Managing a tutorial system: The Unisa ABET experience

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ABSTRACT
An important aspect of print-based open distance learning (ODL) is the effective management of a learner support system that caters for the rural, disadvantaged learner. Unfortunately, this is often neglected by many institutions that offer distance education programmes. It is a well-known fact that the rural environment is often not conducive to distance learning because of the lack of resources and amenities such as electricity and modern communication networks. This article highlights how the Unisa Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Institute organises and manages an effective tutorial system for disadvantaged, rural distance learners. The article argues that one of the main reasons why many rural learners drop out of distance education programmes is a lack of effective support that can see them through their studies. In other words, effective management of the support system is crucial if learners are to be retained on print-based ODL programmes. Such a well-managed support system could offer distance learners some sort of ‘customer care’ in the form of minimal face-to-face tutorials. The effective management of this ‘customer care’, which has been the secret of success for the Unisa ABET Institute over the years, is worth sharing.

INTRODUCTION
One of the strategic goals of the South African National Department of Education is ‘to triumph over illiteracy amongst adults and youths over the next five years’ (Department
of National Education 2000, 3). In pursuit of this noble but daunting goal, the National Department of Education has established the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) to eradicate illiteracy throughout the country. Unfortunately, however, this initiative does not have many trained volunteer educators who can teach adults effectively. In support of the government’s effort to eradicate illiteracy, the Unisa ABET Institute trains, at a distance, all SANLI volunteer educators who enrol for the institute’s formal courses in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). This is done to equip the SANLI volunteer educators with the hands-on skills they need to effectively teach adult learners in the villages effectively. The Unisa ABET Institute offers courses at Diploma and Higher Diploma levels, and many of its learners who live and work in the countryside teach literacy, numeracy and other basic adult learning programmes. Although student support for Unisa courses takes place throughout the country, the focus of this article is on the Unisa ABET Institute tutorial system which, in order to retain students on the study programmes, caters for the specific needs of its students, particularly those in the rural areas.

**RURAL ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING DISTANCE LEARNERS IN FOCUS**

Rural areas comprise the people, land and small settlements outside the immediate economic influence of major urban centres. These areas are less developed, unspoilt (both physically and culturally) and very close to nature. Rural areas lack basic modern amenities, and many people live in conditions of extreme poverty and hopelessness (Sharpely and Sharpely 1997, 22). The peculiar challenges facing the rural adult learner studying at a distance can be discussed under four main sub-headings, namely logistics, learning, family (social) and economic.

1. **Logistical challenges**

The first problem is that there is usually no electricity in these rural areas. This makes it impossible for distance learners to use computers (the Internet) or television programmes in their studies. If this were not bad enough, postal services in these areas are usually poor and this delays correspondence between institutions and students. The transportation system in rural areas is usually poor, unreliable and expensive. In some of these areas, the public telephone network is not effective. In other words, communication in rural areas is generally very basic, and yet these are the areas where many adult learners live and study.

2. **Learning challenges**

As adult learning is not a high priority in rural areas, there are very few learners in these areas. The few that are there, are scattered over large areas, which often have no resource centres (e.g., libraries). This makes it difficult for one to know one’s course mates for the purpose of study assistance. Also, many distance learners find independent learning difficult. One reason for this might be the poor schooling system of the rural
areas that have not prepared learners adequately in terms of developing skills for independent learning.

3. Family/social life challenges

There are many women from rural areas who enrol as ABET learners. As in most rural situations, these women have many other commitments besides their studies to attend to, as they are either wives, parents, mothers or community leaders. They are the people who do the cooking for their families, who fetch food, firewood and water, and who wash and clean the houses and help the children with their studies.

4. Economic challenges

Many of the students are also involved in economic activities, such as part-time teaching, or self-employed in small business enterprises or working on commercial farms.

THE NECESSITY FOR LEARNER SUPPORT

The challenges outlined above take up much of adult learners’ time, leaving them with very little or no time to study. This situation makes academic support nothing short of imperative. As a part-time tutor who is also involved in both process and product assessment of the ABET Diploma and Higher Diploma courses, I am aware of the fact that these students are living, learning and working in rural areas and have to cope with the poor conditions that characterise these areas. Many adult distance learners in these areas feel lonely and neglected. The feeling of loneliness and neglect may emanate from an apparent lack of academic support (e.g., face-to-face contact sessions) which could enable them to obtain assistance from lecturers or fellow students. Indeed, the poor conditions in the rural areas could be said to be a ‘recipe’ for learner attrition. Thus, without an adequate and effectively managed academic support system, many of these rural distance ABET learners may drop out of the study programmes. Sharing this sentiment, Simpson (2000, 9) writes:

[C]learly, studying through ODL is often a very isolating experience: students are isolated from other students, their tutors, the institution and sometimes their own family and friends. Such isolation must inhibit, if not prevent entirely, any possibility of dialogue in their studies. Can we claim to be offering any kind of education if we do not offer our students the opportunity for dialogue at the same time? Moreover, is it possible to offer dialogue only through course materials. If overcoming isolation is important for us, then this can only realistically take place through the process of student support.

It is for this reason – support students in order to retain them on study programmes and ensuring that they get value for money – that the Unisa ABET Institute organises and manages its unique tutorial system in South African rural areas.

THE UNISA ABET INSTITUTE

The Unisa ABET Institute was established in 1995. Through its well-managed student support system and distance education delivery mode, the institute has trained over
18,000 adult educators both in and outside of South Africa. Most of the students of the institute are community builders, non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff and adult educators. In 2005, over 12,000 students enrolled for the various courses in ABET. The success of the institute in its teaching programmes stems from good management and effective student support. To borrow the words of James (1999, 147) ‘teaching and learning in educational institutions are about the management of central processes’. Indeed, without the management of processes, effective student support cannot be achieved. Student support is very broad; it covers a variety of activities. The activities directed to supporting students go beyond the production and delivery of course materials that help students progress in their studies. It covers as wide a spectrum of activities as possible, from the organising and management of student support (including staff development) through to direct interaction with students as tutors, advisors, mentors and other roles (Simpson 2000, 5).

OVERVIEW OF LEARNER SUPPORT IN THE ABET PROGRAMME

Although many institutions in South Africa offer some kind of distance education programmes, many of them do not give their students adequate support. As Simpson (2000, 5) notes:

In some ways, student support has perhaps not received the attention it has deserved. This may be because it is seen as less glamorous than other activities in ODL or peripheral to the real business of developing materials. Or perhaps the managers of ODL programmes have not often been in the position of new and unqualified learners on a distance education course and find it hard to empathise with how highly such learners value support.

As a distance education provider, Unisa has established learning centres in some provinces, but such centres are only found in provincial capitals. It is evident, therefore, that the institution does not cater for students in the rural areas.

Unisa ABET Institute’s student support system is unique because it caters specifically for students in the rural areas. Unlike the learning centres based only in towns and cities, in the rural areas as few as 15 ABET students can be assigned to a tutor who usually lives in the same area and thus within the vicinity of his or her tutorial group. This small number of students offers these students effective interaction between learners and tutors. The ABET Institute’s management team believes that, as distance education providers, it is their moral responsibility to support learners, particularly those who live under difficult conditions in the rural areas. In line with this thinking, once or twice a month, Unisa ABET students in a particular rural geographical region meet at a convenient venue in their district for two to four hours for face-to-face tutorials so that they can share their experiences of the study material. This is in keeping with the statement made by Harry, John and Keegan (1993, 112) that ‘student support services take a wide variety of forms, but frequently offer students the opportunity to visit study centres for tutorial and counselling support, to meet fellow students, and to use facilities unavailable to them at home’. By providing minimal but effective face-to-face support for adult learners in rural areas, the Unisa ABET Institute seems to be leading transformation in learner-centredness and learner support. Although the major form of learner support is
face-to-face tutorials, both the tutors and the Institute lecturers offer students other learning support in the form of tutorial letters, copious comments and suggestions on written assignments and, where possible, telephone tutoring. Students who have access to telephones are welcome to call lecturers, tutors and supporting staff whenever they need help with their studies.

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE UNISA ABET TUTORIAL SYSTEM

According to 2003 figures, the Institute boasts a ‘cadre’ of 187 dedicated part-time tutors and 33 coordinators on the ground (scattered all over the country), all of whom offer academic and other support that ABET distance-learning students need so urgently if they are to cope with their studies. These tutors consist of 102 females and 85 males, supported by the 33 coordinators.

The Unisa ABET Institute identifies, selects and appoints tutors who are committed and qualified ABET practitioners living or working in the countryside. These part-time tutors could be past senior students or individuals identified by the Institute for their good work as adult educators in their communities. When they are appointed, the ABET Institute supplies them with all the stationery and data they need for their work: registers, files, tutor manuals, lists of students assigned to a particular tutor, contact details of fellow tutors, and copies of tutorial letters and study guides. Immediately after student registration has been completed, the institute uses postal codes to identify students who live within particular geographical areas and allocates these students to tutors who live in the same areas.

The tutors then contact their students through various means, by word of mouth or announcements at churches, schools, advertisements posted at post offices, shops, education offices and, where possible, local radio announcements and newspaper advertisements. Thus, the students are informed of venues of tutorials and their first meetings with their tutors. At the first meeting, forms are given to all students to fill in their contact details. These include telephone numbers (where possible) at work and home, name of village, house number, postal address and contact details of spouse or close friends. These details are needed for follow-up purposes. For instance, if a student fails to turn up for a number of tutorials, the tutor will try to find out what has happened to him or her. At the first tutorial meeting, the tutor and students draw up their tutorial timetable for the year and also negotiate their own ground rules that include what the group regards as acceptable behaviour. All students sign the attendance register before the end of the class. A fortnightly tutorial lasts for two hours, while a monthly one for four hours. Once the tutorials are over, the tutor writes a report on the tutorials and sends it to the ABET Institute. The tutor’s claim forms, along with students’ registration details, must accompany the report before he or she is paid.

TUTOR’S ROLE IN MANAGING THE ABET TUTORIAL SYSTEM

In the rural areas, the tutor has many roles to play in order to ensure effective learning among the ABET students. In sum, the tutor’s role may include:
• arranging and managing venues for tutorials. (NB: In the rural areas, tutorials may be held in a church, in a local school, etc.)
• liaising with community structures such as chiefs, headmen, churches, teachers and ABET students, and the ABET Institute to ensure that tutorials are run smoothly.
• presenting face-to-face tutorials to a group of ABET students assigned to him or her in a particular rural district. This covers didactic and facilitative functions, where the tutor plays a formal teaching role by explaining content and also helping learners to explore the course through tasks.
• teaching students the study skills needed to enable them to study independently.
• explaining assignments to students and guide them on how to write academic essays.
• elucidating and highlighting important and difficult sections of the ABET study guides.
• marking specified assignments and give feedback directly to their students and to the ABET Institute.
• counselling, guiding and motivating learners who might have problems with their studies.
• taking note of students’ grievances, queries and problems regarding studies, assignments and study materials, and reporting them to the institute or the appropriate section of the university for action.
• marketing the institute’s programmes to rural communities (e.g. NGOs, literacy teachers and community builders) and help prospective students to acquire forms in time for registration. In fact, in the rural communities, the ABET tutor is often the ‘face of Unisa’ because information on all Unisa courses from prospective students may be directed to him or her.

MANAGING QUALITY ASSURANCE WITHIN THE TUTORIAL SYSTEM

According to Jeong Hong (1992, 319), quality in distance education ‘refers to a product’s fitness for a purpose according to a set of required standards. The issue of quality and quality control, whether in conventional or distance education, has become a more serious concern in recent years’. In order to ensure the quality of the tutorials system, the ABET Institute appoints part-time coordinators to monitor tutorials in all provinces and regions where there are tutorial centres. These part-time coordinators are mainly qualified educators living and working in the regions or districts where there are ABET tutorial centres. The tutors give copies of tutorial timetables to the coordinators; who visit tutorial sessions at least once a month and advise tutors on the methods used to tutor adults. These part-time coordinators also sign tutors’ claim forms, write monthly reports and send them to the ABET Institute. To improve the work of both the tutors and the coordinators, the ABET Institute organises two national workshops every year. The workshops equip them with new skills in all aspects of tutoring (assessment, outcomes-based education (OBE) teaching approaches and new courses at the Institute) and administrative matters concerning tutoring, recruitment of learners and payment of claims.
CONDUCTING AN ABET TUTORIAL SESSION

In the rural areas where the transport system is unreliable, tutorial sessions are usually held FROM 8:00 to 12:00 on Saturdays to enable students to get to the centre and catch the few available taxis. The tutor usually arrives early to open doors and receive the students. The tutor may ask students at the start of the session if they have any specific learning difficulty that needs to be resolved. The tutor then spends a few minutes solving such learning problems before getting down to the day’s work. To make tutorials more participatory and more learner-centred, the tutor randomly assigns students to groups of four or five learners. Each of these groups then chooses its chairperson, secretary, time keeper and reporter. After group discussion sessions (during which the tutor interacts with the students), representatives from each group report back to the class. Once the groups have completed their presentations, there is a general discussion which involves the tutor and the learners. The tutor then answers any questions asked by the groups. The tutor also gives a summary of the issues discussed. At tutorial centres where there are resources such as electricity, television and tape recorders, a video or audio cassette on the ABET course might be viewed or listened to, and the content can be used as the basis for class discussion.

In view of the poor academic background of many students in these rural areas, tutors sometimes combine direct teaching, facilitation and group discussion. Indeed, it is very important to start ‘from where our learners are’. The different teaching strategies cater for the learning needs of all students. This co-operative learning approach underpins the philosophy of ubuntu, where learning is seen as social activity based on the efforts of group members. Often some of my students remark:

Group work gives me an opportunity to help and be helped.

ABET tutorials have empowered me not only to study at a distance, but also to teach adults.

These positive remarks made by students, and their performance in the final examinations, are indications that tutorials do make a difference in the life of the distance education adult learner who lives in the rural areas of South Africa.

SOME CHALLENGES

Despite its achievements, the Unisa ABET Institute tutorial system faces some challenges. A major challenge is that there are still some tutors who are under-qualified to teach students at Diploma level. In some remote areas, it is very difficult to get qualified people to be appointed as tutors. However, even though the coordinators help to identify suitable people that the institute can appoint as tutors, it is possible that sometimes ‘friends’ are appointed to the detriment of more qualified and experienced people. These problems are, however, being addressed by the institute’s management.

To overcome these difficulties, the ABET Institute continuously encourages its tutors to do further courses in ABET programmes to make themselves more skilled and knowledgeable in all aspects of distance education, tutoring and student support in
general. Indeed, the institute subsidises tutors by waiving a substantial part of the fees of those tutors who want to upgrade their qualifications.

Another problem relates to poor attendance at tutorials, especially during winter in mountainous regions. In some rural areas the snow falls during June and July, which often makes the roads impassable. As far as absenteeism is concerned, both tutors and the institute encourage students to attend tutorials throughout the year. Although tutorials are not compulsory, the institute emphasises the need to attend them in various tutorial letters that are sent out students during the course of the year.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on the successful student support system established and managed by the Unisa ABET Institute. The main argument is that rural distance learners in South Africa are more disadvantaged owing to the lack of amenities and learning resources in rural areas. The belief is that, if distance learners in the rural areas are to remain on course and achieve academic success, it is crucial that the ABET Institute continues to offer a reliable and well-managed student support system.

REFERENCES