HUMAN CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION AT UNISA

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ABSTRACT

The University of South Africa (UNISA) is an open distance learning (ODL) institution that provides students access to higher education. Many public servants work full time and can only study part time; this means that UNISA is their university of choice. Public Administration education at UNISA can contribute to build human capacity in the public service. Building human capacity in the public service can, in turn, assist in improving service delivery and was a point raised at the ANC conference at Polokwane. It also forms part of the Human Resources Development Strategic Framework for the Public Service: Vision 2015. The purpose of this article is therefore to determine if UNISA's ODL policy can be used to teach Public Administration and thus improve human capacity in the South African public service.

INTRODUCTION

Building human capacity in the South African public service was one of the issues that was raised at the 52nd African National Congress (ANC) conference (16-20 December 2007) in Polokwane (ANC 2007: online). Public Administration education can play an important role in building human capacity, skills and knowledge in the South African system of government. The need to provide some form of professional education and training in Public Administration has been recognised as far back as the eighteenth century; since then the education of public servants has developed through many phases, to the point where Public Administration is a distinct academic subjects. (Adedeji & Baker, 1974:119). Today, the education of public servants has become even more important, particularly in South Africa, where there is a definite need for skilled, educated and trained public servants. Many universities, including UNISA, teach Public

Administration. UNISA is a comprehensive higher education institution that provides a combination of the philosophies and programmes offered by the former technikons and traditional universities. Nearly a third of all students studying in South Africa are registered at UNISA (UNISA HEQC, 2008:3). UNISA has a specific social mandate to provide open access to its students – especially working, poor, rural and insufficiently prepared students (UNISAHEQC, 2008:3). The use of ODL forms an integral part of the way that UNISA functions, communicates and provides higher education to students in South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world. Public Administration is one of the subjects at UNISA that many students enrol for and is therefore a subject that reaches a large number of students.

The purpose of this article is, *firstly*, to explain the need for building human capacity in the public service. *Secondly*, this article will determine how teaching Public Administration at UNISA, which uses ODL, can assist building human capacity in the public service. This article will also examine the advantages and benefits of using ODL.

This article is based on a review of the most recent scholarship on the development, use and advantages of ODL. Information about UNISA, Public Administration education, and the capacity needs of the public service was collected from the literature, the internet, and official documents (e.g. policy papers, Acts and bills). Thus, the reading and analysing of literature can be seen as the main research method on which this article was based.

THE NEED TO BUILD HUMAN CAPACITY IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

In South Africa, the public service is the supplier or provider of particular products or services that South African citizens might need. It therefore goes without saying that, in order to be able to provide these services, the South African public service is in need of educated, trained and professional public servants. One of the important prerequisites of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,* 1996, is the maintenance of a public service that is efficient, effective and career oriented (Constitution of South Africa 1996: 107-111). The previous South African Minister of Public Service and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, stated in the Budget vote speech of 2002 that government spent an estimated R3billion per annum on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) goods and services, but that only 20 percent of public servants are computer literate. The need to train public servants extends to each state department at both national and provincial sphere and each individual civil servant. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi also stated that the public service was in need of new skills (Fraser-Moleketi 2002).

More recently, in 2004, the need for more skilled public officials was illustrated by a statement by Fraser-Moleketi that the government would be recruiting new skilled personnel and that this recruitment would take place primarily from African countries, India and Iran (with which South Africa has bilateral agreements). From 14 to 17 November 2005, the Minister of Public Service and Administration led a delegation to India with the specific purpose of reaching an agreement between the two countries on the Indian public service being willing to help South Africa through the transfer of Indian public servants, as well as training interventions and mentorship programmes for South African public servants. According to Fraser-Moleketi, this would help the South African

public service to bridge the skills gap within the public service and thus provide better service delivery. (Fraser-Moleketi, 2005: online.) In 2007, in a speech to the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), Fraser-Moleketi stated that the public service was required to continue with its mandate of providing services, but that the government found it difficult to attract and retain employees with the required skills. Government is currently considering various options in order to expand its existing skills base by looking, for example, at foreign skills exchange programmes.

The 52nd National Conference of the African National Congress (ANC) held in December 2007 placed emphasis on capacity-building issues. The following were mentioned as important issues relating to human capacity building (Fraser-Moleketi 2008: online):

- enhancing the technical capacity of the state through proper training of public servants;
- ensuring that capacity for better performance is attained and retained; and
- the preservation and development of human resources through the implementation of a comprehensive human development strategy that includes internships and learnership programmes.

In May 2008, during the launch of the *Human Resources Development Strategic Framework for the Public Service: Vision 2015*, the Minister of Public Service and Administration stated that "one of the handicaps in improving service delivery and ensuring a better life for all is the lack of suitable skills by functionaries of the state". The Public Service has approximately 1 056 244 employees, which represents about 9% of the total employment in South Africa. (Fraser-Moleketi 2008: online.). As the major employer in most jurisdictions, and as a sector with significant economic impact, the public service must compete for the nation's skills. This constitutes a major challenge for public organisations as they seek to maintain an adequate skills base, especially in occupations and areas where skills are scarce. The government is therefore moving towards a system of self-development. The responsibility for developing the capacity to enhance job performance in the public service should be an individual's responsibility. The intention in the public service is to move towards a system where people can improve and develop themselves so that their performance can be improved on an ongoing basis. Education and training can be seen as one aspect of this, one that can assist people to improve and develop themselves. Training and education also holds some advantages for building human capacity, as will be now discussed.

ADVANTAGES OF TRAINING AND EDUCATION IN BUILDING HUMAN CAPACITY

According to Kroukamp (2003:7), education and training can assist the public service to develop the professional capacity of public servants and to promote institutional change. Training also contributes to equipping public servants with the knowledge, skills and competencies they need to carry out their jobs effectively. According to the *White Paper on Public Service Training and Education* (1998:19), training and education in the public service can:

- contributes to equipping public servants, whether workers or managers, with the necessary knowledge, skills and competences to carry out their jobs effectively in pursuit of the vision and mission of the public service;
- enable public servants to deal effectively and proactively with change and the challenges of a dynamic working and external environment;
- enable public servants to acquire a new development oriented professionalism;
- address issues of diversity, while also promoting a common organisational culture to support unity at the workplace and the ethos of a single public service;
- be a powerful instrument for anticipating, as well as facilitating, the introduction of institutional changes within the public service; and
- assist public servants in developing a better understanding of the needs of the communities which they are serving, as well as the capacity to respond to these needs.

Apart from the public service's need to build human capacity and the advantages of training and education for those working in the public service, UNISA offers students the opportunity to work full time (e.g. in the public service) and study part time. Education at UNISA takes place through distance learning.

EDUCATION AT UNISA

UNISA was founded in 1873, in Cape Town, as the University of the Cape of Good Hope. Until 1916, the University served as an examining body for Victoria College, Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town. In 1916, through a decree, the University of the Cape of Good Hope was incorporated into a federal University of South Africa. The structure of the University was radically amended. Control was vested in a Council and Senate, upon which seven constituent colleges were represented. These colleges later became independent universities. In 1918, the University moved from Cape Town to Pretoria. The federal University did not teach private students; it merely examined them. Even before the disappearance of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, tutorial classes and correspondence colleges had been founded in South Africa to cater for the needs of students examined by the University. The *Higher Education Amendment Act*, 1946 enabled the University to undertake the tuition and guidance of the candidates for its examinations. In 1946, the University of South Africa became the first public University in the world to teach exclusively by means of distance education. Prior to the 2004 merger, the university incorporated two distance education teacher training colleges, when the decision was made for all teacher education to be moved to universities. The University underwent different "generations" of distance education – from being a correspondence institution, to the incorporation of multimedia (radio, tapes, videos, videoconferencing), introducing a tutor system and, finally, to developing its own online learning management system (LMS). Students Online (SOL) was finally used to develop the University's own online learning management system (LMS). By making use of Students Online (SOL), students could perform tasks such as checking results, changing addresses and submiting assignments or access their study material and, of course, chat online with other students. At

the time of the merger, the University had 1 239 academic employees, 2 046 administrative and professional staff and 145 043 students, plus a nationwide regional infrastructure that included contact tutorials for students. The University was accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) in Washington DC in 2002 and the merged institution in 2004. During 2007, student enrolment increased to 226 269, thus confirming UNISA as the University of choice for many students. (UNISA HEQC, 2008:4-12.)

UNISA currently plays a crucial role in South African and African affairs and has an essential social mandate in that it serves people who would otherwise not have access to tertiary education – either for financial reasons, or because they are in fulltime employment, or because they live in remote areas, or because they suffer from some form of disability. These categories also include public servants who are working full time; if they are to improve their skills and knowledge, these people need easy, open access to University education and a flexible study programme. Because it is an ODL institution, UNISA has the potential to offer this to its students.

OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) AT UNISA

According to the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2002: online), the terms "open learning" and "distance learning" represent approaches that focus on open access to education and training provision, thus freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Open distance learning means increased access and flexibility and the ability to combine work and education. In addition, open distance learning means a more learner-centred approach and new ways of interacting with students. Open distance learning reflects the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the learner. The aim of open distance learning is to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. A UNESCO state that open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education in the world. Open distance learning therefore plays a decisive role in, especially, the creation of a global knowledge society (UNESCO, 2002: online).

According to Pityana (2004:4), "open" in distance education usually signifies that entrance requirements are simplified or judged on the basis of the individual candidate's readiness to undertake tertiary studies. Open also implies an ability to face up to the learning future and adapt and develop as circumstances dictate. Distance suggests that the learner and the educator undertake the transmission and learning tasks without being mediated by time and/or space (Pityana 2004:4).

The definition of open distance learning used by UNISA (UNISA, 2008: online) includes the following: *Open distance learning is a multi-dimensional system aimed at bridging the time, geographical and transactional distance between: student and institution, student and lecturers/ tutors, students and courseware, and students and peers.* An important point to understand about ODL at UNISA is that all systems – the strategy, what the University does, how the University does it (processes), what the University

does it with (infrastructure: technological, human and financial) – have to be integrated to support the academic enterprise and the student. The open learning movement focuses on lowering entry requirements and then supporting students in their attempts to reach the desired outcomes. Open learning is an approach that embraces student-centredness in the following ways (UNISA HEQC, 2008:4-12):

- lifelong learning;
- flexibility of learning provision;
- removal of barriers to access learning;
- recognition of prior learning;
- provision of student support; and
- construction of learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

UNISA has a written policy on ODL that states its intent on developing and using ODL. The policy has a strong focus on South African society's needs in that it

- provides quality general academic and career-focused learning opportunities underpinned by principles of lifelong learning, flexibility, and student-centredness;
- undertakes research and knowledge development guided by integrity, quality and rigour;
- participates in community development by utilising its resources and capacities for the upliftment of the disadvantaged;
- is accessible to all learners, specifically those on the African continent, and the marginalised, because it provides a barrier-free environment and, at the same time, responds to the needs of the global market;
- addresses the needs of a diverse student profile by offering relevant learner support, facilitated by appropriate information and communication technology;
- cultivates and promotes an institutional ethos, intellectual culture and educational experience that is conducive to critical discourse, intellectual curiosity, tolerance and a diversity of views;
- contributes to the establishment of a good and responsible society by graduating individuals of sound character and versatile ability; and
- meets the needs of a global, competitive society by nurturing collaborative relationships with its stakeholders and other partners (UNISA, 2008b: online).

Through the use of ODL, UNISA is providing quality distance education to significantly more students than would previously have had access to higher education. Some of the other benefits and opportunities of ODL include open and distance learning provides students with easy access, ideas and opportunities to study. Apart from giving access to lifelong learning, ODL offers study opportunities to students from different backgrounds, age groups and geographical areas. Other advantages of ODL include the following (UNESCO, 2002: online):

- increased access to learning and training opportunities;
- increased opportunities for updating, retaining and personal enrichment;
- improved cost effectiveness of educational resources;

- improved quality and variety of exciting education opportunities; and
- enhanced and consolidated capacity.

Apart from the advantages of ODL, ODL also offers some of the following benefits and opportunities to the university and students (UNESCO, 2002: online)
- balancing inequalities among age groups;
- extending geographical access to education;
- delivering education to large audiences;
- expanding the capacity for education in new and multidisciplinary subject areas;
- offering the combination of education with work and family life;
- developing multiple competencies through recurrent and continuing education;
- enhancing the international dimension of educational experiences; and
- improving the quality of existing educational services.

ODL has given more students the opportunity to study at Unisa ODL also provides an opportunity for employees to study at Unisa and improve their skills and knowledge; in so doing, these officials can assist in building human capacity in the public sector.

THE TEACHING OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AT UNISA

At Unisa, the Department of Public Administration and Management is responsible for providing Public Administration education. The syllabus in the Department is relevant to the challenges facing South Africa at national, provincial and local government sphere. The course content is designed to equip students with knowledge, and with both practical and academic skills. The mission of the Department of Public Administration and Management is to be of service to all stakeholders and role-players in public administration as well as the subject Public Administration by means of teaching, research and community service, with a view to making a positive contribution to the quality of life of all people, particularly those of Southern Africa.

In the Department, Public Administration is the subject that studies the nature and practice of governmental institutions. More specifically, Public Administration is a subject that. (UNISA 2008a: online.):
- is fulfilling, topical and dynamic;
- provides an understanding of how Public Administration (the nature and practice of governmental institutions) works;
- explains the administrative and managerial of activities in the public sector;
- educates students for a career in government;
- links knowledge learned to specific employers at all spheres of government;
- allows for comparisons with other government systems; and
- equips students with professional, managerial, administrative and thinking skills.

The Department provides a variety of courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Public Administration is offered through various three-year bachelor's degree

programmes (e.g. BAdmin, BA & BCom), honours degree programmes (e.g. BAdmin Honours, BA Honours & BCom Honours), a master's degree in Public Administration (MPA consisting of course work as well as a dissertation of limited scope), a research master's degree (MAdmin, MA & MCom) and research doctorates (DAdmin, DLitt et Phil & DCom). The vocational education currently consists of a three-year National Diploma in Public Management and another in Local Government Finance, a one-year BTech degree in Public Management and another in Local Government Finance, an MTech degree consisting of course work and a mini-dissertation, and a research MTech degree.

Assessments of the undergraduate learning programmes and degrees that can be used to educate and train public servants show that these can be divided into three categories or streams. The first stream consists of the BA degree with Public Administration as a major subject. The purpose and function of the BA degree can be explained as follows:

- The primary purpose of the BA degree is to provide BA graduates with the knowledge, specific skills and applied competence in a number of fields traditionally associated with the Humanities, thus providing them with opportunities for continued personal intellectual growth, gainful economic activity and enabling them to make a valuable contribution to society.
- A second purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with graduates in a number of learning fields in order to ensure that innovative and knowledge-based economic and scholarly activity is widened.
- A third purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with people who can understand the constructive role they need to play in their society and who are empowered to play that role. (UNISA, 2006a: Online)

A characteristic of the BA degree is the emphasis on personal intellectual growth, making a valuable contribution to society, and the widening of innovative and knowledge-based economic and scholarly activity. This degree falls within the category of providing "a general education for all students or society in general, because it is good to be educated"(UNISA, 2006a: Online).

Another degree is offered with Public Administration as a major subject, at UNISA, is the BAdmin degree. The purpose and function of the BAdmin degree can be explain as follows:

- The primary purpose of the BAdmin degree is to provide BAdmin graduates with the knowledge, specific skills, applied competence and the attitudes they need in the fields of development and public administration to make them lifelong learners, employable workers/entrepreneurs, and contributors to development and public administration in various public and civic contexts.
- A second purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with graduates in development and public administration to widen the leadership base of innovative and knowledge-based economic and scholarly activity.
- A further purpose of the qualification is to provide South Africa (and other countries) with people who can understand the constructive role they need to play as change agents in the field of development and public administration. (UNISA, 2006b: Online)

The major difference between the BA and BAdmin degrees is the scope of study. The BA degree focuses on society in general, while the BAdmin degree focuses on the field of public administration and development studies. The National Diploma and BTech are within the vocational category. The purpose of the National Diploma in Public Management is (Peninsula Technikon, 2006a: Online)

> to train and educate learners to master current and future managerial and development skills for the public service, which includes all spheres of government. The purpose of the BTech in Public Management is "to provide learners with a normative and philosophical base for research and public sector vocation so as to prepare them to eventually assume management positions.

The subjects within the Department include: education, health, protection, housing and environmental studies. Management principles form an important part of the curriculum. The curriculum mainly addresses the challenges facing South Africa in various spheres of government (*Finweek*, 2007: online).

The Department of Public Administration and Management also has a Centre for Public Administration and Management (CePAM) that provides informal training courses (e.g. certificate courses). The Centre offers various short learning programmes, courses, workshops and seminars to local, provincial and national government sphere role-players, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), communities and other interested clients. Training is done through distance and contact sessions (UNISA, 2008c: online).

From the above, it is clear that the Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa could provide public servants with their educational needs. Through the Department of Public Administration and Management, a public servant can enrol for a short certificate course, a diploma or a degree. The Department offers flexibility by offering all its courses through distance education, thus giving students the opportunity to work full time and study at any location where they work or stay. More than 16 000 students on average are taught during each administration period by the Department, making the Department of Public Administration and Management the largest of its kind at any South African university (*Finweek*, 2007: online). The University's ODL policy makes it possible for the Department of Public Administration and Management to reach and teach a large number of students, and gives these students the opportunity to study Public Administration and improve their skills and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrated the need for building human capacity in the public service. Education and training can help to build human capacity. Many public servants work full time and therefore do not have time to enrol for a diploma or a degree. However, UNISA's ODL policy gives students easy access to tertiary education and the flexibility of studying while working full time. This article also indicated that Public Administration

education at UNISA can contribute to human capacity building in the public service. The course content of Public Administration at UNISA is designed to equip students with knowledge, and both practical and academic skills.

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