

THE FLEXIBLE MODE PROGRAMME: BOTSWANA: A NOBLE INITIATIVE THAT CAN BE IMPROVED

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates an ongoing graduate educational management program in flexible mode, introduced in Botswana in 2000. Results of the investigation have revealed, despite the program's popularity, certain shortcomings associated with insufficient learning resources, inadequate communication and time constraints. Recommendations are designed to sustain students and tutors towards more successful outcome.

BACKGROUND

The development and massive expansion of secondary education in Botswana particularly in quantitative terms at independence in 1966 and thereafter, resulted in a shortage of qualified school heads. As a consequence teachers have been promoted to head schools without training in educational management. For a long time school heads were mainly expatriates until the introduction on the policy on localization of senior post in the public service, including schools. Initially heads were exposed to short in-service training courses and some were sent for sent for training mainly in the United Kingdom. Important as these efforts were they were outpaced by the expansion of secondary schools which quadrupled from 56 in 1984 (Republic of Botswana, 1984) to 233 in 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2002). This state of affairs strengthened the case for the need to train more school leaders.

The Botswana Government entered into a partnership with the University of Bath who were offering a modular based distant mode training. However this arrangement was turning out to be costly. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education negotiated with the Department of Educational Foundations in the Faculty of Education in the University of Botswana to offer a similar program to the Bath one. After a series of meetings the flexi-mode program was inceptioned in April 2000 with massive savings for the government and attracting more students including self-sponsored ones. Four years after the program had started it became apparent that the submission of assignments was disturbingly slow.

Structure of the Flexi-mode Program

The program includes twelve three-credit courses and a twelve-credit research essay. The number of courses, their weighting and assessment, are in accordance with the General Regulations of the University of Botswana Calendar

(2005/06:45.5.1) for full-time and part-time graduate students. The program combines distance learning with residential teaching. The students attend block teaching sessions that last for two weeks at the end of each school term in which two modules are completed and for which they are given take-home assignments. Communication between the students and the tutors is mainly by phone. The assumption was that all these students would have access to the University of Botswana Library. The problem was really that many of the students were from far away places. Students have up to twelve semesters to complete their studies as per the graduate school regulations. However it became evident that many students especially those in the first two cohorts would not be able to meet the deadline. Between April 2000 and October 2007 only 17 students out of the 67 registered students had graduated. As a result of this the Ministry of Education has agreed to give two terms off from work to remaining students to complete their studies.

Aim of the Study

The study is aimed at investigating reasons why the completion rate for the Flexi-mode students is low. Basing on the informants' views, the paper will make proposals that can inspire and sustain students' staying capacity in the program. The following questions are intended to aid the achievement of this aim: From the point of view of the students and the lecturers:

1. Why do students fail to submit assignments?
2. Why do they submit assignments late?
3. How can the students be motivated to work harder?

Literature Review

The contact hours of the flexi-mode students are almost the same as those of the full-time and part-time students. The former's contact hours are concentrated on six continuous weeks in a year whereas the latter enjoy a wide spread contact period. The flexi-mode learner is alone

for most of the time. Basically, the flexi-mode learner is a distance education learner. Mikko *et al* (2005) refer to such learners as on-the-job learners and that in Finland such mode of learning was premised on the labour market value of education. In Hong Kong the move towards similar programmes were premised on the idea that learning occurs throughout the course of an individual's life as knowledge keeps on depreciating (Weiyuan and Tak-Kay 2006) and in Botswana the Government had realized the need for a skilled and educated school leadership. The literature review of this paper will be informed by literature on distance and lifelong education. Distance or lifelong education represents a variety of educational models that have in common the physical separation of the students and their instructors. This separation leads to communication gaps between the instructor and the student which have the potential to cause misunderstanding (Moore and Kearsley in Barbadillo 1998). The separation presents a challenge in the way instructors approach distance education students to plan, present content, interact, and perform other processes of teaching. This in many ways is different from the face-to-face environments of campus students in that distance education can deprive the student of the breadth of knowledge associated with sharing ideas and experiences in organized formal and non-formal settings for a sustained long period with other students; a lost opportunity to the learner (Schuetze 2007). Although distance students may be separated from their instructors for most of the time, they do have access and interaction with campus library services although to a lesser extent than those on campus.

For the individual to continually sustain distance, part-time and flexi learning, he/she should be self-inspired, self-motivated and must have self-resolve. For the self-sponsored student particularly, the decision to enrol in distance learning can be a difficult one (<http://www.ferrcuni-hagen.de/ZIFF/PETERS1.htm>). Distance learning students usually hold jobs, have families, live off campus and are older. "They want what they want, when and where they need it and at a price they can afford" (Levine and Jeffrey 2002:3). Ostensibly, they want convenience and affordability in terms of time and finance.

The flexibility of distance education, offers practitioners the alternative to fulfil their needs for self-development and advancement (Peddler *et al.* 2001). In developed and some developing countries, new trends to distance education offer

multimedia technologies such as computer-mediated learning, particularly internet-mediated learning (e-learning) that substitute much of the traditional dependence on book prints (Stokke 2004). In many advanced educational systems in the world, due to the rapid technological development, courses are being delivered to students using a variety of media in various locations including remote geographical areas with increasing interactivity between student and teacher. The new technology has made feedback on assignments much easier as compared to the traditional surface and air mail systems. Using the new technology assignments can be submitted and marked through the email. These efforts are made to serve the educational needs of growing populations (Barbadillo 1998). The USA, the UK and Canada lead in this respect by their continual review of distance education programs to reach as many of their clients as possible through the quickest possible means. In some universities in South Africa, notably the University of South Africa, reading materials in the form of modules and material from journals are distributed to students to facilitate their assignments.

Botswana as one of the few countries with a relatively advanced telecommunication system in the region and among the best in Africa (Commerce and Industry 2000), has the capacity to provide distance education through the sophisticated media mentioned above. However, this capacity has not been fully exploited in the provision of the Flexi-mode. The constraint could be due to the fact that most of the program instructors were/are not familiar with e-learning teaching. The other problem was that most of the students on this program from the remote areas did not have internet. The University of Botswana flexible mode model is limited to mainly two models out of a variety of other models of distance education. These two models are described in <http://www.umuc.edu/ide/modldata.html> 3/6/2006 as interactive communication and independent learning. The interactive communication model allows students the opportunity to interact with others in discussions, whereas in the independent model the student is left on their own for most of the time. This approach enables students to see their own familiar practices in fresh ways and this can encourage them to change their practices within their usual daily workplace (Goddard, Fisher, Kinchington and Cobb 1999). Also, the Flexi-mode students, being regular workers, are offered the opportunity to concretely relate practice to theory immediately as they can learn skills 'today' and practice them the 'next day'.

The learner in distance education/flexi mode deals therefore with live problems rather than being taught which is a major source of significant learning (Moswela 2005; Peddler *et al.* 2001). To the in-service teacher, a topic on teaching methodologies, for example, would make more sense than to a pre-service student teacher as the in-service student can immediately relate their current practice to theory (Peddler *et al.* 2001). Current debate on in-service programs such as the flexi mode is that knowledge on its own is not enough. It needs to be transferred to real life situations in order for it to be more meaningful (The Times-Higher Education Supplement 2006). The immediate blending of practice with theory purported by Goddard *et al.* (1999) is described by Schon (1983) in Yoong and Cervro (2005) as reflective practice which should not be confused with problem solving. Reflective practice, Schon argues, is not necessarily a process of problem solving. Rather, it is about making sense of uncertain experienced situations. To the student who pursues studies concurrently with their job, Schon further argues, distance learning is a conversation between practitioners or professionals about their experiences in the workplace. In the case of school managers, they are able to discuss the learning and teaching behaviour of their students and teachers and discuss issues of school funding and the general micro-politics of education. Such formal and informal interactions between student practitioners pursuing a common goal (the quest to provide quality education) can offer some emotional comfort and reassurance to individuals as they discover that what they perceived to be problems peculiar to themselves and their schools only are common problems to others as well. In this sense the Flexi-mode in particular, as distance education by the interactive communication mode, is a practical way of learning because it addresses practical issues. A study on the Danish Vocational Education and Training distant education program for sales assistants that combined 40% school-based theoretical and practical training in a commercial school and 60% on-the-job training revealed that such an arrangement “strengthened the trainees’ position in the community of practice, the workplace” (Vibe 2005: 145).

METHODOLOGY

The study undertaken is a survey conducted on the course participants. The researchers believe that in order to obtain quality study outcomes, people directly involved in the program should form the core population. On this basis, the study targeted the students and their tutors. A population selected on this basis would likely provide knowledgeable, thoughtful and reflective

experiences on the subject (Swisher and McClure 1984). Specifically, such informed input would draw from the students’ knowledge of their tutors and from the course; and also from the tutors’ knowledge of the program and the behaviour of the students during their interaction with them. This approach also draws from Daniels and Garner’s (1999) perspective on purposive sampling. The number of students who enrolled between 2000 and the time the program was suspended in 2005 was sixty seven (67). Only Forty four (44) students who were accessible participated in the study. All the tutors (10) were targeted for the study but only six responded.

Data collection

The data collection method combined the close-ended questionnaire type that requires a single response, either in a four-point scale or a yes/no response, and the open-ended type that required respondents to think, in a semi-structured way, about themselves and the program in relation to its effectiveness. The advantage of the latter method over the former is that it probes in-depth information and offers more clarification of responses (Bogdan and Bilken 2003). By combining the two data collection paradigms (part quantitative and part qualitative), the study exploited best use of strengths for both of them (Moswela 2005). The questionnaires were pilot tested on a group of M.Ed. full-time and part-time students.

Procedure

The researchers administered the questionnaires to students who came for consultation during their vacation time. Those who did not come to the university were sent the questionnaires by mail.

Findings (from the students)

The findings were obtained from 31 (70%) of the total student sample. All the student respondents expressed the view that the Flexi-mode is a good and noble program; it is very essential and very rich in content and it could be extended to the Department of Primary Education. Four main reasons emerged as impediments to the students’ work. Suggestions were subsequently made as to how these impediments could be addressed.

Workplace demands

All the respondents’ cited demanding workload at their work places as affecting their studies. This concern has been expressed from the sampled individual students’ response to the question as follows: Why are you behind with your assignments or research projects? In particular, some of the respondents noted that “The volume of work at the workplace keeps on

increasing since the introduction of innovations like Performance Management System.” Another comment was that “The Department of Secondary Education has underestimated the workload involved in the flexi mode. More time for personal study away from the workplace should be given to the students”. One of the suggestions for improvement was that “Once the research proposal has been approved students should be given six months sabbatical to work on the research. Some even suggested a whole year”.

Students are slow with assignments and Lecturers delay with feedback

Eighteen (58 %) of the students blamed lecturers for taking too long to mark assignments. This has been expressed through sentiments such as “lecturers should give prompt feedback” and that “strict submission deadlines should be set and penalties imposed where necessary”. Twenty seven students (87%) experienced communication gaps with the research supervisors or lecturers.

Program overload

Thirteen (42%) of the students noted that the courses for the program needed to be reviewed and reduced in number, arguing that “twelve was just too much”. “The program is too packed and teaching is crammed into very little time”, remarked one respondent in support of a reduction in number of courses.

Distance from the university library

The students’ distance from the university library was reported to be a serious impediment to their studies. Out of the thirty one respondents, seventeen (55%) were faced with this problem. This is a particular problem facing the students working in rural areas.

Findings from tutors

There was a sixty percent (six out of ten tutors) return rate of the questionnaires. All the tutors agreed that students are slow in submitting assignments; students do not finish their research projects on time and the number of supervisors need to be increased. Most of the tutors (83%) said that some of the students had not submitted any assignments at all at the time of this study. Slightly over two thirds (67%) of the tutors agreed that there should be a fixed time-frame for the completion of the program. Furthermore the tutors made several suggestions including the call for a reduced number of taught courses; preparation of reading materials/ modules and that lecturers involved in supervision should be given a lighter teaching load.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The research sought to investigate problems encountered by students in their studies and how these could be addressed. The quantitative and qualitative components of the data are discussed concurrently. There is general agreement between the students and the tutors that the former take time to submit their work whilst the latter are slow in giving feedback. The slow rate has been attributed to three prominent themes that emerged from the findings. These themes will form the basis of the discussion in this section.

Students’ and tutors’ workload

Reiterating the respondents’ (students) view that the Flexi-mode is a good in-service program, The Times-Higher Education (2006), Vibe (2005) and Schon (1983) have also applauded programs such as the Flexi for offering the student the opportunity to immediately blend practice with theory. In this way students are also enabled to see their own familiar practices in fresh ways and this can encourage them to change their practices within their usual daily workplace (Goddard, Fisher, Kinchington and Cobb 1999). Such opportunity, however, has not fully benefited the Flexi-mode student in Botswana for two main reasons. Firstly, the students are full-time employees. Their employment requires them to do the same amount of work as if they were not students. Heads for example oversee curriculum implementation at their schools and are regularly out of their duty stations attending meetings and workshops. Secondly, the tutors also experience high workloads at the University as implied in their responses and where they want the number of supervisors increased to help in the research supervision activity. Four (66%) of the tutors said they supervised too many students. All this stems from the fact that the same tutors have to supervise the full-time, part-time and the flexi-mode students. In reality some tutors may have as many as 20 M.Ed. students to supervise in any one academic year. Students in particular were also not happy in finding supervisors for themselves and would prefer an allocation system where they knew who their supervisors were in advance.

Distance from the university

Students’ distance from the university means that they are physically separated with their tutors. This distance leads to communication gaps between the two important partners (Moore and Kearsley in Barbadillo 1998). Thirteen out of 31 (41%) of the students said they had difficulty in communicating with their tutors due mainly to distance. Half the tutors said the same of the students, but also attributed the problem to cost.

Communicating to the Flexi students as noted earlier, is mainly by phone and the university does not relieve tutors of the cost. Twenty three out of 31 (74%) and 18 out of 24 (76%) of the students respectively said they had problems in getting material for assignment and research work. The majority of these students live far from the university library. Most centres that offer similar non-contact or minimal contact hours such as UNISA in South Africa; Botswana College of Distance Learning; Bath in the UK, the Open Distance Learning – Zimbabwe use modules and reading materials in their courses. It is interesting to note, however, that more of the self-sponsored students are graduating first in each of the cohorts where they are. The majority of them have already completed. This does raise the point that those who are sponsored are abusing government funds.

Structure of the program

Both the tutors and students have expressed their concerns about the twelve taught three credit courses in the program. They feel that the number of courses should be in line with regional and international practice. This will help them to complete their assignments on time.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Flexi-mode program has been a welcome initiative for the students who are also in full-time employment. It offers school managers and education officers the rare opportunity to pursue their academic development while at the same time earning a full salary. The Ministry of Education, on the other hand, made immense monetary savings by releasing a large group of 'students' simultaneously and at a rate much cheaper as had been the case for the students who had studied outside the country. Whereas the individual and organizational benefits outweighed the losses, the program was/is not without its own problems. The students were concerned about being isolated from their tutors, shortage of tutors and reading materials. These concerns bordered mainly on organizational and administrative issues, more than on the quality of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the discussion of the findings, there is need for an evaluation for improvement of the program which should focus mainly on modularization of the program; having a full-time coordinator; having better support services for students.

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