the use of resource-based teaching and training, often associated with the use of new communications media.

This interpretation suggests the role both of empowerment and technology in open learning, which is the theme of this forum.

Empowerment can only occur when it is clear who the learners are that require this empowerment. It has long been the contention of the author that each institution providing open and distance education should have a clear picture of the profile of their students, as these differ dramatically from one provider to the other, and even more so from one country to the other. This is also supported by Holmberg when he says "There is no evidence to indicate that distant students should be regarded as a homogeneous group" (1989:23) Secondly, the circumstances and characteristics of these students have a direct impact on the teaching and learning and other support services offered to them. The Vista University Distance Education Campus [VUDEC] has a student population of qualified and mostly experienced teachers as adult learners.

This student profile will be discussed in more detail in section five of the case study.

The concept Educational Technology can be described in this context as any medium of instruction and support which assists and supports the open learning student in engaging in the learning process. This encapsulates the entire spectrum from the basic print medium to the most advanced technology of the emerging twenty first century.

Based on the definition of a developing country by Gilpin (1970:65) "A poor or under-developed country which is making economic progress in respect of capital investment, education and training, productivity and general standards of living", it would seem as if this label is suitable for South Africa. This is further substantiated by the description provided by Pearce (1986:105), which quantifies it as a country with a per capita income below one-fifth of that of the USA. The argument in this paper is also within the economic understanding that there are significant diversities and similarities among developing countries.

3 Vista University and its Distance Education Campus

Vista University is the youngest university of the youngest democracy in the world, South Africa, which is one of 53 countries on the African continent. Of the approximately 97 universities in Africa, South Africa has 21 universities and together with the technikons provide higher education to over half a million students annually. South Africa has the strongest higher education infrastructure on the continent, and its first university was established 170 years ago.

Vista University is also the second largest university in the country. It is the only true multi-campus, dual mode institution of higher education in South Africa. Vista University provides learning opportunities to 18 092 students on seven urban, contact campuses across the country and to 10 129 students through its distance education campus VUDEC.

Providing higher education almost exclusively to the previously disenfranchised black citizens of the country, it is recognised as a HDI [historically disadvantaged institution], particularly with regard to funding during the previous regime. Historically it is the first South African university to have been granted a charter by parliament as a university open to all.

A reference to the vision and mission of Vista University will indicate that it focuses on the provision of affordable services to the needs of its learners and the communities it serves, in an innovative way while promoting excellence in all its endeavours. This then also influences the way in which it strives to support the students in achieving effective knowledge skills and attitudes, with the ultimate outcome of creating worthy and employable citizens.

It should also be noted that the entire educational system in South Africa, including higher education, is currently in the grip of major transformation. In this regard, Vista University is again in the vanguard, having already transformed its governance. Similarly, it is actively busy in transforming its curriculum to continue to serve the interests of the disadvantaged communities in which its campuses are situated.

4 A 1998 Research Project, as part of a longitudinal study.

To enable VUDEC, as the distance learning arm, to provide a focussed service, directed at the circumstances and needs of its students, the author first researched a student profile in 1989. From a total of 18 148 registered distance learning students a sample of 4 555 first year students was selected. A high response of 45% to mail questionnaires was obtained, and the results obtained were considered to be reliable.

A further limited follow-up study, more particularly to determine access to technology, was conducted with a sample of 1903 students in 1994, and a total response rate of 31,8% was obtained, which was still considered to provide valid statistics.

The original, broad-based research was again repeated in July 1998. To enable comparisons, the same segments of distance learners, similar in size to the original study (3891), but more representative of the whole VUDEC student population of 10 129 were selected. Again a very gratifying response rate of 42% was achieved, which is substantially higher than the mail response rates generally accepted by the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa.

The study included the following sections:

- Personal details
- Educational background
- Professional background
- Student circumstances
- Expectations and impressions, and
- Study details, methods and circumstances

This longitudinal study may be one attempt to refute the statement by Koul AThe picture that emerges is that in developing countries research in distance education is neither localised nor coordinated and seldom attracts funds from available sources. (Lockwood 1995:25) The last part of his statement is however, heartily endorsed.

Due to the limits placed on this presentation all the issues cannot be discussed in detail. The data provided comes from the three research projects reported in 1991, 1994 and 1998 and formal reference will not be made in the text when figures are reported.

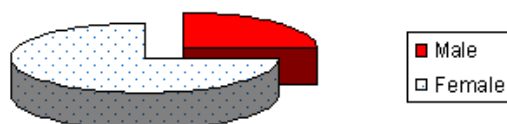
In the next sections readers will be provided with a brief outline of biographical details within which the other data should be interpreted. The case study will then also describe some of the restricting circumstances under which distance and open learners in Africa, and specifically the VUDEC students in southern Africa, are expected to complete their studies and in which they require support. The case study will also highlight the radical shortage of electronic media in these disadvantaged communities, and their major reliance on print media and a low quality postal service.

5 A brief student profile

To enable readers to form a broad perspective of the students served by VUDEC, information is provided regarding: Gender, language group, age, teaching experience and geographic distribution.

5.1 Gender

GENDER OF STUDENTS



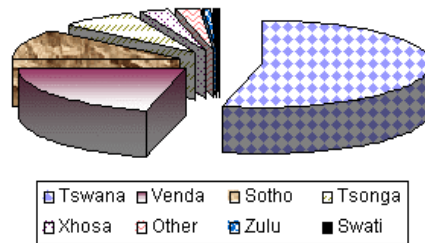
It is interesting to note that student gender distribution in the teaching profession has shifted from 56% to 75% females in the past decade. This has specific relevance to student support as the patriarchal system is still very dominant in the disadvantaged communities, where women actively engaged in intellectual pursuits are frequently victimized by their husbands. Women traditionally also carry a larger, if not the entire burden of domestic chores, which obviously directly impacts on open learning.

2. Language

South Africa adopted a new constitution in 1994, in which eleven languages are given official recognition. Many of the indigenous languages do not yet possess an academic register and the general practice in higher education is to use English for this purpose. It should be kept in mind that students often come from families where the parents came from different language groupings. Secondly, for a period of forty years (read this in conjunction with student age in section 5.3) the

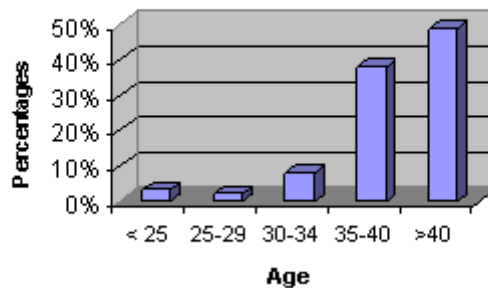
country was ruled by a political party that favoured my mother tongue, Afrikaans, a Germanic derivative, and for purposes of survival this then became the second or third language of students. The result is that English is often the fourth language of students, and this linked with an inadequate schooling system, has led to a low language competency level for many students.

LANGUAGES OF STUDENTS



5.3 Student age

AGES OF STUDENTS

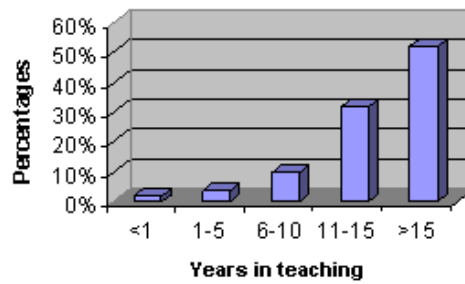


From the research it is evident that VUDEC services students in the adult education category. While the 1989 study indicated 40% of students to be in the 30 - 34 year age group, the current study seems to correspond to world trends in that 49% of the sample are now over 40 years old. This statistic should be seen in conjunction with another question in the questionnaire (Q25) in which the student had to indicate when they obtained their previous professional qualification. Of the response sample 57% had not studied in four years or more, while 32% had last studied ten or more years ago. The combined data makes it evident that these open and distance learning students deserve support of a very special nature, if we wish to empower them in their careers.

5.4 Teaching experience

Based on the previous information, one could expect the results indicated as years of teaching experience to be as reflected; 52% of the students have been professional teachers for more than fifteen years while a further 32% [52 + 32 = 84%] have 11 - 15 years of teaching experience. The imperative of this data is that many of these students have become entrenched in their teaching methodology and curriculum content, so that it becomes difficult to motivate and encourage them to adopt the new OBE teaching philosophy.

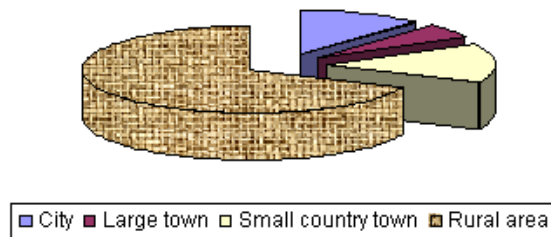
Teaching Experience



5.5 Demographics

Information regarding technology will be more acceptable if one considers that more than two-thirds (68%) of the students live in deep rural areas, not within the immediate vicinity of a town, while a further 15% live in small country towns where modern technological infrastructure has not yet arrived. Only 12% live in cities, and have access to libraries and other high-tech facilities.

DEMOGRAPHIC AREAS OF SCHOOLS



Although numerous other statistics are available, the above outline should provide the reader with a reasonable understanding of the distance education student in parts of Africa. These less impressionable students also have to cope with other physical and social restraints while involved in study, as will be illustrated below.

6 Student circumstances and study conditions

Of critical importance to the student studying in isolation is his domestic circumstances. Rather than highlight each of the numerous issues, the presenter will briefly try and paint a mental picture of the circumstances under which students are expected to engage in intellectual pursuits.

It is gratifying that the number of teachers living in stable privately owned homes had increased in the past decade from 51% to 73%, and that a direct supply of electricity [crucial for night study] had improved from 41% to 67%. It may appear that the provision of water had not improved at all in the last decade as the figures of the first study closely correlate with those of the current study (Running water available in the home 39%). The evidence is, however that the 1998 sample refers more to students deeper in the rural areas than the previous sample, which could suggest a gradual improvement. The relevance to our predominantly female students is of course that carrying water has over centuries been the domain of women and children. Add to this situation that 62% of the students share a traditional two-roomed building with at least two other adults and two or more children and the overcrowding becomes evident. In fact 30% of the respondents indicated that they had four or more children living with them. Another item researched their personal study area and 62% indicated that they either studied in the kitchen or bedroom while another 20% made use of school or library facilities. Given all of these circumstances plus domestic chores, extramural activities and a severe lack of available time it does not come as a surprise that 39% anticipated their domestic study circumstances to be either impossible or extremely difficult.

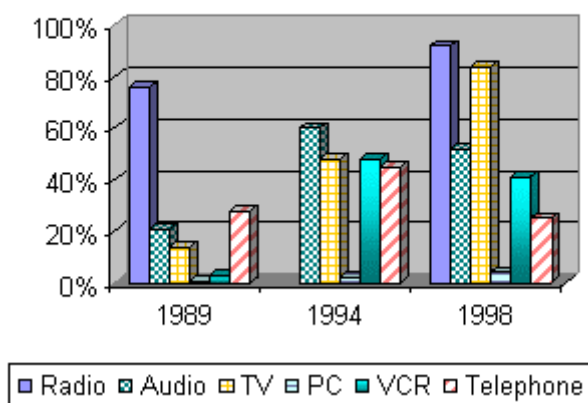
Although the above information indicates circumstances which are progressively more favourable for the

use of technology, it is also evident that empowerment of open and distance learning under these circumstances places particular challenges on the support structures.

7 A critical lack of technological infrastructure

Whereas teaching provision at VUDEC had in the past been very strongly print-based, there have for the past five years been initiatives to move more towards a multimedia open learning approach. For this to succeed it is necessary to establish to what extent students will have access to telematics. It was with great envy that the author recently attended a seminar by Dr Michael Moore from the University of Texas, Arlington, in which the use of high-tech streaming of media in education was demonstrated. It is only fair to state that this takes place in a developed country, in a 35 mile radius within an urban environment, which is radically different from the South African conditions represented here.

DIAGRAMME 2: Technological study aids available at home



Because only 22% of the respondents in the current study indicated access to a student study centre where they could make use of tutoring and technological support, as was anticipated, the availability of basic technology at home was also determined. As the graph below indicates there has been an increase in possession of radios, audiotape, television and video cassette recording equipment, while access to personal computers and telephone conferencing facilities is still very limited.

Use of educational equipment should again not be considered in isolation. Within the domestic community there are often conflicting demands made on the student. Although radio is widely used in all communities, it should be remembered that as a mass communication medium the educational broadcast times are predetermined, which does not always synchronise with the personal schedules of individual learners. The University of South Africa, the oldest dedicated distance education university in the world, made extensive use of educational broadcast in South Africa, and recently decided to discontinue this service. At present VUDEC has focussed its technology enhanced teaching mainly on audio- and videotape, as this retains the flexibility of use so essential in open learning.

Given all of the above restraints, it is necessary to consider what options for support of students are open to university teachers in distance education, and this will be briefly addressed in the next two sections.

8 Empowerment through student support with and without the aid of technology

Globally institutions of learning are called to be more accountable for the throughput of successful students. In an attempt to empower students maximally within financial restraints several strategies have been adopted.

8.1 Face-to-face contact. One attempt to overcome the lack of contact between lecturers and students is what Rowntree (1992:97) calls "Occasional seminars". Because the VUDEC students are all practising teachers, contact sessions are organised during the midyear school recess month. In a survey conducted by Gordon and van der Walt (1998:5) 94% of the students indicated that

this was very valuable to them. It must be borne in mind that this is a very costly exercise for both the institution and the students, given the geographic distances in South Africa, and that lecturers only had a very limited time in which to interact with the students at the various centres.

8.2 Support through print media. The most essential communication channel in a developing country remains the print medium. In the current study just over half (53%) of the students thought that the study manuals provided by VUDEC was excellent (22%) or very good (31%), while the largest group (39%) felt it was only satisfactory. This total figure of 92% correlates with the findings of the Gordon/ van der Walt survey where they had a satisfactory response from 90%. It also correlates well with the results of a study by Smith (1998:89) with Economics distance education students of VUDEC where 80% indicated that the study manuals were attractive and easy to read. In support of the study manuals as the primary print medium, lecturers also make use of tutorial letters which are mailed to students. The study conducted by the researcher in 1994 (Beneke 1994:8) indicated that only two-thirds to three-quarters of the students actually consulted their tutorials, so that this instrument does not have universal value. Lastly, it must be conceded that any mail communication is only as good as the postal service that supports it. In the current research 20% of the students described the postal service as very good, while 51% thought it was satisfactory. In fairness it should be stated that the South African postal services have made concerted efforts in recent times to improve their services.

8.3 Telephonic support In the current research 45% of the students expected to receive direct counselling from their lecturers, while 22% expressed the hope of receiving professional counselling from a qualified student counsellor and 18% felt that the tutors at the study centres could provide them with counselling. It can be assumed that the bulk of such communications would be by means of the telephone. As only 24% of the respondents indicated easy access to a telephone, this would severely hamper the interactional support by this means.

8.4 Learner support centres. By January 1999 VUDEC will have 30 operational learner support centres in seven of the nine provinces as well as in Namibia, a neighbouring country with a communal border. The purpose of these centres is to provide students with supplemental tutoring and personal counselling. It may in the future also be possible to equip these centres with computers and video or telephone conferencing facilities, but this would obviously be very costly. It should also be borne in mind that the current research responses indicated that only 22% of the students indicated a possibility to make use of these learner support centres.

8.5 Support by means of electronic media. In the future it may be possible to interact with the distance learners more directly and effectively with the aid of computer links, telephones and particularly interactional audio-visual links. In terms of support, this will provide the providers with the essential support tools immediately to explore the areas where support is needed most as well as the causes of learner problems. More particularly the diagnostic benefits of being able to observe the non-verbal communication of a student will make any form of support provision far more relevant.

9 Student support through institutional collaboration

The White Paper on Higher Education Transformation (1997:17) strongly advocates the formation of regional consortia and institutional partnerships in South Africa. In response to this VUDEC has actively participated in the formation of COLISA (The Confederation of Open Learning Institutions of South Africa). With its wide spread of campuses across the country Vista University is also a participant in many of the ten regional consortia established in the country. The benefits of these collaborations are still mainly unexplored, but could lead to the provision of support to Vista University students on an agency basis at a much reduced cost and with a broader perspective given to the learner. This, in conjunction with the principles of credit transferability, can ultimately lead to a major empowerment of a previously marginalised and disempowered community.

10 Conclusion

In this case study the presenter tried to provide delegates with an overview of the situation of some open and distance learners in South Africa, based on formal research conducted over a ten year period. The rationale behind this is the acknowledgement that no form of student support can be effective without a

reliable student profile to inform the strategies adopted. Having sketched the disadvantaged background of most of the students and the restraints of technology at their disposal, he is firmly of the opinion that this profile is not unique to South Africa, and probably reflects to greater or lesser extent the positions in many of the developing countries. In reconsidering the assumptions mentioned at the beginning of this case study, it becomes evident that disadvantaged students often do not have easy access to sources of information and knowledge, rarely have technology at their disposal to improve the access and frequently do not have the linguistic or technological skills to use such media.

Given the status quo, it is evident from current practice, that many open and distance learners still succeed in their pursuit of lifelong learning. The members of the Commonwealth are invited to visit this, our rainbow nation and to participate and contribute to the African Renaissance in higher education. I can make no better closing comment than those of Perraton: "If we can make progress along all, or any, of these paths, the learners of Africa may in the long run benefit from our decision making and planning." (Harry, John & Keegan 1993:259)

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