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A Centralised Model for Design, Delivery and Governance of Open Distance Learning at Dual Mode Universities

Abstract

In response to global and local needs, the South African government increasingly enables distance education through legislation and policy, and many traditional public higher education institutions have turned to dual-mode delivery of their programmes. This decision is often based on a desire for new market growth and firmly embedded in for-profit, without necessarily being driven by strategy. A problem with this approach is that faculties intending to offer distance delivery at dual-mode institutions often do so in a decentralised and fragmented manner, assisted only by a university unit tasked with technology enhancement of contact programmes. In such a model of decentralised delivery, for various reasons, problems with quality and sustainability arise. As an emerging dual-mode institution, the University of the Free State (UFS) considered alternatives to its decentralised and uneven governance of Open Distance Learning (ODL), towards enabling a balance between for-profit and quality. After years of using different governance models, the UFS subsequently adopted and refined the Enterprise Model as a solution.

Keywords: open distance learning, ODL governance, centralised versus decentralised distance education delivery, Enterprise model, standardization, sustainable ODL

Introduction

Globally, there is a need to level the playing field in terms of higher education opportunities, and to use innovative ways to provide access to education, inter alia through distance education (DE) programmes. In South Africa, only one of the current 26 public higher education institutions (HEIs), was designed from the onset as a DE institution. Increasingly, due to infrastructure and human resources limitations, the capacity at conventional face-to-face HEIs do not meet the needs in the society. In response, the South African government progressively enables distance education through legislation and policy, by allowing those conventional HEIs to also enter the distance education field. Subsequently a growing number of traditional public higher education institutions have turned to dual-mode delivery of their programmes. The Commonwealth of Learning (2002, p. 42) explains dual mode institutions as providing "both conventional face-to-face education and distance education". The addition of distance programmes to the qualification mix at these former conventional on-campus institutions, is often based on a desire for new market growth and firmly embedded in neo-liberalism, and not based on fundamental changes to philosophy, pedagogical principles and policy.

Against this background, and as an emerging dual-mode institution, the University of the Free State (UFS) has gone through different stages to adopt a suitable governance structure. Involved, primarily in a leadership position, for two decades, I have been part of the process to explore alternative modes of governance,

towards improvement. The aim of this paper is therefore to interrogate the evolvement of ODL governance at this institution within the emerging body of knowledge as a possible solution to the stated problems, not only in the context of South Africa, but in a rapidly changing global higher education environment.

I thus share the journey through three modes of governance, to the point where we function as the UFS South Campus for ODL (SC) today.

A decentralised faculty-driven model

I became involved in ODL before the start of this century, through a faculty-driven piece-meal design distance education endeavour, involving a selection of education programmes introduced by the faculty of which I was part. In this model, faculty members within the different departments were wholly responsible for the design; development; facilitation; student support; budgets; materials distribution and registration. After a while, the faculty set up a single administrative office, still working with support staff in the academic departments. In due time, this evolved into the School of Continuing Education, where the administrative support for the ODL programmes was consolidated, while the faculty members remained involved but situated in traditional academic departments, within a matrix organisational structure.

Although initially there was enthusiasm and commitment on the side of faculty members, this dwindled as we started facing challenges such as administrative overload; institutional policies that were not aligned with ODL principles, no centralised coordination of ODL and no ODL strategy. ODL programmes were largely developed in an uncoordinated fashion, isolated from each other. My observation was that there were different standards for face-to-face and ODL programmes, although nothing was documented. It became increasingly clear that ODL was not part of core business, resources were lacking, budgets were not aligned and the commitment of staff was not systemised.

Literature suggests that upon entering into dual-mode provision, distance education is often decentralised to the faculty or department that takes sole responsibility for the design and the delivery of their DE programmes (Xiao, 2018). They have the vested authority to decide which programmes will be designed in ODL mode, how it will be delivered and by whom (Forsyth et al., 2010). In such a decentralised autonomous structure, administrative responsibility for delivery also lies within the faculty, and economies of scale are limited by the capacity of individual academics (in the faculty) to handle large student numbers and multi-faceted delivery. Daniel (2012, p. 90) cites Tony Bates who refers to such a model as the "Lone Ranger" approach, which, for various reasons, does not lead to sustainability and consistent quality of distance education offerings. Forsyth et al. (2010, p. 24) likewise argue that in a decentralised mode, commitment of staff is not systematised at an institutional level and can have a negative effect on the sustainability and quality of the programme. In this model, individual academics might be supported in the design of ODL programmes by an in-house division specialising in design and development of technology supported and enhanced learning (e.g. an eLearning unit). This does not mean that the online programmes are designed or delivered by such a division; they merely assist academics with the design of the programmes, but the department and Faculty is responsible for the

delivery, which includes facilitation as well as support of the distance students. It also does not mean that the said division has expertise in terms of distance education. Apart from design and development of materials, effective management and administration of ODL in a decentralised model also means that Faculty will take responsibility for the allocation of human and financial resources, management of budgets, the selection and appointment of facilitators; registration; supervision; materials distribution and marketing (The Commonwealth of Learning, 2002; Khakhar, 2010; Xiao, 2018). However, the amount of work that is involved in the delivery of ODL programmes is often underestimated as academics or coordinators have to design assessment; train facilitators; take control of the development and distribution of materials; monitor quality and support students. Furthermore, most individual Faculty members do not have the skills and ability to design and offer quality pedagogically sound distance education programmes (Xiao, 2018; Forsyth et al., 2010) and thus quality is questioned.

At institutional level, there is often a lack of understanding of the different approaches required by face-to-face and distance education delivery, and subsequently policies and practices are merely drawn from current practices, instead of ODL principles (Xiao, 2018). Similarly, institutional planning mostly are misaligned with ODL principles, and institutional culture as well as central infrastructure mostly do not support ODL (Forsyth et al., 2010; Khakhar, 2010). Subsequently programmes are developed in isolation with each other instead of within the larger institutional strategy which means that there is no common set of standards for design and by implication, also for delivery. As such, distance education programmes are not developed as an integral part of the university's teaching mission (Forsyth et al., 2010). Without the support of an organisational structure and culture the assurance of quality distance education in a dual-mode institution is problematic. All of the above impact on quality. Forsyth et al. (2010) emphasise that it is not the availability of web-based technology that provides quality distance education at a conventional institution, but rather centrally set standards for distance education provision.

A centralised administrative model, with faculty-driven authority

With increasing pressure to produce research outputs and to handle large classes and large numbers of postgraduate students, academics in our faculty became less and less enthusiastic about their involvement in ODL. A decision was taken to centralise the administration and coordination by an ODL unit, and the School of Open Learning was established. The UFS SOL followed what is still the most popular version of ODL governance nationally and internationally. The SOL was tasked to oversee the effective administration of programmes, and SOL became the repository of knowledge on ODL, not only in practice, but also in terms of policy and theory. Like in many cases around the world, total academic control was still vested in faculty, and that came with inflexibility and restrictions. Although most responsibilities were situated within the SOL, we had no power beyond enrolment and administrative procedures, and often those were met with resistance. Although we were able to centralise admin, we remained an extension of one specific faculty, where there was no faculty or institutional ODL philosophy. The effect, however,

was that faculty members did not see themselves as part of ODL programmes any more. We thus functioned as a toothless entity.

The experiences of SOL were mirrored in the literature with regard to units centralised at faculty or institutional level. Osei, Dontwi and Mensah (2013) sharing experiences at a unit centralised at institutional level, indicated that there was no difference in terms of the content of the policies for conventional modes of delivery and distance education delivery (also Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Makoe, 2018). This leads to uncoordinated programme delivery, as faculties take final decisions, inter alia in terms of standards and content (Croft, 1992) even though they usually lack ODL expertise (Hope, 2005). The consequence is inappropriate educational and business models (Pankaj, 2017). Institutionally and in faculties, there is little understanding of the cost involved to deliver quality ODL programmes (Hope, 2005) nor of how to align institutional processes and structures (e.g. library services, registration, etc.) with the needs of adult working students (Croft, 1992). Hope (2005) points out that there is often relational problems between faculties and such central units. ODL activities and responsibilities have little status, are not considered for promotion purposes, and their workload is seldom acknowledged (Croft, 1992; Hope, 2005). It is not considered as the core business of the institution but rather as an add-on (Croft, 1992; Boyd-Barrett, 2000). Lack of clear strategy, quality assurance mechanisms and quality assurance standards inevitably lead to poor quality (Boyd-Barrett, 2000; Pankaj, 2017). Hope (2005) believes that a centralised governance system, where ODL is divorced from institutional culture, practice and policy is setting up DE students to fail.

In a centralised faculty-driven model the design and delivery of distance programmes are inhibited by resistance from academic staff. We realised that these challenges could only be addressed through an institutional mandate to the centralised ODL unit.

Enterprise model, with centralised authority and faculty collaboration

Based on the enterprise model of Lowenthal and White (2009), Open Distance Learning was established on the South Campus of the UFS in 2015, as a dedicated ODL space and niche area. This campus is geographically separate from the Bloemfontein campus and does not offer mainstream programmes. It provides for a centralised design for the development and delivery of ODL programmes, but with collaboration with faculties based on a continuum. Importantly, we have the mandate of top management to lead in terms of ODL, and this mandate is provided through policy to give us decision-making authority. Courses are developed collaboratively, taking into account issues such as availability of academic staff members, and faculties still have an oversight role to play. This model enabled us to establish protocols in terms of costing and budgets and standardisation, and to design our own procedures and adapt institutional policies for the ODL environment. We were able to develop structures within the institution to cooperate with the ODL unit.

Lowenthal and White (2009) points out that while there is no one distinct enterprise model, and institutions adopt it according to their own needs, certain features are identifiable. Firstly, there is *centralized administration and oversight,* (Lowenthal & White, 2009, p. 933) which means a single division for the

management and administration of all ODL programmes. It provides for greater oversight and control, can restrict the offering of programmes that are offered, based on a particular business model to ensure viability. Furthermore, it creates an environment for standardising and implementing appropriate quality assurance processes. Secondly, the enterprise model features *collaborative course design*, which is "the process of pairing an instructional designer and subject matter expert" in the design of the course (Lowenthal & White, 2009, pp. 934, 936). This feature combined the unique expertise of both individuals involved, but can also draw on other expertise as required. Thirdly, the model enables *standardisation* in terms of course design (Lowenthal & White, 2009, p. 934), which does not only provide for a standard layout that students get used to, but also infuses certain teaching and learning strategies fit for ODL. Lastly, the enterprise model includes *faculty assessment and training*, which transfers knowledge on ODL.

Added to this, at our campus, particular sub-systems were created, based on institutional principles.

Collaboration

Collaboration forms the basis for the ODL business model at UFS SC, and is part of the institution's long-term planning, vision and mission. In the first place, we collaborate at top management level, which provides and strengthens our mandate. Standardisation is part of the institutional strategy for ODL, while faculty collaboration is negotiated through memorandums of understandings (MoUs). Academic commitment is essential, and due to the limited human resource capacity on the UFS SC, we contract academics on long-term and ad hoc contracts. In our MoUs, weighting different tasks are clearly indicated, which promotes transparency. The minimum responsibility of faculties is quality assurance through moderation. Profits are shared according to weights of stakeholder input.

Sub-systems at UFS South Campus

Sub-systems created on the UFS SC is based on a strategic UFS decision, taking into account the UFS long-term planning. The campus principal is a member of the top management team, and oversees six different departments, including course design, a multimedia department and academic planning, which inter alia take responsibility for quality assurance. However in terms of content knowledge, we rely on academic staff, from faculties and the ad hoc appointments.

Lessons learnt

To enable dual mode institutions to successfully deliver ODL, sound governance principles is a prerequisite. This means that there must be a central organisational structure with vested authority, and institutional policies must be aligned to also meet the needs of ODL students.

In order to develop quality ODL programmes, the organisational structures should give guidance to faculties in terms of planning, design, delivery and quality assurance. To manage and overcome staff resistance clear contracts with faculty members or ad hoc staff must be entered into. Towards sustainable delivery, programmes must be cost-effective, taking into account economies of scale.

Conclusion

It was found that centralised governance of distance programmes at the Institution enabled a high level of standardisation of ODL programmes and led to sustained offerings. I can conclude that an Enterprise Model for the design and delivery of distance programmes is an option that enables universities to establish sustainable distance programmes. I subsequently recommend that a high level of standardisation and collaboration be established towards quality ODL. This implies that dual-mode universities should centrally customise its policies and practices to also include teaching and learning in a distance mode. In the end, effective governance of ODL can be attained only by a strategic decision at institutional level.

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