

## **COLLABORATION OF STAKEHOLDERS AS AN EXPANDED LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR A DISTANCE LEARNER: The Case of Institute of Extra Mural Studies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Learner support for the distance learner is one of the critical elements for effective learning. This support that is so essential is usually expected to come from the educational institution where the learner is registered. However, there is circle of support around the learner that includes among others the family, the community, and the work environment. These may in one way or another become a significant support for the distance learner. This study explored through some of the stakeholders within this circle ways in which all could collaborate in order to improve and strengthen learner support. The results affirm the importance of an extended circle of stakeholders and the need for both the educational institution and the different stakeholders to collaborate in order to promote learner support needed for distance learning.

**Keywords:** Learner support, collaboration, opens and distance learning, Institute of Extra Mural Studies, Lesotho.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Human Development Report defines development as a process to increase choices that people have in order to improve their lives. In particular, the report asserts that the purpose of development is "to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives" (UNDP 1995, p.11). In order for this to happen, people need to acquire knowledge, information and experiences and to access resources that would enable them to achieve development goals. The role that education plays in promoting an enabling environment has come to be accepted by the world.

As a result, governments, through various world bodies, are signatories to the conventions such as The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All and others. Education is becoming indispensable today as the world is confronted with the scourge of HIV and AIDS and other diseases, the challenges of deepening poverty, ravaging wars and their devastating effect on citizens, the promotion of good governance and democracy.

**In particular, citizens now realize the importance of participation in the development process to ensure that their rights are catered for. However, the empowerment in the form of relevant educational information is critical.**

**How does open and distance learning, ODL, come into this situation? The world now accepts that ODL is a viable complement and or alternative to formal education. ODL is relevant for all educational levels including primary, secondary, post secondary education and lifelong education. In particular, ODL plays an important role in opening access to education, in extending service at a reduced cost and in providing and promoting quality learning. Key to achieving these goals is the learner and the kind of experience s/he is exposed to. Such experience determines the success and quality of the product. These experiences mostly organized by learning institutions can be administrative, academic or social. However, other bodies outside the learning institutions also have a critical role to play in enhancing the learning situation. All of these experiences contribute to learner support system.**

### **THE INSTITUTE OF EXTRA MURAL STUDIES**

**The Institute of Extra Mural Studies (IEMS) is the one organ of the National University of Lesotho (NUL) that promotes access to higher education through open and distance education. Although the programmes are to a large extent based on face to face tutorials and the use of print media, IEMS has managed to reach out to those who would not normally qualify for straight admission by employing the strategies of openness and the distance method. Openness here is used in its limited sense to indicate relaxing the rigidity in the conventional university admission criteria. IEMS admits mostly those high school graduands with third class pass and General Certificate in Education (GCE), the lowest high school leaving certificate. IEMS has in the past opened access to mature students with three years secondary education level plus working experience into two year certificate level, after which learners would qualify for a two year diploma level.**

**Later all of the sub-degree level programmes were reviewed resulting with the facing out of certificate levels. The programmes were upgraded to three year diploma level. At the same time, the part time mode has allowed working adults as well as those far removed from the head quarters to attend classes during specified weekends or after work hours. The programmes offered are at diploma level in mass communication, business management and adult education and also a four year degree in adult education. The beginning of the academic year 2007/8 has seen the start of two new programmes. The first is a four year degree, bachelor in business entrepreneurship (BABE), the second is a three year masters in adult education (M.Ed.). All of these programmes are part time in nature and are all operating at varying levels of distance. All of the adult education programmes are more distance in that there are fewer face to face sessions, they utilize the print media in the form of ODL modules for diploma and first degree, and ODL prepared readers for the masters programme.**

**Preparation of ODL material for the BABE has already started but in the meantime regular textbook material is being used. It is envisaged that all of the programmes at IEMS will be offered through ODL. The NUL has completed its strategic plan for 2007/2012 and has started implementing it.**

**Its first strategic goal is to improve access to its programmes. One of the key outputs to this objective is that there will be new programme offerings at IEMS. In order to achieve this, IEMS is mandated to introduce an ODL strategy so that more students can access university education. This tall order poses a number of challenges including shaping up of old programmes, introducing new programmes, learning materials, capacity building, facilities, human resources, learner support services etc.**

**This paper looks anew at the critical issue of learner support. Learner support has become a major concern especially because these new programmes will run on a more distance mode, with learners taking more responsibility and with fewer face to face sessions. At the same time, stakeholders for the IEMS programmes will tremendously increase and will include among others, the learners themselves, their families, the employers, the industry, the communities, the facilitators, the tutors etc., the list is endless.**

**In what way do these stakeholders play a role in the learning process of the learners? In what way can each facilitate such a learning process? How can IEMS facilitate a meaningful role for each of these or some of these stakeholders to play in ensuring a fruitful and successful learning process for the learner?**

#### **WHO ARE THESE LEARNERS**

**The learners at IEMS are quite varied, by age, gender, working experience and status, and adult responsibilities.**

**The programmes of mass communication and business management are mostly subscribed by younger learners, mostly o-level school leavers. We talked to a number of them at random, and most indicate they would have preferred to be in a regular university attending full time conventional programmes. The following was a response from one learner in her second year of diploma:**

***I really took IEMS as the last chance, but I really wanted to be at NUL so that I can stay in the university and experience independence. There I think I can study better because the library is there, I can get the Manpower (bursary) and also the teachers are always there and the campus has security. But here, you are on your own most of the time. Here even the Government does not know we exist and that we have a right to get scholarship like other Basotho. You will think my parents are not paying the tax! But at least I will get the diploma so I can go to South Africa to do my B.Tech.***

**Most of the younger learners really lamented that they are in the part-time programme. However, the older learners, who are mostly in the adult education programmes had different views. Most of them are already working, most are married and families.**

**Some of them are returning learners who are looking to improve their qualifications so that they can upgrade their status. Others indicated they needed these qualifications for promotions while others were preparing for career paths. We talked to a gentleman who was already occupying a relatively good position, he asserted;**

*In the two years I have been doing my studies, I know that I have to continue, I feel so motivated to study more. I have met people who are equally motivated, we study together, we support each other.*

*Everybody accepts me as I am, they don't think I am stupid, I am not afraid to say 'I don't know, ' it is such a friendly place to study. Even though I have to sacrifice to pay my fees, I think it is worth it studying here. At work I feel very confident, I can talk to colleagues and I can handle challenges. You know, I even (please help to delete this space)share some of the ideas with my wife. I am looking forward to moving into the masters programme in the same way.*

### **CHALLENGES FACING IEMS LEARNERS**

While there are rewards after the various programmes, learning at a distance poses special problems for the learners. Some of our learners come from the rural areas where schools/centers are very far from their villages. They travel long distances to come for tutorials. The mountainous terrain makes some areas inaccessible by road. Such places may not have access to radio, telephone and electricity.

In some cases, it means that learners, especially those who attend evening face to face sessions, have to rent places close to the centers. This becomes an additional expense as well as a potential security threat especially for girls. Recently Government stopped sponsoring part time programmes such as adult education and mass communication, on the basis that they are not within government priority areas of sponsorship. The only programme in which learners receive Government bursary loan is the business management.

As a result, in the other two programmes learners struggle to pay for their learning commitments. Implications are that, some learners fail to be regular for f2f tutorials because of various financial commitments. Attending f2f tutorials is also a challenge for those who are employed and are not given leave of absence. Although there is a policy to allow employees in government service time to study on part time, the implementation of this policy is still poor.

Most learners are also not aware of it. For those who work for private or for non-governmental organizations, getting time off for study depends on whether such study is within the organisation's staff development plan or just on the employers' goodwill. We have often come across situations where learners tell us that they do not want their employers to know that they are studying, that it may prejudice their studies.

Low self esteem is another major problem among learners (Dzakiria 2004). This is because of the attitude that still prevails that distance education is of inferior quality to the conventional programs. However, the closer the learners get to graduation, the more self confident they become, especially when they realize how much they have grown academically and the challenging assignments they play both at work and in communities.

The other element is the patriarchal nature of our society and its practices poses special challenges especially for the women, who are the majority of our learner population. Women have community roles to take care of the sick especially today in the face of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and other community responsibilities like feasts, funerals and many traditional activities. Community members do not understand why these women do not take up their responsibilities as expected.

Usun (2004) also observed a similar factor, the socio cultural context as playing an influencing role in the lives of learners. It is important therefore to take these into consideration as learner support systems are planned. Many of the learners come to IEMS with conventional education experience from primary school and secondary/high school. They have been exposed to a learning culture of full time f2f, teacher centered methods of learning and in general, a situation where a learner is dependent on the teacher. As a result learners need to be equipped with skills to be independent self-directed learners.

### **LEARNER SUPPORT**

Learner support within ODL has received a lot of attention because of its centrality for promotion of successful quality learning for the distance learner. It has been classified in many ways. Dillon and Blanchard (1991) for example, present four types of learner support system. First is support based on unique learner needs largely influenced by the learners' background? Second is learner support and content, third is support provided by the institution to facilitate the learning process and finally is learner support and technology, its quality and its consistency of availability. These systems have provided a guide which institutions usually put into place to steer their learner support.

Harrington, Laster, Stennet, and Cornwell (2004) have used a model of learner support that comes from the work of Cornwell (2000) that puts learner support into three categories. The first category refers to academic support, access to all information required for academic work including availability and responsiveness of faculty. The second category is practical learner support related to practical help on learning, personal assignments etc. The last category is the emotional support that learners receive especially from others like family. Harrington et al. have used this model to develop a Learning Support Needs Questionnaire (LSNQ)) for diagnosing students' needs. One of the critical points their study makes is that most of the work in this area tends to focus on what faculty can do to promote learning and that there is little emphasis on what the learners' needs for learning are "in order to help students to diagnose their own support needs and therefore develop their own strategies for dealing with them" (p.9).

However, it is also true that learners, especially in the situation of ODL in Lesotho, still need the facilitation to support them to develop their learning strategies. Learner support and learner needs are therefore taken as two sides of the same coin, mutually complementary. The Association of the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (ADEA, 2002) conducted a comprehensive literature survey in ODL policy and practice. They emphasize the critical role that learner support plays in the success for ODL programmes.

Their classification of learner support is also in three categories. First are services related to teaching and learning needs; second are services related to access and information process and needs; lastly are services related to social and personal needs. Classification of learner support therefore depends on angles or approaches taken. Learner support may also be taken as learners needs. Support to be given in order to meet these needs can be categorized as that each is;

- directly related to the academic programme and learning,
- related to the process-facilities etc. and
- related to the personal like counseling, motivating, urging on. A lot of work has been done on what support is required for academic aspects; this is especially done at the motivational level and takes the various forms of support such as registration, getting materials, contact with facilitators, getting feedback, writing examinations.

While a lot more has been done on the first two areas, work related to some aspects of personal needs still has to receive more attention. Here we talk about the kind of support a learner needs as a person at institutional level and beyond. Dillon and Blanchard (1991) talk of unique needs like motivation, confidence, financial difficulties, adult learners and learners with disabilities. Harrington et. al. (2004) refer to help with house work, child care, emotional support, tolerance, emotional reassurance etc; while ADEA (2002) add aspects of peer support and study groups, career guidance, social events and language problems. In what way can IEMS as a training institution collaborate in order to address some of these needs, especially those at the personal level? This study aimed to contribute to this debate through looking at how collaboration for learner support can be expanded to include a number of stakeholders especially beyond the institutional level. Again the study explored ways in which such collaboration can contribute to an effective learning experience for the learners.

### **COLLABORATION FOR LEARNER SUPPORT**

Collaboration in ODL is a pillar in helping providers realizes their goals to promote access at reasonable or low costs and high quality. The concept of collaboration has been explored at length. Indeed, as Perraton (2004) clearly indicates "much open and distance learning, at all levels of education, has been built on collaboration between partners" (p27). Collaborating partnerships have been formed at institutional, national, regional and international levels. The Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) is an old form of collaboration done at a regional level.

Here members collaborate in terms of materials sharing and development, sharing of experiences, exchange of programmes, research, capacity building etc. DEASA is now extending its wings into the whole SADC region and opening wider areas for collaboration in order to improve on ODL offering in the region. Whatever level that collaboration exists at, it requires commitment, a clear understanding and meeting of minds for success and mutual benefit. Perraton (2004 p31) proposes the following as pillars for successful collaboration:

- Clear goals and clear statement of purpose
- Significant roles for administrative and academic staff in all member institutions

- **Governance and funding structure that fits the purpose**
- **Members of a partnership need to see that they have complementary roles and there are benefits to all**
- **Commitment of resources from all partners.**

## **RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

This paper presents results of a study undertaken at (IEMS) on the collaboration efforts to promote learner support. The study was conducted as preliminary to a larger research. Initially a small number of stakeholders which included ten former students, six part time lecturers, four educational institutions and four employers was interviewed for the purpose of presenting the study to the conference. Later the sample was increased to double the numbers for all categories. The purpose was to explore the views of the stakeholders on learner support for the promotion of learning and whether through collaboration with various stakeholders learner support can be improved and strengthened. This study employed a qualitative design, which utilized interviews to collect data. Focus group interviews were conducted, one for past students and one for part time lectures. Employers and educational institutions were interviewed individually. The various qualitative responses including sharing of experiences were recorded and analyzed into themes and sub themes guided by the research objectives.

### **Research Objectives**

It is assumed that stakeholders' collaboration has a great potential for improving learning, teaching and research activities and can strengthen existing learner support services. The objectives of this study were to:

- **Identify the views of participants on collaboration in learner support**
- **Identify possible areas of expanded learner support.**
- **Identify strategies for improved stakeholders collaboration in learner support**
- **Explore areas of collaboration between IEMS and various stakeholders on learner support services**

## **FINDINGS**

Findings of this study cover views from various stakeholders. Common themes that were recorded are extended learner support, areas of collaboration and attachment.

### **Views about Extended learner support**

#### **Learners**

- **Learners felt there is a need for more networking and collaboration between learners and tutors, learners and administrators, learners and other learners during and after study period.**
- **Printed materials are the strength of learner support, there is need for IEMS to have more written materials for all the programmes.**
- **Improvement of library facilities and addition of more relevant and up-to-date reference materials.**
- **Improvement on IT in all the centers to enable access by all learners and tutors.**

- **"Sometimes it is personal needs where we need support, counseling, a listening ear, comfort and understanding." This was a view echoed by all learners.**
- **Education is not only about learners but affects families, employers and colleagues, communities etc., all should form part of learner support.**
- **If we can be given recognition and be accepted this will be great motivation**
- **Women are majority of learners, they need to get more support**

### **Employers**

- **A policy that supports learners through study leaves already exists. What is important is to ensure that there is proper implementation.**
- **Employees and employers should work together, with no secrets kept about studies.**
- **There should be meetings between employers and educational institutions to discuss what skills are required and how to support each other.**
- **There is no clear understanding of how IEMS works and programmes like adult education are not understood by many.**
- **We need to give learners some time for studying during working time**
- **Learners should also show their commitment to earn the support**
- **We should be a learning community around the learners, their learning affect everyone around them,**
- **Learner support should come from all who are connected to the learner directly and indirectly**

### **Views on Collaboration**

**There seemed to be agreement by all stakeholders that collaboration with educational institutions would benefit all concerned.**

**There are indirect ways of collaborating like participating in each others events, sports, celebrations, conferences etc.**

**This is important and promotes understanding and good relations among institutions. IEMS should show goodwill where it has skills that could benefit other institutions, whether these are paid for or given gratis.**

**Collaboration should be reciprocal not just one way. Other views follow:**

- **Culture of volunteerism should be encouraged among learners.**
- **Volunteer services open channels of communication between the employer, the learner, and educational institutions. It allows for sharing of experiences and skills and contributes to a learning culture in communities.**
- **IEMS should share its programs and involve employers in plans for new ones and in the review. Curriculum would be improved, be more practical and relevant to the developmental needs of the country.**
- **Other employees would be motivated to learn and that would lead to and promote learning communities.**

- There should be collaborative research in the areas of policy studies, development, advocacy, and action research
- Relevant stakeholders be invited for learners research supervision to ensure relevance to development
- Sharing of technological resources.
- Business people advertise themselves through IEMS for a fee
- IEMS collaborate with others for teaching and for transfer of credits
- Institutions could collaborate for formulation of ODL policy
- Such collaboration could be extended through national associations.

### **Attachment**

All interviewees who were not employed expressed the same passion about the issue of attachment. Their observations were that if well planned attachment could:

- Help learners get hands on practice and exposure in working with communities
- Get opportunity to market them.

A number of participants felt that employers could:

- Benefit by having free, extra and willing hands to do the job.
- Connect with the university through attached students.
- Contribute in the development of the materials and curriculum because they will be involved in the learning process
- Where possible share resources with the university to improve learner support.
- There could be short and long term collaboration depending on the agreed model.

### **DISCUSSIONS**

As literature and experience has shown, the issue of learner support is very critical especially for distance learners. This study set out to assess how the usual institutional learner supports system can be strengthened taking into consideration the IEMS learners' special circumstances. Can a learner's circle of support in the family, among friends, at work, in the community become part of the expanded learner support collaboration? Does an educational provider have responsibility to foster collaboration of various stakeholders in order to build up an expanded learner support? Who are the potential collaborators? In what way can such collaboration contribute to an effective and supportive learner support system?

These are some of the questions that this study has tried to respond to. This study on collaboration of stakeholders for learner support at IEMS has raised some key issues regarding learner support on the one hand and collaboration on the other. While in the first instance learners and tutors were interviewed separately, the findings seemed to be complementary in the kinds of issues that were identified as critical.

The educational institutions also seem to be in agreement about strengthening the facilities within institutions and encouraging collaboration in order to benefit from each others' strengths.

**The fact that the major source of funding for education is the Ministry of Education and Training, is very important and should be taken as the raison d'être for collaboration in all matters relating to ODL.**

**It is important that ODL institutions in Lesotho should also find a convenient model that can be used in order for all to pool resources and collaborate in offering the required learner support.**

**Employers and educational institutions should also collaborate for mutual benefit, the capacity building of the employee and learner, the common human resource. Some of the ways in which employers can collaborate with educational providers for learner support include financial sponsorship, time to study, facilitating practice, offering opportunities for attachment, providing counselling and mentoring etc. These are at the heart of the problems that learners experience and in many cases contribute to attrition.**

**On the other hand, educational institutions can offer their skills and services in terms of participation in boards, offering short term training, participating in ways that can help add value to work and industry.**

**Collaboration for learner support may also come from families and communities. Distance learners feel isolated from the communities and families because their time outside work is spend in school work. Very often they miss on social activities like funerals, weddings and feasts, they feel like outsiders (Yum et. al. 2005). On the other hand, they need the understanding and support of the communities and families.**

## **CONCLUSION**

**From the results of this study we conclude that beyond the direct support that learners receive from education institutions, there is also the indirect learner support provided by others, to facilitate an efficient learning process. As providers, learning institutions are strategically placed, and have a direct and moral responsibility to coordinate the various stakeholders for collaboration and strategic partnership that will foster the required learner support for the distance learners. It is hoped that such expanded learner support collaboration will also promote collaborative learning among the stakeholders and build a culture of learning in our society. The distance learners will no longer feel isolated but will play a central and active role in their environments while at the same time becoming active drivers of the learning process.**

**The results support the view that there is need for expanded stakeholders' collaboration to strengthen learner support. There is consensus that expanded collaboration for learner support should not just be the responsibility of an educational institution but a collaborative effort with stakeholders around the learner.**

**From this study, no model has been established yet, but as Perraton (2004) indicates, collaboration requires commitment and a clear understanding of what is envisaged. We suggest that further research should be to explore how the model of collaboration for learner support by all ODL providers and also how volunteerism, attachment can be best organised and what other roles in particular can be played by families and communities in promoting collaboration of stakeholders for expanded learner support.**

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