PRACTITIONER RESEARCH AND EVALUATION SKILLS TRAINING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (PREST): EXPERIENCES OF GRADUATES FROM ODL INSTITUTIONS FROM FOUR SADC COUNTRIES

Thomas Musankuleni Kaputa (PhD)
Zimbabwe Open University
ZIMBABWE

ABSTRACT

This study is an evaluation of the Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training in Open and Distance Learning programme (PREST) which was conducted by Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) between 2009 and 2010. The programme focussed on imparting research evaluation skills in Open and Distance learning (ODL) to practitioners from the Southern Africa Development Committee (SADC) countries through the internet. Practitioners with knowledge of Open, Distance Learning (ODL) research skills are vital to their institutions. Unfortunately a large number of personnel in ODL institutions in the SADC region have training in conventional methods rather than ODL. This study was guided by the question: How relevant is PREST to ODL institutions in the SADC region? A qualitative research paradigm was used focussing on the evaluation skills gained from the programme. The researcher was the main instrument and he used personal accounts from the other four research practitioner graduates. These were from Botswana, Tanzania, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Convenient sampling was used to collect information from research practitioner graduates who had completed and taken part at the graduation ceremony at BOCODOL in 2011. The findings and recommendations provide vital insights on the direction SADC ODL institutions should take if they want to benefit from the PREST programme.

Keywords: Evaluation; practitioner; open and distance learning.

INTRODUCTION

There has been an explosion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in the world and many of them are on the internet. Africa has not been left behind as we note closer to home in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) a proliferation of single and dual mode ODL institutions have also developed (Modesto and Tau, 2009). Solbrekke (2008:485) points out that 'modern societies rely heavily on professionals with specialized knowledge based competences'. This is precisely what these institutions are attempting to achieve. Best practices demand that the professionals who work in these ODL institutions should have adequate skills to provide quality services tempered with high ethical standards to their varied and trusting students. These professionals should be guided by well grounded ODL principles to ensure that the outcome of their endeavours are bench marked on world standards. Such a scenario would be flexible enough to include current ODL trends. According to Stromach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne (2002:487) "Today, notions of professional expertise and institutional role patterns, values and 'heroic' role models are in constant flux". Are institutions in the SADC region that have embraced ODL practices cognisance of this and have they ensured that they are competent enough to tackle open and distance learning professionally? In their quests to provide ODL best practices are they guided by the interests and desires of their customers? Are they guided by moral or immoral motions? How prepared are institutions to meet this new frontier? Capacitating practitioners

in ODL principles, skills and practices is the first step in equipping professionals in the correct frame to provide a legitimate and moral education.

This study focuses on the PREST programme which was conducted by the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) to capacitate practitioners in the SADC institutions using the ODL mode of delivery. I outline the evaluation which was conducted by me as an ODL research practitioner who took part in the two year course as I solicited information from fellow practitioners from four SADC countries. The paper ends with recommendations for ODL institutions in the SADC region.

Background to the study

Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) which offers this post graduate certificate called Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training in Open and Distance Learning (PREST) is in Gaborone the capital city of Botswana. Botswana is one of the 14 countries which are in SADC and is franked by Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

BOCODOL is a college which offers a variety of programme to students ranging from high school courses to Postgraduate programmes like PREST. According to the graduation list of 2011 the programmes it offers range from academic courses to commercial courses (BOCODOL Graduation Ceremony 2011). The Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE) placed the PREST programme at BOCODOL so that it can capacitate its own students and those from the SADC region. The PREST programme was sponsored by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) Ministries of Education. The programme focuses on post graduate students who are already working in ODL institutions. It focuses on imparting research and evaluation skills in ODL to practitioners from the SADC region that do not have an ODL background. The PREST programme is cognizant that practitioners with knowledge and skills of ODL research are vital to ODL institutions. This is because they ensure quality service delivery in their institutions. Delighted customers are the best marketers of institutions since they talk about their successes to a variety of listeners across the society's spectrum without any inhibitions. Employers and other stakeholders will be able to notice improvements in these agents of positive change because of the quality performance of the ODL students. Ultimately ODL institutions will gain credibility and recognition from their communities. ODL practitioners and universities must realize in all their efforts that they are community entities and that their survival is dependent on their communities.

The current situation in ODL institutions in most SADC countries is not healthy as most of them do not have ODL training. ODL is an area which needs to be guided by personnel who are grounded in the area of ODL theory and practices. Anecdotal reports from personnel in these ODL institutions in most SADC countries show that they have training in conventional theory and skills rather than ODL. For example in Zimbabwe all Universities are now offering a dual mode of ODL. According to Modesto and Tau (2009) a dual mode is the provision of both conventional campus based teaching and ODL classes. In Zimbabwe the ODL, which is offered parallel to the conventional classes is called block release. During block release students come for lessons for a week up to a month. This is the face to face component of the programme. Most lecturers and tutors who teach in these programmes have no training in ODL. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only University in Zimbabwe mandated by the Government to offer ODL programmes in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe Open

University Act Chapter 25:20, 1998) and has personnel qualified to do so. However, even at ZOU large members of both full time and part time tutors have not been staff developed in ODL theory and practices. This scenario may be the same in the other SADC countries. The ZOU enrolled five of practitioners to the PREST programme as a way of addressing this lack of capacity.

Statement of the problem

Most ODL institutions are staffed by personnel without ODL training. This results in poor service delivery to students. How can the PREST programme be used to capacitate the large numbers of practitioners without ODL qualifications currently teaching in ODL programmes?

Research questions

The main research question is: How relevant is PREST to ODL institutions in the SADC region?
These sub research questions were generated as the study unfolded:
1. What was learnt by the graduates?
2. How did the graduates use the learnt knowledge in their institutions?
3. How did their institutions use their knowledge and skills gained form PREST?
4. What lessons can practitioners draw form PREST?
5. What is the future of the PREST programme in the SADC region?

Theoretical framework

Theories of Distance Education and Open Learning have evolved from numerous points but of interest have been the so called lay theories, which have a profound effect on how the ordinary person views Distance Education (DE) (Peters 1993). The theoretical grounding of ODL is diverse. Holmberg (1981) cites one theory by Peters which views DE as an industrial type of teaching and learning characterized by planning, rationalizing procedures, division of labour, mechanizing automation, controlling and checking. He compares DE to the way an industry functions.

Another theory worth our consideration is by Holmberg (1981) in which he sees distance education as a method of guided didactic conservation between the learner and the material. The implication is that any material given to a learner must resemble a conversation between the two in the form of a simulated internalised conversation between the learner and the text. The assumption of this theory is that feelings of personal relationship between the two promote student pleasure and motivation thus enhancing student achievement of learning goals. These theories guided this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Practitioner Researchers in ODL's focus

I want to begin by explaining the terms which ground the study which are 'research', 'evaluation' and 'practitioner researcher'. According to Shuttleworth (2008) research is the systematic investigation to establish facts or collect information for the advancement of knowledge. Woodley (2004:45) looks at evaluation as 'the systematic investigation of the worth or merit of some object'. Woodley (2004) says that in our day to day endeavour we may use the term loosely to denote gathering information. This may be formal or informal.

The term practitioner researcher is a new one to me in the sense that at the ZOU we have not formally called ourselves by that term. Woodley (2004) defines this person as an individual who gathers information on their institution in an endeavour to solve some problems. PREST therefore was concerned on developing practitioner researchers in research and evaluation skills in ODL.

According to Modesto and Tau (2009) the PREST programme initiates dialogue on ODL systems in the countries within the SADC. Students got ideas, knowledge, skills and attitudes on ODL from the programme. These seasoned practitioner researchers were able to find new ways of expressing themselves. The aim of PREST was to expose and equip students with methods of evaluating the effectiveness of their practices in ODL. Below are the aspects the students did in the programme.

Institutional Practitioner Research lessons

The students were introduced to best practices form distance education systems in Southern African countries namely ZOU (Zimbabwe), BOCODOL (Botswana) and Domasi College of Education (DCE) (Malawi). They learnt that ZOU is the largest ODL institution in Zimbabwe. According to Modesto and Tau (2009) it started as a department of the University of Zimbabwe and is now an autonomous institution which offers diplomas and degrees in arts, education, science, agriculture, social sciences and commerce. It is divided into eleven geographical regions. The last one is a virtual region which is online. The ZOU strategic plan of 2001-2004 cites its vision as "to be a leading and first choice distance teaching and open learning institution locally and internationally". In order to achieve this ZOU has placed research as a significant component of its growth. BOCODOL has already been discussed in an earlier section. DCE was a project to upgrade teachers through distance education.

Students used the above lessons to gather information on their own institutions. The students used examples from their own institutions and tried the ideas learnt on their institutions. It was a hands on programme giving students opportunities to be innovative at their workplaces.

Improving ODL Practitioner research in Institutions

PREST also introduced students to experiences from other practitioner researchers like the following writers of ODL articles; Woodley (1999), Berger and Mirozowski (2001) and Gibbs (2002). Their writing mainly focused on practitioner research and the type of research designs preferred by ODL practitioner researchers. Woodley (1999) in his articles focuses on the role of a practitioner researcher in the institution they belong to. He points out some of the issues that need to be addressed; especially the issue of institutional research. He views practitioner research as a form of self defence and self criticism.

Berge and Mirozowski (2001) have focused on two fundamental aspects of research which they feel need attention as they reviewed various journals and abstracts. These are the focus of ODL researches and the type of research designs being used by ODL practitioner researchers. They cite ten areas in their research and rank the ones commonly researched upon in ODL. Issues of policy and management are ranked lowest as compared to design issues. Researchers tend to use descriptive surveys, case studies, correlations and experiments. The first is the most preferred and experiments are the least preferred.

In response to the criticism on the use of descriptive surveys rather than quantitative methods in the form of correlation studies and experiments; Gibbs (2008) lambasts the mechanistic reductionist nature of the latter as they lack the capacity to explain some of the phenomenon experienced in ODL. In his defence he proposes the need to also look at other methodologies. Anderson (2004) makes a case for the use of new and innovative designs. The debate between quantitative and qualitative design superiority issues has tended to confuse ODL research and indeed any other research. He suggests design based research which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods and is participatory in nature since participants take part in designing their own programmes.

Armed with the above students were able to identify appropriate areas to focus on in their institutions. Secondly they augmented their existing research skills and acquired new research skills to use in their practitioner research in their institutions.

The area of ODL in developing countries especially the need to develop home grown ODL practices which incorporate indigenous knowledge dissemination practices was addressed as a gap which needs to be filled. Lastly the issue of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) which has not been addressed adequately in the developing countries was covered. Two areas stand out here, capacitating students in education technologies and providing infrastructure for access to e-learning. There is a huge gap between developed and developing countries. How this can be addressed should concern practitioner researchers. An evaluation of this nature would provide ways of fine tuning programmes meant to capacitate practitioners. The use of using qualitative ways by focussing on the perceptions of those who would have graduated from such programmes need to be considered when formulating ODL courses and also when implementing the teaching.

The Future of ODL programmes

The PREST was conducted online using mainly emails (Modesto and Tau, 2009).The use of educational technology has also influenced distance education in the way it structures the teaching and learning situation. Its application occurs in systematic step by step planning and development of educational measures. This has been influenced to a large extent by behaviourist and cognitive learning theories. The need to address the cognitive domain has been central to distance education. But the psychomotor domain has been problematic to address since the student is at a distance. The use of education technologies or e-learning as it is now popularly called is one step towards including the more practical aspects of certain courses. How was it handled in the PREST programme?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research paradigm was used focusing on the ODL evaluation skills gained by the graduates from the PREST programme. This study was grounded in the practitioner research approach. The study puts the practitioner at the centre of the research because it is assured that he or she has gained or has a working knowledge of the techniques and systems of ODL (Woodley 2004). Practitioner research has its foundations in grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology. It uses grounded theory as it analyses empirical material or studies a field or a process (Flick, 2009). It is ethnographic because it combines different methods based on participation; observation and writing about a field under study specifically ODL in this case (Flick, 2009). It is also phenomenological because it dwells on a careful

description and analysis of the participants' life world and the meaning extracted thereof (Creswell, 2009).

The population consisted of all the institutions offering ODL programmes in the fourteen SADC countries. Initially eight countries forwarded names of lecturers for the PREST programme. This was a total of 31 lecturers. Very few lecturers ended up taking up the programme although it was fully funded.

Convenience sampling was used to select the countries and the participants who were finally selected. Morse (2007) describes convenience sampling as locating people who are available for the study. In this instance these were those who came to the BOCODOL graduation. In order to get started I used Blumer's (1970) approach of using sensitising concepts. This was achieved by holding discussions with other graduates, some of the lecturers and other stakeholders so as to find relevant situations, persons or events. During this phase I established the specific problem which lacked empirical analysis and theoretical explanation (Flick, 2009). The main research question was generated during this stage and was refined later. I was convinced that my fellow graduates whom I had communicated with would be able to respond to my request. The data collection was done entirely using the participants' emails.

In order to get as much information as possible I used my experiences, the other research practitioner graduates' personal accounts and the relevant documents used during the PREST programme. Each research practitioner graduate gave an account of their experience at their institution after graduating. These accounts were submitted and acknowledged through emails. Effort was made to follow Mann and Stewart's (2000) factors for computer mediated interactions. They were also triangulated through documents analysis and an interview with one key informant from BOCODOL.

The data was coded and categorized using Flick's (2009) thematic coding. These accounts from participants gave rise to the generation of central topics. These resulted in a thematic structure which depicted the participant's responses. The study followed all the parameters of ethical considerations. Consent was sought from the participants online. Anonymity of the participant was guaranteed and confidentiality upheld.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that four graduates from four countries managed to respond to the request to submit accounts of their experiences of the PREST programme in their countries. These were from Tanzania, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. The Botswana graduate's verbal account at the graduation was used also. This shows that four out of the eight countries which had initially indicated that their practitioners will embark on the course took part in this qualitative evaluation. The data analysis gave rise to six themes which I present using a question format and also discuss here. Pseudonyms for graduates will be used throughout the presentation.

What was learnt by the graduates?

All the graduates acknowledge learning a lot from the PREST programme. Their responses are indicative of people who had not had any training in ODL. Hamid from Tanzania captures these experiences on Distance Education as he said:

> This course was about Research and Evaluation in Distance Education. For this reason I learnt a lot about research and evaluation skills. But however, I can say I learnt much more about research in general. It was from this course where I developed my research skills and wide knowledge about distance education. Before this course I knew very little about Distance Education because my professional background is community development. I covered different theories in education and this made me more informed. I can also say that I learnt advanced essay writing skills and ways to attempt questions.

This shows that Modesto and Tau (2009) and Woodley's (2004) curriculum was fully understood by the graduates. The PREST graduates passed with a distinction, merits and credits depicting a high performance on average.

The issue of developing hands on experiences is reflected by Sibongile from Swaziland who pointed out that:

> Through the PREST course I learnt priceless knowledge about pertinent critical Open Distance Education (ODL) issues and concurrently developed my research and evaluation skills in the ODL area as well.

The graduates acknowledge that they learnt their skills from seasoned ODL practitioners, both local and international ones . This mentoring enabled them to acquire advanced ways of producing good articles. Fadzai from Zimbabwe had this to say:

> I gained research skills right from the expertise required to come up with a paper that is publishable including proper writing skills. I had hands on experience on learning though the distance education mode facilitated by technology especially communication

How did the graduates use the learnt knowledge in their institutions?

Graduates are applying what they learnt at their institutions. The knowledge learnt has enabled graduates to improve their research supervision skills. Hamid from Tanzania said:

> It is interesting to see that I even sharpened my research skills by publishing more papers in journals as a result of the skills attained from PREST. For my students also one could see that they are learning more from me as their dissertation supervisor compared to others since they are saying it out. I have also been helping other lecturers in terms of research skills and find myself useful to my organisation.

Fadzai from Zimbabwe claims that the programme helped her to use the practitioner skills to do institutional research which informed decision makers in her institution to refine various processes:

> Practitioner research skills were applied to conduct research to inform decision makers and refine processes in a quest to achieve Excellency in distance education; refined both academic and administrative skills for the benefits of the institution and other institutions.

Kagiso, a Botswana graduate, affirmed that he applies the knowledge and skills gained in his department as he teaches commercial courses.

Sibongile from Swaziland points out that the acquisition is a source of pride to her and her department:

> Obtaining this Post Graduate Certificate in Practitioner Research & Evaluation Skills Training (PREST) is a source of pride for me because it illustrates that the Insititute of

Distance Education (IDE) is moulding active ODL practitioners who can contribute towards enabling more Swazis access quality education. This course also inspired me to continue my PhD, which I am currently doing.

The above comments show that the graduates heeded Berge and Mirozowski's (2001) call for ODL researchers to use other types of research designs. The contribution of these graduates will improve the quality of ODL knowledge coming out of this region of Africa.

How did their institutions use their knowledge and skills gained form PREST?

Institutions sent their staff to the programme because they were convinced that they would improve their work place. Practitioners from the four countries showed how their institutions used their gains. This was by cooperating what the graduate had learnt into the institution. Hamid from Tanzania was an agent of positive change in his institution and in his country:

> … Using skills attained from PREST I managed to coordinate the DEASA conference held in Dar. I can say that PREST skills helped me to review abstracts and papers submitted by various presenters.
>
> I have also been working with local and international journals in reviewing manuscripts for publication. Such journals are like SADC CDE/DEASA, Journal of Adult Education in Tanzania and Southern Institute for Peace Development in Zimbabwe. The chief Editors of the journals appreciate my work and make me proud and this is PREST in action.
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> Further, now as an expert in Distance Education our management appointed me to study with New Zealand Open Polytechnic a certificate in E-learning Design and Facilitation. I am now starting my second trimester of the course. I believe I only qualified for this course sponsored by Commonwealth of Learning because of my PREST qualification.

In Swaziland Sibongile also cites positive contribution in her institution as she is involved in creating awareness of ODL throughout the Kingdom:

> I am now a DE practioner who is advocating or creating awareness on the benefits of ODL. Armed with this newly acquired knowledge I am now capable of clearly differentiating distance education and conventional education and I continuously strive to link ODL practices to matters or sectors in the Kingdom which will benefit from distance learning.

The responses confirm that the graduates made use of the articles they studied from Woodley (1999) and Modesto and Tau (2009).

What lessons can practitioners draw form PREST?

All graduates point out that they are many lessons to be learnt from the PREST programme. This is summarised by Sibongile from Swaziland who says:

- PREST certainly is enlightening about ODL, its issues and its benefits.
- The PREST course adequately bridges the gap for new ODL practitioners.

Fadzai from Zimbabwe pointed out that:

- It was interesting to note that the distinction between conventional, distance education institutions is in place.
- The role of technology in distance education was an eye opener.

Kagiso from Botswana mentioned that his institution has acknowledged that all the practitioners who undergo this programme show a marked improvement in their work. The institution has ensured that more of its practitioners undergo the course.

What challenges did practitioners face in the PREST programme?

Hamid from Tanzania cited the major challenge of the PREST programme as its isolated nature despite its use of the internet:

> From PREST I learnt that, facilitating an online learning is not an easy task. I could see the way I was struggling with my assignments to meet the deadline and imagine how our facilitator was contacting us all, marking and providing feedback to all of us at personal level. However, the course made me feel isolated because there were no platforms to discuss with other learners from other countries. We are learning that interactive learning platforms are important for learners to share ideas and discuss asynchronously online on important issues.

What is the future of the PREST programme in the SADC region?

The future of the PREST programme is guaranteed if the graduates and their institutions see it as relevant to their needs. However, graduates suggest two areas which need to be addressed to ensure that the programme is improved; the first one is the use of the internet and the second is the need to focus on practitioners in conventional institutions.
On the use of the internet graduates like Hamid recommends that:

> I strongly recommend SADC CDE to move away from using email as a tool for communicating with online learners. This is more or less similar to correspondence education. Current well known platforms like Moodle and Blackboard should be used. Alfresco can also be a good source of learning materials for learners. The future of PREST will then be assured if it moves with the emerging technologies.

In the same vain Sibongile from Swaziland suggests that to ensure that students do not feel isolated in this age of technology:

> There need to be more online interactivity e.g. forums where students can discuss issues, queries etc. and where lecturers can also engage with the students in order to build knowledge collaboratively.

On conventional practitioners Fadzai from Zimbabwe said:

> I recommend institution wide exposure to the PREST programme to induct personal academic and non-academic in distance education. In future PREST should be availed to even education practitioners in conventional institutions offering distance education in one form or other.

She clearly shows that the PREST programme is relevant to the SADC region as she affirms thus:

> I see the programme growing in leaps and bounds as it remains relevant for many years to come.

Our main research question 'How relevant is PREST to ODL institutions in the SADC region?' is answered in Sibongile's contribution:

> PREST is relevant for my institution in every manner. It's an area where more research and practice needs to be explored and expanded in the Kingdom. PREST motivates me as a practitioner to persevere and promote ODL as it is a good solution to ensuring that the majority of Swazis become educated. Educated citizens translate into an improved economy. Likewise, I value my learning experience and intend to

continue practicing what I learnt because I believe that distance learning is the vehicle towards ensuring that more Swazis become educated for the benefit of the nation as a whole.

All the four participants acknowledge that the programme is relevant to the instituitons in the SADC region as it capacitates them in ODL.

CONCLUSIONS

The study showed that graduates gained new research and evaluation knowledge and skills which changed their perception of ODL and this changed the way they conducted themselves in their institutions.

The practitioner research and evaluation skills learnt invoked a sense of pride and joy in the graduates as it empowered them to carry out real practitioner research which resulted in changing how their institutions made decisions.

Institutions perceived the PREST programme as relevant as they gave the graduate practitioner researchers key roles in local and regional research committees. The graduate practitioners' inputs improved the quality of their research output.

The use of emails only for conducting lessons submitting assignments and feedback created isolation among learners. Online discussion forums were not used.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made the following recommendations:
- The PREST programme is relevant and should be offered to all practitioners in the SADC countries to ensure that they offer quality ODL programmes.
- Existing ODL institutions should offer the PREST programme or an equivalent in their countries, to both ODL and conventional based lecturers. These institutions should certify all those who teach in ODL settings.
- The PREST programme should embrace innovative e-learning modalities like Moodle and Blackboard to remain relevant to changes taking place in education. Online forums for students to students and tutor interactions should be created to enable collaborative learning.

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