Conceptualisation of learning support by distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana

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Introduction

In Botswana, distance education (DE) at secondary level is delivered by the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL). The distance learning mode is an important means of providing secondary education to learners from marginalised communities in remote settlements. These hard-to-reach communities are mainly of the San and Bakgalagadi ethnic groups. The San are the indigenous people of the Kalahari Desert and are among the poorest of the poor in Botswana.

BOCODOL has been delivering secondary education across the country since 1998 when it was created through an Act of Parliament. This report is based on a study conducted at four sites – Kang, Inalegolo, New Xade and D'Kar – in the western part of Botswana. These sites are mainly inhabited by the San and Bakgalagadi groups, from which BOCODOL has enrolled distance learners living in geographically remote settlements with no public transport or other essential services.

BOCODOL has a number of policies designed to ensure effective delivery of open and distance learning (ODL) in Botswana. BOCODOL policies include the guidance and counselling policy (2005) that describes types of learning support offered to distance learners and includes orientation, examination practice, study skills, and individual and group counselling. Data related to the conceptualisation of learning support was gathered from responses to a questionnaire and from interviews.

Concept of learning support

Distance learners at the Kang site understood what was meant by learning support better than those at Inalegolo, D'Kar and New Xade, probably owing to their proximity and easy access to tutors and ODL staff. Their definitions below encapsulate the general level of understanding:

Kagiso: *Learning support is all about brightening somebody's future and also a way of trying to achieve a pillar of vision 2016, which says an educated and informed nation.*

Pau: *Our learning support is very well because they give us some books [and] audios to listen to… Like a tutor is teaching in class and you can understand.*

Ayi: *Helping each other on tips of learning.*

Dumie: *Helping the community to do well or correct their results for the better, so that they can find good schools and jobs.*

Anele: *This is the support given by tutors.*

Thila: *Supporting others to learn so that they pass.*

Charlie: *Learning support is the advice that you are given in order to achieve high marks in examinations.*

Distance learners at D'Kar, Inalegolo and New Xade sites, however, had not fully understood what was meant by 'learning support', as for them it implied being taught in much the same way as in a regular classroom. During the interview, this is what Lizwe said:

> *We don't want to come to class with some questions or problems that we encounter at home. We want to be taught not to be assisted where we met problems. I do believe most of us don't understand what is meant by studying through distance learning. We still need to be taught, not tutoring.*

The misconception (his use of 'we' indicates that he probably speaks on behalf of others) may be a result of language challenges experienced during the pre-enrolment stage, resulting in ineffective communication on how to learn at a distance. The officers did not speak the distance learners' mother tongue and used English as a means of communication – a third or fourth language for some learners. For others, their learning experiences at mainstream schools may have clouded their expectations of learning support.

Given their contextual challenges and other issues, participants thought the following could work best for them in order to achieve better grades at the end of the year. Their paraphrased responses include:

- Attending more weekend classes
- Submitting more assignments
- aking part in group discussions
- Having past exam papers to work from
- Regular learner support courses to be conducted
- Studying hard
- Weekend courses at least twice a month
- Assignments marked on time and returned quickly
- Guidance and counselling sessions
- Tutors available during the week to offer help

Participants' conceptualisation of learning support as indicated in the responses above falls into two categories: face-to-face support and mediated support. Participants also shared their expectations of learning support and anticipated that these would be addressed by the DE provider.

Expectations of learning support

Learners enrol in distance learning with particular expectations and if these are not met, they feel misled and may withdraw (Fung and Carr, 2000). Learners need to know exactly what they can expect in support, how to interact with the institution, what their responsibilities are and how to determine when they need assistance (Hughes, 2004). The BOCODOL Learner Charter (2000) and the BOCODOL Guidance and Counselling Policy (2005) provide support to all distance learners across all programmes for the duration of their study.

Distance learners were asked about their expectations during the interviews. Participants at all four sites concurred that they expected to be provided with teachers who taught them in much the same way as if they were at a regular school. This is not surprising as these were first-time distance learners and their experience of teaching and learning was limited to their own school experience. Three distance learner participants had the following to say:

Interviewer: *When you enrolled with BOCODOL, what did you expect from BOCODOL, and did you get that?*

Khumbu: *I expected to be taught but fortunately, I was a teacher by myself.*

Ayi: *I expected BOCODOL staff to provide us with extension materials but they provided us only with core materials.*

Dumie: *I expected them to give us more revision materials from past papers but they gave us only a few.*

Informal discussions revealed that distance learners expected tutors to be exceptionally good in their course delivery and to be knowledgeable. They believed in the common Botswana adage, 'Teacher no mistake'. They did not expect a learner-centred approach to be used or for learning material to replace the teacher. The journal entry of one tutor confirms such learner expectations:

> *They dislike the learner-centred approach. Most learners prefer to be taught everything word by word... Their expectations are that tutors should teach and not facilitate, such that if there is no tutor there is no learning. Most would want to go home and do other activities.*

The participants did not apparently understand the active role they are expected to play in their academic progress. This mismatch between expectation and experience may also have accounted for a loss of interest, and frustration. Some distance learners had not read BOCODOL's *How to Study* guide or *Learner Handbook* because they were overwhelmed with the learning material package, thus reinforcing the perception that their progress was largely or wholly dependent on the quality of tutoring or learning support provision. Distance learners at Kang, however, expected their share of responsibility to be greater. Two learners from the site offered their understanding of the process as follows:

Anele: *I had information before that distance courses need our commitment to study ourselves – I knew that this was going to be my own business.*

Charlie: *It is important because you are given the chance to study at your place, any time and at your own pace, thus making you free to perform other work like domestic work and looking after children.*

With this sense of ownership and motivation, distance learners like Anele and Charlie are more likely to succeed in their programme and future studies.

References

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