Meeting the needs of postgraduate learners: a historical review

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ABSTRACT

To improve the delivery of distance education, it is crucial to understand the needs and demands of learners. The following question provided the organising framework for the study: "To what extent have the learning material and assessment system of a module, Personnel Management, met learners' needs and expectations of the learners?" This article outlines the module in Personnel Management; the development of the assignment and assessment system in the module; criteria for defining "quality teaching" applied to the module; the quality assurance process followed in designing and redesigning the module; learners' perceptions of the module; and how the learning material and assessment system could be improved to meet learners' needs and expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Ideas of quality were originally developed in the 1930s and 1940s primarily by W Edwards Deming, a statistician who was best known for helping postwar Japanese business to become number one in quality in the world (Sallis 1997:7). He first visited Japan in the late 1940s and returned in 1950 when he encouraged a group of Japanese industrialists to make a nationwide assault on inferior quality. Deming provided a simple answer to the dilemma of poor quality: find out what customers want. The resulting approach is popularly known as Total Quality Management (TQM).

The review of quality in learning programmes comes at a time when concern for quality in higher education is perhaps at an all-time high (Nielsen 1997:288; Eaton 1999:26). At a time when consumer choice and customer perception of quality is cardinal, institutions which can offer quality products and customer service will survive and prosper (Jenkins 1991:97). The notion of quality in education is not new (Rinehart 1993:260). What is new is that the quality philosophy, quality management (QM), already applied in business and industry, is being adapted to problems encountered in institutions (Wilson 1993:62; Daugherty 1996:83; Cramer 1996:360).

QM focuses primarily on achieving quality and can be defined as a philosophy and a set of guiding principles intended to meet and exceed the needs and expectations of various external and internal customers (Bradley 1993:169; Herman 1993:2; Pike & Barnes 1994:24; Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:26). The second focus is on the acceptance and pursuit of continuous improvement as the only useful standard or goal of attaining quality.

The quality approach is also applicable to distance education where teaching and learning are separated by time, place and space. Always keep in mind that learning at a distance with only a few on-campus seminars is a viable option for many learners (especially employed educators) who wish to improve their qualifications and develop professionally (Purnell, Cuskelly & Danaher 1996:76). Although distance education is in many ways similar to teaching face-to-face, the experiences of teaching and learning at a distance are different since participants are separated from one another and their communication is mediated through written material and/or electronic means (Wolcott 1995:39). This environment also has the potential for increased interpersonal distance due to fewer opportunities for contact and the loss of feedback. Acknowledging that physical separation of educators and learners poses actual and perceptual obstacles, learners' views on their own learning offer crucial information for reflection (Van Niekerk & Herman 1996:44; Sherry, Fulford & Zhang 1998:4). Sherry, Fulford and Zhang (1998:20) also indicate that learner-based evaluation and reflection are generally accepted when the intended application is support for improvement of

learning. Recent policy developments in higher education in South Africa are likely to lead to increasing evaluation of the quality of learning and, in particular, to the increased use of learner evaluation in this process.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To improve the delivery of distance education, it is crucial to understand the needs and demands of learners (Purnell et al 1996:76). Different approaches to teaching and learning in distance education intensify the need to monitor the quality of geographically dispersed learners' learning experiences (Sherry et al 1998:5). The following question provides the organising framework for the study: "To what extent have the learning material and assessment system of a module Personnel Management met the needs and expectations of the learners?" Thus, the article

- explains some concepts relevant to the research question
- provides an overview of the module in Personnel Management
- explains the development of the assignment and assessment system
- applies criteria for defining "quality teaching" to the module Personnel management
- explains the quality assurance process followed in designing and redesigning the module
- determines learners' perceptions of the module
- recommends how the learning material and assessment system could be improved to meet learners' needs and expectations.

WHAT IS QUALITY?

Daugherty (1996:85), Oakland and Oakland (1998:188) and Juran (1999a:2.2) define "quality" in conventional business terms as

- Listening to customers.
- Finding out what they want. Customer satisfaction is a vital institutional goal and is considered the absolute test of an organisation's effectiveness.
- Producing products that are fit for their purpose.

"Quality" therefore means the features of products and services which meet or exceed customer needs and thereby provide satisfaction. For the purpose of this paper, the perception of learners as customers is used to determine the quality of the learning experience in the postgraduate module Personnel Management. Learners offer a vital and valuable perspective on the quality of their learning experience.

APPROACH TO THE PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT MODULE

The BEd specialisation course Educational Management is a postgraduate course offered through distance education at the University of South Africa. It comprises four modules, one of which is Personnel Management. The course serves as preservice management training for many learners who are teachers as well as inservice training for learners who are school principals, deputy principals, heads of departments or employed in regional or head offices of Departments of Education.

The main approach to learning materials underlying Personnel Management is similar to Steyn's (1997b:81) learning paradigm. According to Barr and Tagg (1995:21), the learners are the main agents in the process who actively discover their own meaning by being involved in doing things and thinking about their actions. This allows practitioners to reflect on actions and to identify alternatives for improved future performances (Tanner & Jones 1994:415; Hobson 1996:45). Within the learning paradigm reflective practice therefore plays a significant role. Through reflective practice, practitioners (the learners) reflect on past and present actions with a view to improving future performances in their practices (Kottkamp 1990:183;

Hart 1990:153). This approach was deemed appropriate for educating and professionally developing educational managers in personnel management because it allows for learners' (practitioners) reflection and action (Schön 1995:34; Griffin & Kilgore 1995:56). Leder (1993:6) agrees that learners should be active participants in the learning process and not merely passive recipients of information transmitted to them by others. In this approach the model of the lecturer as expert has given way to the educator as facilitator in the teaching and learning process (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:150; Houser & Vaughan 1995:9).

THE ASSIGNMENT SYSTEM

In 1996 and 1997 the assignment system encompassed the following:

- Assignment 01 required students to compile their own position analysis according to their post levels; poll a group of staff members to determine their inservice training and professional development needs; act as the principal in a scenario on staff appraisal; analyse a case study on motivation and determine their staff's job satisfaction level.
- Assignment 02 comprised role-play exercises which covered communication between a principal and an irate teacher, a negotiation situation, an appraisal interview, a disciplinary interview and group problem-solving techniques to tackle a problem in the school.
- Assignment 03 was an essay on a topic chosen by the student. Students had to carry out a mini-research project on a problem they identified in their school/organisation.

When reviewing the responses of 1996 learners, the so-called "voice of the customers", the lecturers responsible for the module were concerned about the logistics of the process whereby feedback was given to learners on their assignments, the so-called "the voice of the process" (Greenwood & Guant 1994:45). Moreover, conversations with learners showed that many merely took cognisance of the general comments on the assignments. Even where learners paid careful attention to the lecturers' comments, it was likely that learners had forgotten some of the content of the assignment after six weeks, the general time-lag for an assignment to be returned to a learner. This brought the level of learning into question, considering when feedback on assignments was provided. It was assumed that if knowledge and skills could be repeated and inculcated within a shorter time span, the quality of learning could improve. Another concern was the many telephonic requests for extension of submission of assignments. If learners planned the completion of assignments better, the process could be more effective. Considering the above, in Scherkenbach's terms (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:47), the two "voices" of the customer and the process were out of line and needed to be realigned This paved the way for the adaption of the assignment and assessment process.

In the light of the above, a single, extensive assignment was set for 1998, which consisted of ten activities linked to the ten topics covered by the module. The assessment procedures were again decided on after consulting the instructional designer. After careful planning, a progressive assignment (a lengthy assignment consisting of various knowledge and skill-building activities covering all the topics) was designed. A complete memorandum, which students receive upon registration, was compiled and served as a reference and a marking schedule. Each activity also included a mark allocation as recommended by the 1996 students. A suggested timetable for completion of these activities throughout the year was provided to help learners plan their work. Since the activities were designed to reflect learners' personal involvement and experience in various practical situations, learners were unlikely to copy the answers to these activities. Before submitting their assignments, learners were required to award their own marks according to the marking schedule provided in the memorandum. Once again it was emphasised that the marks awarded indicate learning successes and experiences and not "passes" or "failures". A learning experience should not be quantified in terms of pass or fail.

THE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS

The researcher was initially assigned to the module in 1993 and, after reading relevant material on the teaching of management knowledge and skills, adapted the learning paradigm and reflective practice paradigm referred to above. This was a major paradigm shift and learning materials had to be adapted accordingly for 1994.

Reflection on my own teaching during 1994 brought the realisation that the teacher cannot be the sole role player and certain strategies were needed to assure quality.

Several quality assurance activities were used in the module:

1) A focus group interview with role players to determine the "content" of learning material

Frequent stakeholder assessments and meaningful dialogue and reconciliation among learners are necessary (Nielsen 1997:306). Nielsen (1997:306) suggests the following groups for such dialogues:

- Students: What are their learning needs? How can these needs be met?
- The university community: The teaching staff and instructional designers have an obligation to uphold academic standards, which implies concern for content, pedagogy and assessment of courses.
- Goverment agencies: Departments of Education and state funding bodies have different concerns from the above, such as curriculum issues and priorities of the state.

In 1995 an official from the Education Department, two colleagues from other universities, two principals from schools, an instructional designer from Unisa, lecturers involved in the BEd Specialisation Education Management and two students enrolled for the specialisation course were invited to participate as role players. As introduction, the official in the Department of Education explained their demands concerning management knowledge and skills of school leaders. The facilitator then divided the participants into groups and asked them to identify key learning areas. These areas were listed and discussed in the report-back session. In the light of this discussion, participants then had an opportunity to indicate the importance of topics that were then part of their modules and to suggest other relevant topics.

2) Using a team approach to drafting course materials

The module was developed and reviewed incrementally (cf Lee 1996:63). The course team consisted of the academic involved in writing the learning material, an instructional designer, whose task was to regulate the work of the team and to provide a link between the author, the editor and graphic designer as well as the service departments involved in the production of the learning material. In the first stage of rewriting the learning materials, the author presented the 1994 learning materials to the instructional designer to scrutinise the learning content, the learning objectives, the assignments and examination papers. The learning objectives and outcomes were not aligned and had to be revised. Since learning outcomes differ, after careful consideration, the outcomes were grouped into three categories: knowledge, skills and attitude. Closely linked to the learning design is the content design, which was informed by the focus group's ideas. The focus here was on the form to adopt for teaching the content. A self-contained, stand-alone study guide with a reader consisting of numerous articles on the topics in the content were selected (cf Goodwin-Davey & Davey 2000:6) After careful consideration, a draft document, stating the proposed topics from the focus group's interview, the learning objectives, the presentation strategy and format and content of assignments, was proposed. The instructional designer then reviewed and approved the draft document. The author proceeded to write the learning material. Upon completion of a study unit, the draft was examined by the instructional designer for timely feedback. Feedback was provided in writing and in face-to-face discussions. When the write-up was complete, it was again reviewed by the instructional designer. The editor and graphic designer joined the course team when the

learning material had passed academic examination and been revised accordingly (Guri 1986:67). The visual layout of the text, which includes the readability of the text, interactivity strategies, the use of graphics, icons, the style sheet and the type of "look" that a text gives, is an important aspect of design (cf Goodwin-Davey & Davey 2000:8). The editor and graphic designer worked closely with the author and instructional designer.

3) Peer review of learning material

After implementation of instructional and graphic designer comments, the learning material was sent to an external expert in the appropriate field of study and a potential student for evaluation of the learning content and design.

4) Appointment of an external examiner

The external examiner worked with the first examiner in all matters such as approval of the exam paper, memorandum and monitoring of scripts.

5) Collection of feedback from students

Quality assurance through effective internal verification is important (Menmuir 1995:44).

CRITERIA FOR DEFINING "QUALITY TEACHING"

Hunt (1998:276) identifies certain criteria for defining quality teaching, which apply to the module Personnel Management as follows:

1) The educator has the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to enable learners to achieve the learning outcomes of the module

The educator is an experienced adult educators who has taught a variety of distance education programmes and is actively involved in research. The other educators who later joined the module team have similar experience.

2) Module details are explicit, clear and comprehensible to learners. Module objectives and the assignments are clear

Study guides and tutorial letters outline the aims, structure, content and nature of the module.

3) Learners are involved in active learning

The study guides contain interactive activities and assignments have detailed guidelines for answering them. Learners also receive a detailed memorandum with a marking schedule for self-assessment.

4) Learners' views on the assignment are solicited systematically and used to review future assignments

Part of the completion of an assignment includes a questionnaire which gives learners the opportunity to reflect on the assignment, its activities and the assessment system.

5) Learners know who to turn to for help and advice

Tutorial letters provide educators' office and home contact numbers and learners are invited to make appointments with educators should they need assistance.

6) Educators reflect on their practice and performance and develop their skills and knowledge

The educator has tried to clarify and reduce uncertain situations by questioning assumptions and constructing and testing teaching and learning approaches (Jedrziewski 1995: 27). One of the biggest benefits of educator reflection is that educators take personal responsibility for their own growth and professional development (McCombs 1997:10). Nummendal (1997:46) explains that self-knowledge is necessary for authentic research that grows out of one's own teaching practice. In order to make necessary quality adjustments, the educators constantly reflect on learners' performance in assignments and the examination and their perceptions of the module.

According to the above, the module is demonstrably doing well as regards "quality teaching".

RESEARCH METHODS

According to Weller and McElwee (1997:209), experience and intuition are not sufficient to base decisions on. Thus for the purpose of this research two methods suggested by Ramsden and Dodds (1989:17) and Prosser and Trigwell (1990:141) were used to collect feedback from learners. First, questionnaires were sent to students in 1996 to determine their perceptions of the assignment and assessment system. The questionnaire consisted of 80 items and was a compulsory assignment for which ten credits were automatically obtained on submission of the assignment. The questionnaire covered students' biographical information and consisted of different items, including an evaluation of the three assignments. Although the data indicated a positive response, it was necessary to improve the process since commitment to continuous improvement is viewed as an important principle in QM (Arcaro 1995:64; Swift, Ross & Omachonu 1998:95).

To determine learners' perceptions of the new improved assignment and assessment system, another questionnaire, consisting of 94 items, was designed and employed for learners enrolled in 1998 and 1999. There are ten sections in the questionnaire, one for each activity in the assignment. Learners had to complete the corresponding section in the questionnaire after completing an activity in the assignment. The questionnaire measured the ability of the activity to hold learners' interest; whether the activity was understood; the relevance of the activity for practice; whether the activity could be completed within the suggested time allocation in the timetable; and marks obtained after marking the activity. General comments at the end of the questionnaire focused on learners' perception of their learning experiences.

Second, data were collected at an Educational Management Seminar in August 1996 where participants were divided into groups of four or five. The learners had the opportunity to express their views freely in their groups on two open-ended questions: "How did you experience the content of the module?" and "What was your experience of the assignments set in the module?" Each group had to reach consensus on their views and one student in each group was responsible for submitting a summary of the group's response in writing. Sixty-four responses were collected.

More qualitative data were collected at a similar seminar in September 1998. The 148 learners who participated were again organised into buzz groups of four or five and asked to comment on their experience of the assignments and the self-assessment system in the module. The groups had to answer questions like "What is your perception of the assignment and assessment system in Personnel Management?" and "How does assessment affect your learning?" About the present system. "Rich" expressions enabled learners to give a true reflection of their feelings and experiences. Thirty-seven responses were collected and analysed.

The qualitative responses of 1996 and 1998 students were read and reread. The responses of students using the same or more or less the same words or concepts in their responses were categorised into several categories.

FINDINGS

This section discusses the 1996, 1998 and 1999 quantitative data and the 1996 and 1998 qualitative data briefly.

1996 quantitative data

A total of 471 (89,5%) responses to questionnaires during 1996 were recorded and analysed. Of the respondents, 181 (38,4%) were males and 287 (60,9%) were females. Forty-eight (10,2%) respondents received instruction in their mother tongue and 421 (89,4%) respondents in a second or third language.

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate their experiences of Assignment 01. Of the respondents, 97,7 percent found Assignment 01 relevant to practice, 96,4 percent found it improved their understanding of the topics and 97,9 percent found it succeeded in developing their management skills.

A number of questions dealt with learners' experience of Assignment 02. Here the responses were very positive: the assignment was relevant to learners' practice (96,8%); it helped them to understand the module (95,4%); and it improved their management skills (98,9%). In designing Assignment 02 it was envisaged that participants in the role play would both act as tutors and benefit from their involvement. According to the responses, the assignment achieved this aim: 93,5% of the learners acknowledged that they had learnt from the participants in the role play and 93,4% believed that participants had also gained from the experience. Of the respondents, 93,3% considered this assignment important and 85,6% indicated it should be compulsory in future; 96,6 % felt that their confidence in working with people had improved after completing the assignment and 97,1% maintained that the assignment enhanced their self-knowledge by identifying their strong and weak points.

Assignment 01 had a self-assessment component as only two questions were marked by the lecturer and the rest were evaluated by the learners according to a marking schedule provided. The value of Assignment 02 lay in its completion and thus no marks were awarded although a memorandum was included when the assignments were returned to the learners. According to QM, results of tests and examinations do not necessarily reflect a learner's progress or learning experience (Arcaro1995:64). Marks should rather be de-emphasised and life-long learning emphasised instead (Fields 1993:62). This assignment also had a self-assessment component as learners were required to compare their answers to those of the lecturer. Although most learners indicated that self-assessment is a good strategy (88,2%), a small percentage (10,2%) did not regard the strategy as effective. This is possibly because learners are accustomed to lecturers correcting assignments and awarding marks. This supports the traditional perception among learners that lecturers know and can; learners do not know and can't.

1998 and 1999 quantitative data

A total of 303 questionnaires of 1998 learners were analysed which is 62,3% of the total population (468) enrolled for the module. A total of 274 questionnaires of 1999 learners were analysed which is a 79,2% of the total population (346) enrolled for the module. An extra two weeks were allowed for late questionnaires which could explain the improved response in1999. Table 1 indicates the biographical information of respondents.

Table 1: Biographical information

Item	Option	1998 (%)	1999 (%)
Gender	Male Female	32,1 67,9	28,4 71,6
Is the module that you are studying written in the medium of	your mother tongue a second or third language	6,0 94,0	7,7 92,3

According to Table 1, the majority of learners in both years were women. The biographical information also shows an increase in the number of females since 1996. This may be partly explained by the fact that the South African Constitution does not allow discrimination on the basis of gender and many women therefore now envisage themselves as potential managers in the education system. In addition, some men might think that as a result of the Employment of Educators Act of 1998 (Employment of Educators Act 1998) women are now more likely to be appointed as educational managers, should they apply for the same post, which may inhibit men from choosing to study Educational Management.

Table 1 also indicates the medium of instruction. Learners whose medium of instruction is not their mother tongue may have difficulty understanding the learning material, completing the assignments and assessing them, especially within the suggested time limit.

As indicated, the ten sections were designed to determine learners' experience of each of the ten activities in the assignment. The activities correspond to the topics in the study material. A number of items in the sections were similar. Table 2 indicates the range of responses to certain items.

Table 2: Range of responses

Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree: 1998 (%)	Strongly Agree/ Agree: 1999 (%)
The subactivities of activity X succeeded in holding my interest	91,7 - 95,6	92,6 - 96,3
I understood the activities asked (79,2%)	92,7 - 96,0	93,4 - 97,0
The work covered in the activity is relevant to my practice	90,0 - 97,0	90,8 - 98,2
I can identify with the case study used in the activity (Activity 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8)	87,0 - 93,3	86,7 - 92,2
It was easy to write a case study (Activity 6, 9)	78,3 - 86,9	78,3 - 82,5

When the 1998 and 1999 responses are compared, there is no significant difference. Learners in general reviewed the various statements positively. This indicates that the activities were challenging to hold their interest, that learners were able to understand what was required and that the activities were relevant to their practice. Considering the findings in general, learners responded less positively to writing their own case studies. Taking into account that most learners study through a second or third language (table 1), could account for the perception of having difficulties in writing the case studies.

Table 3 indicates the responses of learners to particular learning activities, such as the interviews and role-play sessions.

Table 3: Responses to particular learning activities

Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree: 1998 (%)	Strongly Agree/ Agree: 1999 (%)
I learnt a lot about my organisation (school or otherwise) by conducting the different interviews	98,0	98,9
By conducting interviews I developed my management skills	98,3	97,8
I learnt a lot by doing the role-play exercises	96,3	98,2
Role-play exercises developed my confidence	97,3	96,7
Role-play exercises developed my knowledge in that particular area	97,0	95,9
Role-play exercises developed my skills in that particular area	97,3	95,3
The level of difficulty of activities is acceptable for BEd students	90,2%	91,5%

According to the responses in Table 3 it is clear that both the interviews and role-play exercises played a significant role in developing knowledge, skills and even confidence in management areas in their particular practice. The level of difficulty of activities was also viewed positively.

Table 4 indicates how 1998 and 1999 learners rated their management competence before completing the activities in the assignment. Table 5 illustrates learners' perceptions of their competence as educational manager after completion of the assignment.

Table 4: Initial knowledge of personnel management

Qualifier	1998 (%)	1999 (%)
Poor	14,8	11,8
Fair	27,0	25,6
Good	9,9	9,2
Excellent	0,7	2,2

Table 5: Feeling better equipped after completing the activities

	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree 1998 (%)	Strongly Agree/Agree 1998 (%)	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree 1999 (%)	Strongly Agree/Agree 1999 (%)
I feel better equipped as an educational manager after completing the activities.	2,7	97,3	0,4	99,6

As mentioned, the activities in the assignment required learners' active participation in various management areas. A comparison of tables 4 and 5 shows that having completed these activities successfully contributes to learners' experience of increased competence. When considering the two groups, it seems as if there is a difference in their perceptions of their competence. The South African education system's increased advocating of participative management in the new dispensation and learners therefore more readily being able to make their contribution than before could explain the increased perception of their competence. In providing a learning environment to support higher-order critical skills, learners develop metacognitive skills that enable them to learn in various situations in which they may find themselves as professionals (Hobson 1996:56). These skills entail the development of thinking and decision-making skills and skills for evaluating their actions (Hobson 1996:56).

1996 qualitative data

The two open-ended questions asked at the 1996 seminar provided the main categories for the analysis: learners' perceptions of the content of the module and their perceptions of the assignment system.

(1) Perceptions of the module

Three subcategories emerged in this category.

    a) Presentation of the content

    The comments recorded centred on two subcategories:

- The accessibility of the content: "easy to understand", "straight forward", "to the point", "down to earth", "clearly written" and "explicitly explained"
- The way the content was structured: "well compiled", "well organised", "well structured", "well arranged" and "well presented"

    b) Learners' experience of the content

    In this subcategory five types of comments emerged.

- Challenging nature of the content. Forty-two groups said the content was "challenging", "thought provoking", "stimulating", "enriching", "motivating", "encouraging", "inspiring", "refreshing", "empowering" and "never boring". One group in particular stated, "We recommend the content for future use because it is motivating especially on the part of the teacher and it upgrades us to become managers." One group indicated that the content was "clear and understandable, yet it needs much time and much practice". Another group was of the opinion that the content "requires in-depth reading with insight". Considering the high percentage of

learners who do not receive the learning material in their mother tongue, their comments are understandable.

- Learners' cognitive experience. Fourteen groups indicated that the content was "informative" and "promotes creativity", "reveals detailed current information with an eye to the future", "improves one's way of doing things in a critical way" and "the tutorial matter can be used again and again. It is not merely for students of Personnel Management only."
- Learners' affective experience. Fourteen groups indicated that they found the content "interesting", "fulfilling", "very exciting" and "dynamic". One student said: "It has assisted me in gaining confidence in my position as HOD." Another stated: "The content is of great value, not only for assignments and examination purposes, but also for life in general." Quality of the content. Twelve groups indicated that the material was "excellent" or "brilliant" and revealed "quality".
- Learners' participation in the learning material. Seven groups indicated that the material required their "active participation", "involvement in activities and exercises", and "opportunities for their own opinions".

c) Link between the content and educational practice

In this subcategory two types of comments emerged.

- The practice-relatedness of the material. Twenty-four groups said the material was "very practical", "practical", "can be used in practice", "work related", the "examples given are very good", "based on daily occurrences or experiences in the school"and "depicts real-life situations". Some specific comments on the practice-relatedness of the material were: "The topics are very relevant and appropriate as we can identify with them in our own personal teaching experience"; "The topics are applicable in the job situation and also in everyday life outside the school situation"; "We appreciate the content as it is practical and shows that a lot of research has been done"; and "Scenarios in the content are so helpful, eg when you are isolated, you realise that you experience similar problems like others" and "We can identify with the material in our own personal teaching". Although there are wide variations among distance education programmes in the kinds of learning processes they exemplify, many still provide little student support beyond the distribution of student modules and marking of student assignments and examinations (Nielsen 1997:301). The most challenging aspect of providing quality learning at a distance has been providing appropriate practitioner experiences (Nielsen 1997:301).
- Learning material's influence on learners' professional performance. Six groups said the material "helps us to solve problems in our schools","is helpful in our job situations", "improves our way of doing things in the school" and "improves our way of dealing with management situations".

A common complaint about distance education curriculum is that it is out of touch with the learning needs of practitioners (Nielsen 1997:300). Often material is designed in offices where authors remember their own past experience and are not in touch with real current practice. Fortunately, these learners' responses contradict this notion.

(2) Perceptions of the assignment system

a) Assignment format

Two types of comments emerged from the subcategory.

- Quality. Fourteen groups indicated that the "standard of the assignments was very high"; the assignments were "very in-depth", "unique" and "different from other courses in terms of approach and method, but different in a positive way"; "well outlined" and "well formulated". Two groups referred to the difficulty of the

assignments: "When we read them for the first time we thought that they were difficult, but when we started working on them they were practical and encouraged creativity" and "It was difficult to approach them, but after finishing them you feel great that you've achieved something".

- Length. Five groups indicated that the assignments were "too long" and "length requires more time" for completion and one group warned that the lecturer should be "careful of the length"of assignments.

b) Learners' experience of the assignments set

To a large extent respondents' experience of the assignments correspond to their experience of the content of the study manuals. In this subcategory five types of comments developed

- Stimulating effect. Fifty groups responded that the assignments were "thought provoking", "enriching", "encouraging", "motivating", "eye opening", "empowering and enabling students to face their practical situation" and also succeeded in "character moulding for leadership".
- Challenge. Forty-nine groups indicated that the assignments were "very challenging", "extremely challenging to an extent difficult", "challenging" and "required more insight and commitment from a student". One group stated: "The cassette tapes were a challenge — the first of its kind." Ten groups referred to the assignments as "very demanding", "demanding" and "demanding insight from our day-to-day experience in schools and the practical aspect of our duties". Four groups added a positive perspective on the demanding nature of assignments, indicating that they were demanding but "at the same time gave us a lot of practice in the field of education"; "helped us to apply theory to practice"; although they were often frustrated, they "soon realised that it was for our own benefit as it in many ways contributed to our personal and professional growth"; and "When you first look at the assignments you feel discouraged because from afar they look difficult and like a lot of work. After starting you don't want to walk away from them."
- Cognitive experience from answering assignments. The nine groups who commented on their experience said the assignments encouraged "creativity" and "gave us an opportunity to develop"; required "intellectual ability" and "encouraged self-study and group work".
- Affective experience of assignments. Nine groups said the assignments were "interesting", "exciting" and "enjoyable" and one said they were "great". The assignments succeeded in "a change of attitude to education in practice"; "changing us from lazy to hard working students" and "turning one into a changed person altogether".
- Participation when doing the assignments. Four groups indicated that the assignments required their "active participation". On group elaborated by saying that their participation was brought about by the video and cassette tapes in particular.
- Time required for completion. Three groups indicated that the assignments were "time consuming" although one of them was of the opinion that they were nevertheless "good".
- Preparation for future studies. Three groups indicated that assignments were "preparative for M Ed and D Ed degrees", "preparing them for future studies" and a "good way to prepare us for master's degrees".
- Concerns about the requirements set for completing assignments. One group indicated that "assignments require a lot of cooperation from other staff. They may not be interested." This, in itself, may be of concern to learners, but nevertheless provides an opportunity for them to develop negotiation and communication skills.

c) Link between the assignments and educational practice

- Practice-relatedness of the assignments. Thirty groups indicated that assignments were "very practical" and "practical". Some groups elaborated, indicating that the assignments "involved application and were based on what we experience at our

school"; "address real problem situations in the school"; "are based on practical situations rather than being theoretical" and "link theory and practice". This aspect also refers to the relevance of the assignment to learners' work situations Ten groups indicated that the assignments were "relevant to the school situation", "related to our careers", "realistic and relevant to the changing times and conditions" and "appropriate to the daily teaching situation".

- Assignments' effect on professional performance. Five groups commented that the assignments "developed certain skills in management"; "helped the reader to understand and have insight into his/her job as a principal"; "were helpful in the school situation" and "helped us to solve our problems at our different schools". One group also said that "solutions to assignments provide practice for real situations".

Although the data reveal an overwhelming positive experience of the module and the assignment system, two groups indicated that the assignments were too long. Although the written part seldom exceeded 20 pages, the assignment required learners to know and understand the content thoroughly before they could answer any questions or do any role plays could be done. It is therefore understandable that three groups regarded the assignments as time consuming. Again, a postgraduate module requires more input from learners and cannot be compared to previous studies. The comment of the group who regarded the cooperation of staff as a difficulty should be viewed as positive because sharing views with others and including their views can be enriching and succeed in bringing people together, which is somewhat difficult in distance learning.

DISCUSSION OF 1998 RESPONSES

The overall responses of learners to the assignment and assessment system were very positive. The following categories were identified from the responses.

(1) Judgement of the assessment system as a whole

The majority of responses to the self-assessment ranged from "It is a good system"; "It is a good method of studying effectively" to "We like the assessment system". Two groups thought that self-assessment "is very good idea, because it encourages self-discovery and helps in self-understanding". Another group added that "Self-assessment in Personnel Management is a method that encourages one to read, to know more about Personnel Management". One group stated that the assessment is good because they know "where to go from the beginning" while another group indicated that it was "exciting to have the opportunity to evaluate your own work".

Although most groups (32) responded very positively, five groups expressed their concern. One group explained: "We do not favour the marking of our own assignment." Another group said: "The system is not good because we do not know whether the facts are correct or not" and another group went on to say: "It is impossible to assess ourselves because what we wrote is what we thought is correct." Yet another group stated that "self-assessment may be regarded as important to the university, but to us it is not important because we doubt ourselves until the lecturer has marked it". The last group that responded negatively said, "It [self-assessment] doesn't give us any oomph to write assignments when we know they will be returned unmarked."

(2) Learners' affective experience of the assessment system

A few groups indicated how the assessment system affects them positively. One group in particular stated, "The assessment motivates us to become responsible for our studies." Three groups referred to the encouragement that self-assessment offers: "Self-assessment is very important because it encourages us to learn effectively"; "It [self-assessment] encourages us to work and reach the goal"; "It is rare to find failures because students who

have submitted assignments actually acquire the prescribed credits" and "It [self-assessment] encourages us to work hard as individuals at one's own pace."

Three responses in this category were negative: "Sometimes we have different answers and we believe they are correct. When they are not in the memorandum we become discouraged"; "It [self-assessment] demotivates us and we feel as if the lecturers do not care about our uniqueness because they can't realise it" and "The self-assessment system makes us nervous, because we don't feel relaxed when we think of the assessment coming ahead". This last group, however, acknowledged that self-assessment "urges the teacher to be more attentive and well prepared. It reinforces hardworking on the part of the student."

(3) Learners' participation in their learning

Several groups said that the system assisted them to take responsibility for their own learning, as two groups succinctly put it: "The assessment system motivates us to become responsible for our own learning" and "Self-assessment teaches us to check our work and be responsible." Apart from these responses, most groups indicated the positive influence of self-assessment on their learning, stating that self-assessment "serves as a quick judgement of our abilities and how we can improve on certain aspects"; "contributes positively to the learning because learners get the opportunity to look deep into their work and critically analyse their work, see their shortcomings and are able to correct their mistakes"; "is the best way for postgraduate students in that it helps them to determine their progress in a continuous manner"; "is a good method of studying actively"; "helps us students to know whether we are moving in the right direction in as far as Personnel Management is concerned"; "gives you an opportunity to revise the work promptly"; "allows us as students to critically look at what we have written and improve it"; "has improved my standard of compiling my assignment"; "gives us time to correct our mistakes before we submit the assignment. In some cases it helps when we do not understand what is needed by the question"; "gives us ample chance to peruse our performance" and "makes us to work actively with understanding and encourages all people to participate. It facilitates our learning."

No groups indicated the negative effect on learning as such, although it is believed that their perceptions could contribute negatively to their learning.

(4) Immediate availability of memorandum

Many groups indicated that the immediate availability of the memorandum was a positive aspect: "Self-assessment is good because we get feedback immediately and we get direction. At times we look at the memorandum and see that the topic is not that difficult"; "The memorandum gives us a chance to go through our work again and in the meantime it gives us a chance to correct ourselves"; "We can recognise our mistakes and are able to correct them without wasting time repeating the mistake"; "The immediate answers to the assignment are beneficial and very important in order to assess and identify different problems and problematic areas of the topic"; "The assessment system provides a valuable opportunity for students not to wait for weeks and weeks before they receive their assignments. Students are placed in the position to answer against the memorandum supplied" and "The memorandum helps us to discover a lot of mistakes which we were unaware of."

One group indicated learners' negative perception of the memorandum, stating that the feedback did not specifically criticise their "way of writing. When we mark we are not able to give ourselves the exact mark as we will even try to cheat ourselves."

(5) Effect on work life and other areas

A few learners referred to the effect of self-assessment on other areas in their life : "It gives me knowledge of management at school"; "It gives me a chance to know my staff and pupils at school"; "It is important for every human being to have self-assessment in life" and "Self-

assessment is a good thing to do because it awakens us in such a way that we get involved in our work practice". Two groups indicated the positive effect of the self-assessment system on preparing for the examination.

The learners made no particular negative mention of the assessment system in other life-world areas.

CONDITIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY

There are a few constraints to programme effectiveness (Nielsen 1997:299). The assumption is that higher quality would result if these constraints were eliminated or minimised (Nielsen 1997:299). Although these constraints can be internal or external to the programme, the focus for the purpose of this paper is on how internal constraints have been dealt with in the module. The external constraints include the organisational support level of infrastructural development eg transportation, communications; and distribution and professional networks which are not the focus of this paper.

Nielsen (1997:300-302) identifies a number of serious internal constraints. The design of the module Personnel Management succeeded in eliminating or minimising the following internal constraints:

- Relevance and quality of the learning material. A common complaint about distance education curriculum is that it is out of touch with the learning needs of practitioners (Nielsen 1997:300). Often material is designed in offices where authors remember their own past experiences and are not in touch with real current practice. From the quantitative and qualitative data it seems that the content of the module and its assignments succeeded in putting learners in touch with their practice.
- Effectiveness of learning processes. Although there are wide variations among distance education programmes in the kinds of learning processes they exemplify, many still provide little learner support beyond distributing modules and marking assignments and examinations (Nielsen 1997:301). According to Nielsen (1997:301), the most challenging aspect of providing quality education at a distance is to provide appropriate practitioner experiences (Nielsen 1997:301). Both the quantitative and qualitative findings show that this constraint is being dealt with.
- Quality of learner assessment systems Programmes of distance teacher education use a variety of approaches to assessment (Nielsen 1997:301). Unfortunately many systems have been plagued by delays in providing feedback to learners because of the turn-around time on assignments taking several weeks (Nielsen 1997:302). Using a memorandum, which is available on registration, and requiring learners to mark their own assignments could be considered a possible way of tackling and eliminating this problem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE DESIGN

The fact that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience has important implications for management education, including the following:

- Quality assessment recognises the importance of the practitioner's commitment to change (Nouwens & Robinson 1991:109). It includes data-gathering which focuses on improvement. According to Nouwens and Robinson (1991:109), other strategies which need to be considered in the quality improvement process are:

  - adoption of an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach to decision-making and information gathering
  - identification and elimination of major weaknesses in the module
  - identification of strengths of the module which have been reviewed or are obviously not in need of review to protect them from unnecessary change

- The learner is not a tabula rasa because everyone enters every learning situation with more or less articulate ideas about the topic under discussion. Educational managers possess a great deal of knowledge acquired through experience (Eraut 1994:75). The learning material in the study relied on learners' practical knowledge and experience will continue to draw from that rich available resource.
- This also implies that all learning is relearning (Apps 1991:102). According to Sergiovanni (1991:5), theory may be regarded as one source of meaning which is subordinate to the educational professional and serves to inform but not to prescribe practice. Theoretical knowledge can therefore provide frameworks for establishing and categorising patterns in practice. Unfortunately, many educational managers become too reliant on experience without examining it sufficiently. An important aim of management education will therefore be to reorganise managers' experiential knowledge and bring it under greater critical control.
- Educators should learn to use learners' experience more effectively. They must engage the actual experience of learners so that learners can make connections and identify relationships between what they already know and what they are learning now. From the findings it is clear that learners can identify with the case studies provided, but focusing on learners' own case studies could be more developmental for learners to understand their own situations and need to be empowered to deal with the problems occurring in their practice. According to Houser and Vaughan (1995:27), effective educators understand and put into the learning environment what learners need to know and do in order for them to master their environment in which they work and live. In the mastery of learners' environment educators should acknowledge learners' existing experiences and become part of the environment which both permits and encourages the development of learners.
- Reflection and self-assessment should be more integrated in the curriculum and all activities so that they are not mere add-ons which signal their marginality through self-conscious exercises (Boyd 1993:41). Learners need to understand the value and importance of reflection and more opportunities need to be created for them to practise it within the various activities and assignments of the module.
- It is important to remember that there are clear limits to the quality of service any academic staff can provide (Ormond 1993:63). These limits are set by resources, workloads, areas of competence and personal boundaries (Ormond 1993:63).

CONCLUSION

Educators require more explicit and substantive beliefs about what learning entails, what teaching strategies learners need to use to take advantage of this sort of teaching and how they know learning has occurred (Burroughs-Lange 1996:47). The learning paradigm and reflective practice do not have the answers to all the important questions, but do set new questions with new responses (Barr & Tagg 1995:25). Answers to questions such as what knowledge, skills and attitudes learners need in order to live and work meaningfully; what they must do to master such knowledge and skills; whether the programme is designed to create a learning environment for learners to master such knowledge and skills, and whether the learning experience has made the learners flexible and adaptable learners, able to thrive in a knowledge society (Barr & Tagg 1995:25).

Considering the above questions, the module Personnel Management aims to facilitate the learners' professional development, which includes the facilitation of self-awareness development and the promotion of individual professional accountability. A prerequisite for designing future learning material is to reflect on the learners, the nature of the learning material, and the methods employed in designing learners' active participation. From the reflection specific strategies can be devised to enhance the experience of learning among the learner population.

The results of the study suggest avenues for further research. First, how can the wealth of knowledge created by each group of learners be made available to future learners? Second, what model might best be used to examine the management development of each individual

learner? Third, what short-term and long-term effect does the management education offered have on the quality of education?

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