

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPACT OF CURRENT ODFL DELIVERY IN INCREASING EDUCATIONAL ACCESS FOR MARGINALISED MEMBERS OF COMMUNITIES IN LESOTHO

NAME OF AUTHORS: Thabiso Nyabanyaba, 'Malits'oanelo Thamae and 'Mats'epo Nyabanyaba

E-mail address: t.nyabanyaba@nul.ls

Postal Address Institute of Education, National University of Lesotho,
PO Roma 180 Lesotho

Telephone +266 22340601(Work)
+266 22333469 (Home)
+266 58001702 (Mobile)

Abstract

This report presents the findings of a study on the capacity of open and distance learning (ODL) within four education sub-sectors – secondary education, teacher education, technical vocational education and training (TVET) and tertiary education – in Lesotho. Within an aim of greater and more strategic deployment of distance learning within and across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, the study undertook a survey of the perception of staff and students regarding the effectiveness and impact of current ODL provisioning among marginalised members of the communities in the country. Using semi-structured questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions, the study evaluated students' perceptions of how ODL could improve their and their communities' socioeconomic wellbeing, both now and in the future. Students highlighted the challenges of current ODL provision, such as lack of investment in human and material resources for ODL. They also highlighted the real and potential ability of ODL to improve the wellbeing of marginalised members of communities in Lesotho. Particularly for those respondents who are situated in difficult circumstances, it emerged that the flexibility and openness of this mode of educational delivery are features that have made the mode attractive and effective in improving their socioeconomic status, as they seek a second chance.

Background and purposes

There is a growing body of literature highlighting the potential for open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) approaches to increase access for marginalised students (Unterhalter, Hoppers & Hoppers 2000; Pridmore & Jere 2011). In particular, Unterhalter et al (2000) argue for the ability of open and flexible delivery modes, available through open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL), to reach a high

proportion of young people from a diverse range of backgrounds who are experiencing barriers to schooling (Pridmore 2008). Pridmore and Jere (2011) provide empirical evidence that more equitable access to education can be achieved by providing opportunities for ODFL as a complement to traditional schooling and by building circles of support around vulnerable children. Despite this growing body of knowledge about the potential of ODFL approaches, the uptake by different countries, particularly developing countries, has been quite low. Driven by the priority of and investment in basic education, and by lack of appreciation of the potential of the mode to increase inclusion for marginalised members of communities in developing countries, spending on ODFL has continued to be squeezed out by the conventional mode (Perraton 2000; Yates 2000). There is also a dearth of research on the use of ODFL delivery modes and how it is perceived by the very community members who utilise it. As a result, not much is known about the potential and challenges of implementing this mode among marginalised community members.

The context in Lesotho is that following a period of reduced economic growth and increased unemployment, Lesotho experienced a period of improved macroeconomic performance between 2000 and 2009. This period of strong fiscal position enabled impressive levels of social spending, including on education. Even as the Government of Lesotho increased spending on education and enrolments increased in three of the four sectors, the study indicates that access to education remains limited and three of the four sectors – secondary, TVET and higher education – continue to exhibit high levels of inefficiency. It is against this background that the rationale for investigating the status of education and the provision of alternative delivery modes to increase access to education becomes strong. Based on a cross-country research project commissioned by the SADC Secretariat, this paper aims to contribute to an understanding of the development and deployment of effective, harmonised ODL to increase access to quality education and training in Lesotho. In particular, this study seeks to highlight the perceptions of those who use ODFL modes of delivery about its effectiveness and value for advancing their socioeconomic status.

Research methods

The study uses a mixed methods approach that combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods. The data collection was organised in two phases. The first of these was the study of relevant documents and research literature, which informed the second component.

The second component was a nation-wide survey of the status of education and the provision of ODL. The first survey instrument measured the effectiveness of ODL programmes in the country as well as challenges and successes in the provision of distance learning. There were also questions on the mobility of students within the SADC member countries, and the status of education in general. For the survey, 250 administrators and staff in various institutions within the four sectors were selected. An actual sample of 102 respondents was obtained, with good representation of geo-

ecological zones, types of institution (open, face-to-face and combined) and sub-sectors.

The second instrument was a focus group discussion with ODL learners within the four sub-sectors and representative of regions. The final stage involved in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and ministry officials covering the four sub-sectors. The findings of the two data collection components were then presented in a validation workshop involving education planners, senior education officers within the four sub-sectors and stakeholders, including representatives of school proprietors, teacher associations, teacher unions and educational institutions.

Findings on the status of education and the provision of ODL

A number of non-governmental organisations offer a variety of programmes on literacy and vocational skills which benefit many orphans and vulnerable children as well as members of various communities. The key institution offering ODL programmes at secondary level is the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (LDTC), which continues to provide literacy programmes and opportunities for learners who are preparing to write their examinations outside conventional schooling. Other institutions that offer ODL opportunities include the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies (IEMS) and the Institute of Education, both of the National University of Lesotho. Lesotho College of Education is now offering a Distance Teacher Education Programme for unqualified and under-qualified primary teachers, a need that was compounded by the introduction of free primary education in 2000 in Lesotho.

With parents experiencing serious socioeconomic challenges, there is evidence that large numbers of children are dropping out of school. Despite enrolment growth in secondary and higher education and teacher education, inefficiencies continue to present challenges, particularly for secondary and higher education. In secondary education, for example, while there has been a steady increase in enrolments, enrolments of boys continue to lag behind those of girls by a considerable margin. However, girls drop out of school at high rates in the later stages of secondary school. Higher education is reported to be generally inaccessible and of poor relevance to economic development in Lesotho. Technical vocational education and training has stagnated in growth and remains poorly regarded in terms of its relevance. Teacher education is reportedly the one sub-sector that has improved in access, efficiency and even quality, particularly within its ODL provision.

Findings on the scope, capacity and status of ODL

Provision of ODL in Lesotho has grown considerably in all but one of the four sub-sectors. TVET continues to lag behind the other sub-sectors and still relies almost entirely on its limited face-to-face institutions. Wide variations were reported in the quality of governance, human capacity and learner support structures in the various institutions. Common across all institutions, though, were reports about the lack of internet and information and communications technology and library facilities. Great

success has reportedly been achieved in the development of learner-support materials among many ODL institutions in Lesotho, but these success stories need to be shared and experienced more widely.

There were also clear advantages and strengths reported about ODL provision, many respondents noting its affordability and flexibility. Although for many learners ODL was not a mode of choice, they had great respect for the mode and argued that it moulded strong character and the ability to balance commitments among its beneficiaries. The main challenge reported included financing and human capacity. Tutors were reported to lack skills in supporting ODL learners, often using only the few face-to-face sessions to cover a wide curriculum.

Findings on students' perceptions on the effectiveness and impact of ODFL provisioning

Students expressed a strong liking for ODFL as a means for reaching the most marginalised students in the country. Its flexibility and openness allows students who have been unable to continue their studies for a variety of socioeconomic reasons to seek a second chance. The majority of these students are women who have been forced out of school for a variety of reasons, including early marriage.

There are challenges in performing well because we have family members who seek for our attention and sometimes don't understand the demands of our studies. But overall, these (ODFL programmes) are suitable as we can attend to family and work and improve ourselves at the same time. (Female learner at LDTC)

Initially, and still today, few males enrol in such programmes because males regard studying as a female activity and are under pressure to support families. However, a growing number of male students have also enrolled in such programmes.

I dropped out of secondary school because my parents could not afford and I had to go to the mines in South Africa. When I was retrenched in 1996 I enrolled into LDTC and now I'm considered a very important member of the community because I'm at tertiary level. (Adult Learner at IEMS)

There were many other expressions of the potential and challenges facing the provision of education through ODFL in this study. However, the overall feeling was that it has the potential to reach many students who would otherwise not have the opportunity to continue their studies, having been forced out of school by a variety of socioeconomic circumstances.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is evident that Lesotho has made huge strides in the provision of education and ODL in the country. However, there are many other opportunities for expansion, particular within the secondary, TVET and tertiary education sub-sectors. There is also a need for the Government of Lesotho and all stakeholders to demonstrate the necessary commitment to finalise and implement the various education policies remaining in draft form, setting very clear strategic targets. Other recommendations emerging from this study include the following:

- There is a general call for the diversification of curricular offerings and the mode of delivery within all sectors, and particularly at secondary level, in order to absorb more learners and provide school-leavers with skills for the workplace.
- LDTC should expand its provision to lower levels of secondary school in order to provide alternative opportunities for primary school leavers who unable to gain access to the limited number of secondary schools in the country.
- Conventional school teachers should be provided with ODL skills in order to support learners who are experiencing serious disruptions to their attendance as a result of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in the country.
- The TVET sub-sector should improve its quality, focusing on providing relevant skills for the workplace and creating a number of good-quality regional TVET institutions to improve intake.
- Greater integration of the TVET sub-sector with the other sub-sectors should take place to enable mobility between the sectors for learners.
- The National University of Lesotho should increase ODL provision to alleviate congestion.
- All ODL institutions should improve their learner-support and coordination structures, particularly in the rural centres.
- ODL institutions should share experiences and standardise their practices.
- The implementation of the quality assurance framework should be expedited and institutions should maintain regular monitoring and evaluation exercises.
- The ODL draft policy should be finalised and implemented, with clear strategic targets and a binding legal framework that commits government and institution leadership to providing adequate financial and human resources for ODL provision.
- The regional policy framework and strategic plan should include a clear implementation plan and a legal framework and resources to enable governments and institutional leaders to commit resources and capacity to ODL provision.

from both the evaluation of the status of ODFL provision and from the perceptions of those who benefit from the mode, it is clear that there is huge potential for the mode to improve the quality, efficiency and equity of education in Lesotho. Encouragingly for such a marginalised mode, ODFL has received a big thumbs-up from the many young people who continue to be pushed out of conventional school. Therefore, increased

investment in this mode of delivery can only benefit developing countries such as Lesotho to improve the wellbeing of their populations.

References

Perraton, H. 2000. *Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Pridmore, P & Jere, C. 2011. Education and social justice in challenging times. *Compae* 41(4):523-531.

Pridmore, P. 2008. *Barriers to accessing conventional schooling for children and young people affected by HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa: a cross-national review of the research evidence*. SOFIE Opening Up Access series. London: Institution of Education.

Unterhalter, E, Hoppers, CO & Hoppers, W. 2000. The elusiveness of integration: policy discourses on open and distance learning in the 1990s, in *World Review of Distance Education and Open Learning: Volume 12*, edited by C. Yates and J. Bradley (pp. 27-48). London: Routledge Falmer.

Yates, C. 2000. Outcomes: what have we learned? in *Basic education at a distance*, edited by C. Yates and J. Bradley. London: Routledge Falmer.