Challenges for successful planning of open and distance learning (ODL) in a technology enhanced environment – A template analysis

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Abstract

The planning of open and distance learning (ODL) facilities in higher education is not clearly described in the literature. A number of ODL facilities were not successful because of lack of planning or failure to ensure that all the different systems for ODL delivery were in place and functioning. This paper sheds light on how to plan strategically and how to implement an ODL facility at an existing university with reference to the role of technology in teaching and learning. I used a template analysis to construct a roadmap for ODL planners, as it lent itself to organising data from a large collection of articles, books and documents from 1980 to 2010. I purposefully chose template analysis as a document analysis process to foster the recurring themes found in published articles on planning and implementing ODL facilities in higher education.

The results indicate four main strategies for successful implementation of an ODL facility. The template consists of strategic planning, policies, systems and challenges. The final template on ODL planning offers new insights on distance education. It could be used as a foundation for ODL planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Lastly, the template reflects the different challenges in ODL; it is recommended that consideration is given to the multiple technological changes influencing ODL. These technological changes need to be assessed as often as possible, and their influence on teaching and learning in ODL should inform future planning and development.

Keywords: Template analysis, challenges in open and distance learning, distance education
INTRODUCTION

When education professionals ponder on the feasibility of distance education programmes and whether or not to implement ODL, their first impulse is to search through the curricula to determine which courses can easily be translated into online, video or digital formats. Rumble (1986) made it clear that educators must understand that distance education may not necessarily be the best solution to address their problems in education. Meanwhile, each year, the number of higher educational institutions offering distance education learning courses continues to grow significantly (Moore & Anderson 2003).

The history and evolution of ODL is well documented, but the planning process of an ODL facility within a university and the methodology of how to ensure quality education to students in the ODL mode are vague. The literature available addresses certain aspects of ODL planning and implementation. What matters most is the consideration of challenges when an ODL facility is planned (Watkins & Kaufman 2003).

The greatest challenge for education institutions moving towards ODL is to adopt a singular vision and policies and procedures for ODL implementation. In general, ODL planning is focussed on budget and staffing issues and not on critical pedagogical issues. ODL is so much more than just a teaching mode or method; it is a distinct and coherent field of education, which is focussed on new delivery methods based on a pedagogical philosophy (Levy 2003).

To add to this problem, there are no clear guidelines available to follow when planning open and distance learning in higher education (Gunawardena & McIsaac 2004). Planners of ODL need to think about the reasons for offering courses via ODL and if it is possible to offer the course via ODL. Before any investment is made into distance
education, a rigorous needs assessment of the educational institution may justify another option, or other difficult decisions may take priority.

Furthermore, the lack of strategic planning in education may lead to ineffective interventions or interventions that are not sustainable (Mays 2005:211). Successful ODL implementation is likely to depend on the ability to create the future that they envisioned, as opposed to reacting to what other institutions have done in this regard (Moore & Anderson 2003; Zawacki-Richter, Bucker & Vogt, 2009).

Planning an ODL facility is a process of change. In any organisation, change is difficult and complex and, therefore, ODL planning will need careful consideration at all levels (Monk & Hitchen 2005:288). This paper address the challenges of planning and implementing an ODL facility in an existing higher education institution. The key component of this study is the design and production of a template for planning and implementing an ODL facility. For this purpose, the study draws on more than 30 data sources.

One of the most common approaches to content analysis is thematic analysis, where the coding scheme is based on categories designed to capture the dominant themes present in the data. Thematic analysis is ideally suited to getting a clear picture of the basic content of text.

**THE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives for this study were

1. to explore the literature on planning and implementation of an ODL facility in higher education

2. to construct a template for ODL planning and implementation.

The purpose of the study was to analyse the literature on ODL planning and implementation to develop a template for ODL planners.
The research question stated for this study was as follows:

What needs to be considered in higher education institutions embarking on planning an ODL facility?

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The final template consists of four codes, namely, strategy, policy, systems and challenges. The first level-one code is “Strategy”, which comprises six level-two codes: Purpose, vision, mission, and analysis of internal environment, analysis of external environment and formulation of strategic issues, goals, objectives, and action plans.

The second level-one code, “policies”, encompasses another set of key issues for the study. Policy issues serve as guidelines to meet goals and, in planning an ODL facility, these aspects play a key role in the success of the initiative. Twelve level-two codes were identified as the basic framework aspects for policies in ODL with thirty level-three codes specifying particular policies and aspects of policies in ODL. I added “culture” under policies as it is mostly an aspect of an organisation that develops later with organisation growth and involves policy issues.

The third level-one code, namely, “systems” encompasses key issues in the planning of ODL facilities. To start with, this code accounts for 29 level-two codes, which were sub-divided into 15 level-three codes. The 29 level-two codes were firstly, management systems, which include the bureau of management information and quality improvement system. This code includes ICT services, which include, for instance, technology and communication technology systems, including information communication, telecommunication services and computer service and support systems for students and academics. There are also financial systems, which consist of financial management, financial autonomy and transparency, and how the money is spent and raised, with financial control as a measurement of effective spending. Teaching and learning systems include curriculums, examinations, undergraduate and postgraduate student affairs, editorial service assignments and dispatch system administrative support systems. Staffing or human resource systems include work responsibilities,
skills to perform their job descriptions; opportunities for training must be in place to administer the staff for ODL. Finally, support systems incorporate a call centre, examination administration, graduation ceremonies, a bureau of student counselling and career development, student financial aid bureau, bureau of learning development, safety services, and student support and library services.

“Challenges” was the fourth and last level-one code. Fifteen level-two codes were identified and 28 level-three codes. The 28 level-three codes were purely descriptive: the basic infrastructure to deliver ODL courses is expensive, including appropriate basic technologies, basic technology services such as wiring, networking, connections, computers, software and the necessary licensing, plus technological support for staff and students. Staff development, strategic alignment with ODL, corporate learners, professional enhancement learners, traditional learners and degree-completion adult learners present further challenges for ODL planners.

Lastly, codes were connected, and the themes identified, based on the codebook, literature and coded themes. Codes were written with reference to the code label or name, the definition of the theme and, lastly, an explanation of when the theme occurs (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006).

**CONCLUSION**

From the results of the study it is clear that the planning and implementation of ODL needs to be careful and systematic to ensure success. A lot of thought should go into planning and analysis of markets for ODL. As with any other system, ODL becomes cost-effective when it can take advantage of economies of scale. This means that the larger the users of the system, the lower the cost for each person or, in the case of education, the student.

The division of labour is familiar in many walks of life, but in education specialisation seems rare. In traditional face-to-face classrooms, individual teachers develop and
deliver their own courses (Care & Scanlan 2001). Educators try to be everything to everybody and to be experts in communication, curriculum design, course design, assessors, motivators, facilitators as well as content experts. This could be wasteful in ODL, as simply adding more new technology will not necessarily result in good teaching and learning. For ODL to be successful, it is important to move to a system where teachers are specialists within a system (Moore & Kearsley 2005; Casey 2008).

The template analysis of ODL planning clearly illustrates that systems for ODL delivery must be well developed before ODL can be implemented. Four sets of insights were developed from our analysis, each integrating structural and process elements in planning and implementing ODL facilities.

First to emerge were the dynamics between the processes of strategy, policies and systems, and the impact of challenges on the ODL planning processes. Each of the processes incorporates a set of decisions and is shaped by certain characteristics. The potential for overlap and interplay between the strategy, policies and systems influenced by these challenges is infinite. This study indicated that strategy precedes policy and systems. Different challenges impact continuously on all plans and processes (Olugbenga 2010).

Secondly, different policies should be drawn up for ODL, the most important being the organisation's general ODL policy. All other policies must be aligned with this. Following the policy process, all the necessary systems should be put in place for the smooth running of ODL. Effective ODL delivery needs certain support systems to function.

Thirdly, the systems must be in place and operational before ODL is implemented to ensure service delivery. In this study, it was found that for successful ODL, complex and extensive systems are required. No organisation could survive without a collection of systems in place and operational. ODL relies on a wide variety of systems to function smoothly before student satisfaction can be assured.
Lastly, some of the most important challenging issues in ODL are economic and social change, technology advancement, computers and software, and student demographic change. More research and specific reflective research is required on ODL planning and implementation. The template for ODL facility planning provides a clear guideline for ODL planners. Logically, the next step would be to test the template further and develop it into a model for ODL planning and implementation.

See Figure 1 (below) for more information.
Figure 1: Challenges for successful planning of open and distance learning (ODL) in a technology enhanced environment
References