The Impact of a One-Year Teacher Training Programme in Uganda

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BACKGROUND The world conference on Education for All (EFA) was held in March 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand. At the conference a declaration was adopted by member states and international agencies to agree to take immediate steps to achieve education for all by the year 2000. The declaration took a broad view or vision of basic education as consisting of formal schooling, non-formal education programmes, open learning systems, and distance education (Padhan & Chaudhary, 2004). All of the members thought these options would provide avenues for basic education to children, especially in developing countries, and, as importantly, also would benefit the adult population.

Since the conference was held more than a decade ago, tremendous development has taken place in the provision of education to disadvantaged populations in the developing world. Distance education (DE) has gained real credibility as a method of providing training to the populations denied formal training and as a way of upskilling national work forces.

Creed and Perraton (2001) argue that teachers have been the most notable beneficiaries of distance education. The demand for distance education is tied to the need to upgrade the knowledge and skills of untrained and underqualified practicing teachers arising from the ever-increasing demand for education. This scenario has challenged traditional teacher education institutions to develop distance teacher education options. The evolution of traditional teacher education institutions into dual-mode providers encounters two major challenges. One challenge is the requirement to recruit or develop qualified, experienced, and supportive personnel who understand the philosophy of DE, to organize, control, and direct this evolution. The other is the need to cope with the tensions that emerge as DE brings innovation and flexibility to the delivery systems of the institutions.

In Uganda, following the publication of the government White Paper on education (1992), universal primary education was introduced in 1997. This development has tremendously increased the demand for qualified teachers to meet the increased number of children in primary schools (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2004). In response to this challenge, Kyambogo University, in partnership with the then International Extension College (IEC) of the United Kingdom, developed a one-year

programme to address the initial knowledge and skills needs of the large number of new support staff required to deliver distance teacher education programmes throughout the country.

In Uganda, Kyambogo University has been the traditional government teacher education institution, delivering in-service and advanced secondary teacher education at its main campus in Kampala and working with a national network of teachers' colleges to deliver primary and basic secondary teacher education programmes. All such programmes had been of a conventional on-campus nature, full-time in nature, from two-year (Certificate) programmes to those longer in duration, and all involving various aspects of practicum experiences with attachments to local schools. The emergence of the distance, in-service option enabled the training of the large number of practicing but untrained teachers in the Ugandan school system, as well as providing more advanced training to the equally large number of practicing under-trained teachers, i.e., those with minimal training who required upskilling and further training.

Kyambogo University introduced two distance programmes in response to the demand:

- A Diploma of Education Primary External (DEPE) qualification for primary teachers wishing to upgrade from a two-year trained certificate level to a three-year trained diploma level;
- A Diploma of Special Needs Education, External (DSNEE) for special needs teachers to upgrade in the same way as for the DEPE.

In addition Kyambogo University is planning to offer a Bachelor of Education, Primary External (BEPE) degree programme to enable primary teachers to begin the process of upgrading to a three-year trained level.

More than 5,000 students enrolled in the DEPE and DSNEE programmes. These were delivered using a combination of specially delivered print-based self-study modules, elements of formal and informal face-to-face components (including tutorials), tutor-marked assignments, and support and communication systems utilizing radio, SMS, and postal communication systems as well as nationwide resource people.

Many of the people used initially to provide the practitioner support services had limited experience in, or knowledge of, distance delivery systems. Kyambogo offered short training experiences for these people but this was felt to be insufficient. Kyambogo's relationship with the IEC was used to develop a more formalized programme of study for these support people, delivered by distance to promote empathy for the distance learner which was considered very important.

To kick-start the training of distance education practitioner-facilitators in Uganda, a total of 70 trainees was selected from a number of institutions, notably Kyambogo University, Makerere University, National Teachers' Colleges, and Primary Teachers' Colleges. The selection of these trainees was on the basis of their active contribution to the Distance Education (Primary) and Special Needs Programme outlined above. The selected trainees consisted of lecturers, administrators, academic registrars, principals, and deputy principals. They pursued a programme, designed by the

IEC in collaboration with Kyambogo, which led to the award of a Certificate in Distance Education. This programme was run over a period of one academic year and delivered through a distance mode.

Description of the Delivery Model
The delivery model included the following:

- Three print-based self-study modules, each supplemented with a module of readings, and supported by a learner's handbook. The modules centre around three courses: Learner Support in Distance Education, Distance Materials Design and Development, Management of Distance Education.
- A short face-to-face residential course, where learning challenges were explored and experiences shared.
- A major tutor-marked assignment, with feedback shared in the residential course.
- Attachment of a tutor to each DE practitioner-trainee. These tutors were selected on the basis of their experience and training in distance education in Uganda. This expertise was generated through one-cycle DE donor-funded projects which had formerly operated or were currently operating in Uganda.

In addition, a specialist from IEC was seconded as an occasional advisor to the Department of Distance Education, Kyambogo University, to assist with aspects of programme implementation.

In January 2002, 65 of the 70 original participants to the training programme successfully completed the first cycle of this programme and were awarded the Certificate in Distance Education of the IEC.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Once the graduates returned to their respective work places, there was a need to assess the impact of this training on their performance in the training and support of primary teachers they undertook within the DEPE and DSNEE programmes. A research exercise was conceptualized to establish the impact of the IEC course. The purpose of the study was to determine the impact of the IEC course on the competence and confidence of the graduates in managing and supporting distance education programmes. We were interested to explore the following two questions:

1. What impact has the one-year IEC course had on the performance of the graduates in the support and delivery of distance teacher training?

2. Is there a difference in performance between the graduates and non-graduates of the IEC course in the support and delivery of distance teacher training?

METHODOLOGY

The method used was essentially qualitative, using a series of comprehensive questionnaires (of the open-ended model used by Patton, 1990). These questionnaires explored skills and experiences, performance, attitudes, and confidence. Results from the questionnaires were collated and some simple parametric statistical analyses were undertaken.

A total of 117 respondents participated in the study. These included:

- 36 graduates of the first cycle of the IEC Programme, from the 65 who completed;

- 32 peer and supervising staff members;
- 49 non-participant peers and administrators who were used as a control group (those working alongside the one-year programme graduates, but who did not themselves undertake the programme).

Respondents were all drawn from Kyambogo University, Makerere University (also in Kampala), and National Teachers' Colleges (NTCs) and Primary Teachers' Colleges (PTCs) located in the four traditional regions of Uganda—the north, east, central, and western regions.

Three categories of questionnaires were used for collecting data. All of the questionnaires contained both open-ended and closed questions.

Category One: **IEC one-year programme graduates.** This questionnaire solicited information from the IEC graduates on personal data, usefulness of the IEC course, and performance of the graduates after the IEC course. The information on personal data identified the profiles of the graduates who took part in the IEC one-year programme.

Category Two: **Staff working with, and alongside, the IEC graduates, but not as distance practitioners.** This questionnaire sought information on the usefulness of the IEC course on the performance of the graduates. It sought to check whether the IEC graduates changed their way of working with distance learning students and other staff after their training.

Category Three: **Those people who had not undertaken the IEC programme of study, but were working as distance practitioners alongside the IEC graduates.** This questionnaire sought to find out how this alternate group of distance practitioners compared with the graduates of the IEC course on knowledge of distance education methods in teaching and in supporting the distance learner.

The study was carried out in all the institutions in which the graduates of the one-year IEC programme worked. The questionnaires were designed, pilot tested, and corrected where necessary. They were then administered to selected respondents by the researchers. The qualitative information was clustered under themes and interpreted based on the research questions which guided the study.

KEY FINDINGS

The following key findings resulted from collation and analysis of the data.

Graduate Perception of the Programme's Value

The overwhelming majority (92 percent) of graduates felt the programme was positive and extremely valuable for their understanding of distance education and in the provision of skills and knowledge which could be applied as they support the delivery of Kyambogo distance teacher training programmes. This was certainly consistent with the original programme objective to develop human capacity in the delivery and management of distance learning (International Extension College, 2001). In particular, graduates felt that the programme familiarized them with the important conceptual aspects of distance education.

They noted that the programme met their expectations and was relevant to their work, especially the study and support

materials. Also, they noted the mode of delivery was particularly appropriate and helped them to develop a real empathy with their own distance learners, thus changing many of their existing professional and personal attitudes toward the distance learners. They also felt a need to encourage other distance practitioners, not yet trained, to undertake the programme if given an opportunity.

Self-Assessment by the Programme Graduates

In terms of assessing their own performance, graduates felt particular areas of their work had improved significantly given the knowledge and skills gained from the programme. These areas included: attitude to, and reception of, distance learners; ability to listen to, and understand, distance learners; need to be flexible in using (creating or modifying) systems to support distance learners; providing study guidance to distance learners; and designing, analyzing, and organizing study materials for distance learners. Much of this learning revolved around changed attitudes toward, and understanding of, distance learners and their distinctive contextual needs. When compared to the practitioners who had not undertaken the programme of study, all of these areas had been greatly enhanced among the graduates.

These improvements were in comparison to areas such as the provision of face-to-face components of delivery to distance learners, planning for DE delivery, and record keeping, all of which saw no significant self-perception difference between the graduates and those not yet having undertaken the programme. This is of concern given that Tait (1995), Simpson (2000), and Bhalalusesa (2001) all agree that these aspects are important for effective delivery models.

These changes of attitude and in levels of understanding and empathy were manifested in enhanced levels of care by the graduates for the distance learners—regarded, in the Ugandan context, as a key component in the retention of and success for such learners.

Application of Concepts Learned in the Programme

Participants agreed, overwhelmingly, that they were now able to apply concepts learned in the programme to their professional work context in the delivery and management of distance education. This stood in marked contrast to the non-participants, who still felt distinct shortcomings in these conceptual areas.

Most notably, the participants felt able to implement:

- Newly learned writing and design skills for the development of distance self-study materials—whether for print-based or multimedia (especially radio scripts) delivery.
- The need to understand the personal and contextual circumstances of all learners so as to enhance levels, and modes, of student support.
- The process of undertaking environmental analyses (using a SWOT-type approach) in order to better understand the institutional capacity to design and support the effective delivery of a programme to distance learners.
- The concept of programme logic in the design and development of distance learning programmes, with the key components of developing objectives, activities, and measures of progress

along with (and this is important in Uganda with its contextual volatility) risk analyses and responses. This concept, however, was noted as being the most difficult to apply.

Responsibilities Gained after the IEC Course

A large majority of the participants indicated they were given significant new responsibilities in the delivery and management of DE after completing the programme. They attributed this to management and supervisors understanding that they had acquired new knowledge, skills, and understanding. Responsibilities given were related to the following roles: trainers and trainer coordinators; team leaders (for student support and materials development); learning facilitators. These areas of responsibility closely equated with the areas graduates perceived as having been the most useful from the programme content.

Non-participants also were being given similar areas of responsibility, although, as they indicated, this was because of the shortage of appropriately experienced resource persons. They felt a lack of sufficient skills and knowledge in their new areas of responsibility and expressed eagerness to have opportunities to undertake formal training of a type provided by the one-year programme.

Reduction of Attrition among Distance Education Students

The programme participant-graduates indicated that the programme had greatly enhanced their understanding of distance learners and their support needs. They were then able, more effectively, to design, implement, and manage appropriate support mechanisms which enhanced learner retention rates in the programmes (DEPE and DSNEE) they were delivering. In contrast the non-participants had significantly less understanding of the need to develop support mechanisms which would impact on learner retention and success rates.

Key academic support mechanisms which participant-graduates noted as a result of exposure to the programme content included:

- Remedial work
- Building learner profiles
- Designing learner-friendly materials
- Time management/budgeting for distance education
- Conducting regular face-to-face meetings
- Keeping students busy
- Encouraging them to study seriously
- Helping them understand terms
- Sharing with them the need for Special Needs Education
- Making learning materials accessible
- Encouraging students to read literature on Special Needs Education

Non-academic issues identified by the participants as measures to help in reducing attrition included:

- Empathy
- Individual attention
- Encouraging early payment of fees
- Regular visits to them
- Teaching personal experience

Essentially the participants seemed now to have a strong realization that real innovations are required in academic support, learning methods, guidance and counselling, and non-academic support methods, in order to promote improvements in student progress and retention. Case and Elliot (1997) suggest these represent the foundations for the

development and implementation of successful retention programmes for distance learners. In addition the role of care, guidance, and counselling is also paramount when combined with efficient and flexible systems of student support. Simpson (2000) and Acar and Wrightson (1996) reflected this from their own experiences. The majority of the participant-graduates indicated these values had been inculcated in them through exposure to this programme, whereas non-participants seemed not to have been so acculturated.

Resource Allocation

There was remarkable synergy between participants and non-participants when asked to identify the key aspects in distance education which required resourcing in order to enhance delivery of distance programmes. Both essentially ranked the following areas as most important for resourcing: materials development; learner support systems; training of learning facilitators (tutors, counsellors, etc.). This synergy may have occurred because of exposure to DE programme delivery by all categories of respondents. Participants, however, seemed to have a better understanding of how resources could be used within each of these areas.

Other areas of attention varied widely in perception of importance between the two categories. One such area was the role of resourcing information and communication technology. Although both categories rated this reasonably high, the non-participants considered this much more important (in fact just below the three most important categories listed above), whereas the participant-graduates rated this much lower. It may well be that the participant-graduates, through their training, had a more realistic understanding of the learning contexts of the Ugandan DE learners.

Performance of the IEC

Graduates after the Course

Peers of the participant-graduates who were either co-professionals or manager-supervisors in some way were asked to comment on the graduates' performance as a result of their exposure to the training. They were specifically asked to comment on performance areas which they felt had been enhanced, especially in relation to both the participant's pre-programme performance and those of the non-participants. The following areas were regarded as having superior levels of performance, and all related to areas of content and coverage provided by the one-year programme:

- Transparent and open interaction with fellow staff, with a willingness to share
- Capacity to interact with, and care for, the distance learners
- Knowledge of distance learning programme delivery aspects
- Planning for distance programme development and implementation
- Caring attitude toward the work and the distance learner

One area which peers felt had not changed was in the keeping of student records. This points to a possible need for future revision of such a training programme—given the impact that student records (in generating feedback) can have on learner morale. When asked to self-assess their performances, participant-graduates also rated these areas as the most positive areas of their improvement.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

Given that the main objective for developing such a training programme, in the Ugandan context, was to enhance the capacity of the distance education support and management practitioners, the following represent the main areas of impact, with clear implications for continued existence of such training:

- By undertaking this training, the practitioners were able to empathise with their own distance learners and their learning contexts. This involved understanding elements of time, study, and personal constraints. A greater understanding of ways of dealing with the mature adult learner was gained, including a stronger awareness of the study skill requirements of the distance learner.

- Exposure to the training promoted changes in the tone and care required when relating to DE learners. It inculcated a willingness to attend to the needs of the distance learners. This was reflected in real attitudinal changes among facilitators in the way they deal with distance learners. The study has enhanced problem anticipation skills, and has provided a stronger sense of obligations and commitments for the management and support staff in the distance education delivery model.

- It appears to have promoted the use of teamwork and collaboration in the delivery of distance education programmes as a result of the team-based experiential learning engaged in by the learners on this programme.

- All of this has meant that the pool of conventional educators can be assisted to convert to distance modes of thinking. These, in turn, as newly knowledgeable people, have been able to cross-fertilise with their colleagues to promote the spread of understanding around management and delivery of distance education. This has further impacted on enhanced levels of collaboration among staff in newly developed dual-mode institutions. Much of the traditional tension in such institutions is now being dissipated.

- Analytical skills acquired from the study can now be applied more effectively in a number of areas of management and delivery of distance education—most notably in materials development, management systems, planning processes, and student support design and delivery, i.e., in the key pillars of distance education systems.

- In general the culture of the learning model used in this training programme has encouraged multi-levels of collaboration between the distance learners themselves and between support and management practitioners in the field.

In the Ugandan context, which is still somewhat dominated by conventional modes of teacher education delivery, distance education has had to promote levels of awareness and understanding among the wider group of educators. This training programme has been extremely effective in assisting in this process by promoting empathy, understanding, and objective knowledge of the value and convenience of the distance delivery mode in dealing with the demands from, and unique contexts of, the rapidly changing Ugandan learner environment.

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The authors are a team of experienced distance educators and researchers from Kyambogo University, Kampala, Uganda. Kyambogo University is the Government University charged with overseeing the training of all teachers for Uganda. The authors conducted the research as an action research component of the capacity-building project described in this article.