‘Distance learning’ or ‘learning at a distance’? Case study of an education initiative to deliver an in-service bachelors degree in Zambia

Christopher J. Smith*

Department of Education, University of Bolton, Bolton, UK

In 1998, as part of what was then Zambia’s Department of Technical Education and Vocational Training’s (DTEVT) human resources capacity building initiative, under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Vocational Training (MSTVT), donor funding was secured to provide degree-level training for key teachers and managers within the technical education and vocational education and training (TEVET) system. However, the lack of degree-level courses designed for TEVET personnel at both of Zambia’s universities prevented progress. This situation has disadvantaged TEVET staff and for years has limited their professional development. To address this, a pilot project involving a British Higher Education Institution delivering a degree programme, in-country and in-service (part-time), was proposed by senior DTEVT staff. Some seven years after the commencement of this programme and with three cohorts having successfully been completed, this paper examines some of the key issues in delivery of the programme over the years and reflects on significant events that have influenced the programme’s development and are likely to continue to impact on its future direction.

Keywords: blended learning; distance learning; e-learning; international development; professional development; TVET (technical and vocational education and training)

Introduction

In 1998, the Education Department at what was then Bolton Institute of Higher Education (now the University of Bolton, situated in the North-West of England), secured a contract from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Vocational Training (MSTVT) in Zambia to deliver a ‘distance’ in-country Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme in Technical and Vocational Education (TVE). The main beneficiaries of the pilot programme were staff from two trades training institutes located at Kabwe and Livingstone, respectively. This was a unique tripartite arrangement for Bolton, to deliver one of its award-bearing education programmes overseas, funded by a third party, the Finnish overseas aid organisation FINNIDA (Smith, 2006).

For many years Bolton has provided a BEd programme, in Bolton, for overseas students from the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector. Many such students were funded through overseas development agency scholarships. Whilst these still do exist, changes in development policy by some of these agencies have resulted in a decline in the number of students being funded to travel overseas to

*Email: cs3@bolton.ac.uk
study. However, the Zambian programme was a quite different and attractive proposition both in terms of costs and access. Because of the high costs of sending students overseas to study, an in-country and in-service programme was proposed.

The first programme came to a satisfactory conclusion when 18 Zambian lecturers were awarded the BEd at a graduation ceremony held in Zambia in 2000. By tracing the development of the programme over three cohorts, this paper seeks to examine significant issues over the period that have both hindered and helped in its development. A number of issues will be examined here, not least of all the financial implications of running a programme such as this overseas. Other key themes will examine aspects of the delivery methods employed, including a discussion about issues surrounding the use of e-learning methods, and the contextual considerations in relation to both course content and assessment.

**Background**

Zambia, situated in Sub-Saharan Africa, is a relatively peaceful, if not exactly prosperous country, set amidst a number of countries undergoing extreme turmoil of one description or another. Angola to the West and the Democratic Republic of Congo to the North were both effectively war zones until relatively recently, whilst Zimbabwe to the South continues to disintegrate economically and socially under the current regime. Zambia’s other country neighbours: Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique to the East and Botswana and Namibia to the South, have had mixed fortunes over recent years, both economically and socially. One thing all have in common, including Zambia, is the high mortality rate due to the AIDS pandemic. Whilst this is not central to the study, as the reader will find out later, there is a link.

The programme was introduced partly to provide incentives for TVET staff working within the system to remain there, and also to provide course members with the additional skills and competencies required to develop as effective managers and change agents within the system.

**Initial considerations – contextual considerations versus standardisation**

At the outset, the main contractual partners decided that the award would be an ‘ordinary/unclassified’ degree. This decision was based partly on cost grounds in terms of the project time-scale and also the fact that an ‘honours’ component would go beyond FINNIDA’s policy in the region. It was also decided to have a maximum cohort of 20 course members to better ensure quality provision.

As far as possible, the modules were carefully selected to meet local needs. In addition, at the request of Ministry representatives, a new module was written, again to meet a local demand. These decisions raise some interesting points regarding equivalence of standards between the Zambia programme and the ‘home’ programme, which will be discussed later. Whilst this is not a comparative study between the programmes, like for example van Schaik and Beckstrand’s study (2003), inevitably some comparative references will be made. The main entry requirements for course members is possession of a Secondary Teaching Diploma, together with relevant experience in the TVET sector.

The programme involved delivery of nine taught modules. On Bolton’s UK-based BEd programme, a pathway was developed for overseas students based on years of
specific demand for certain modules. Thus, around a core of mandatory modules, the ‘optional’ modules were based around largely technical and vocational education (TVE) issues, to reflect not only the interests of the client group but also the policies of the international donor community and associated organisations involved in development. As UNESCO recently (re)stated:

Given the necessity for new relationships between education, the world of work and the community as a whole, technical and vocational education should exist as part of a system of lifelong learning adapted to the needs of each particular country and to worldwide technological development. (UNESCO/ILO, 2002, p. 9)

Module inclusion for the Zambian programme was informed by factors such as relevance to the Zambian situation but also to keep the programme ‘aligned’ to the key principles of the UK-based programme, i.e. for it to be focused on professional development.

Although, as stated, the programme was adapted to meet the local context, as far as practicable, course members in Zambia would experience the same programme as they would if they went to the UK. Any significant differences could be interpreted as a reduction in academic quality compared to the ‘home’ course and, if perceived as such, could have a negative impact on the student experience. Any perceived ‘watering down’ of the programme in terms of course materials, delivery or assessment is likely to lead to trouble (Hopkins, Burke, & Gill, 2000; Tollefson, Usher, Croker, & Morrissey, 2003; Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999).

Preliminary discussions both in Zambia and Bolton focused on the question of parity between the Zambian and Bolton-based programmes in terms of quality and standards, on the one hand, and meeting student/client needs, on the other. Certainly, thoughts of programme content designed for one context or country being inappropriately delivered in another country context, without modification, were in the course team’s collective mind. This is a point well illustrated by Martin et al. (2001). But it was important to strike a balance between meeting the needs of the Ministry and course members in terms of providing a programme relevant to the Zambian context, whilst at the same time meeting Bolton’s quality standards regarding providing the validated Bolton programme. With the exception of the CBT module, which had to be validated before inclusion on the programme, all the other modules were available on the UK programme (this also is now available on the UK programme). The reform of practitioner-based vocational training in the UK and elsewhere towards competency-based approaches was seen by the Zambian Ministry representatives as a potentially important development across Africa, thus, this module was created to explore both the practicalities and rationale behind such approaches.

From a quality assurance point of view, Hopkins-Burke and Gill (2000, p. 288) are unequivocal regarding their distance programme: ‘both home and overseas students receive exactly the same course materials and are subject to an identical assessment procedure’. This is interesting when considered alongside their observation that ‘Distance learning programmes based on bureaucratized non-academically active tutorial staff are less flexible’ (p. 287). Whilst their programme is quite different and follows perhaps a more traditional distance model than Bolton’s Zambia programme, leaving aside any questions about context, the above assertion regarding flexibility seems somewhat at odds with the comment about content and
assessment quoted previously. The course team at Bolton were confident that both the requirements of equivalence of standards and flexibility of meeting the contextual needs of course members could be met without any significant adjustment to the programme. During module delivery, whilst the key concepts would remain the same, as with any group of students, discussion, anecdotes and examples would relate largely to their own experiences. Subsequently, all module assessments also had an individual contextual and/or cultural dimension, enabling course members to focus on issues of personal concern or application. The structure of assignments was such that, within certain parameters, they were non-prescriptive, allowing course members to apply concepts and theories to their own situation and discuss these within a localised setting. This was, in essence, the same approach adopted on the home programme.

Programme delivery and attendance
During the initial discussions with Zambian Ministry representatives, e-learning was still only in its infancy and not a considered option. Issues surrounding such approaches, however, will be examined later. More conventional distance learning applications, for example the use of self-learning texts, although popular at the time, was not something the Education Department had wide experience of in this context. This was of no consequence, however, because the preferred option of the Ministry was for Bolton to deliver a more or less conventional face-to-face programme in Zambia. Essentially, the Ministry wanted the same course to be offered in Zambia as that offered in Bolton. Apart from the logistics of doing this, there were other issues to be considered.

The logistics of delivery proved to be less of a problem than first feared. How to ‘convert’ weekly module sessions over a semester into an economic and effective incountry model turned out to be comparatively straightforward. Course members attended the In-service Training and Education Centre (ISTEC) of the Technical and Vocational Teachers College (TVTC) in Zambia for a series of three-week residential workshops and seminars. After a period of induction, modules were delivered over two weeks and the third week was devoted to directed study work using the facilities at ISTEC/TVTC. After a period of about eight weeks, further modules would be delivered/completed on a rolling eight-weekly basis. Overall this amounted to 25 weeks of residential attendance at ISTEC over an 18–20-month period. Clearly, as Tollefson et al. (2003), writing about the residential element of their distance programme point out, this was a massive commitment by course members in terms of leaving their homes and families. Notwithstanding issues associated with course members being away from their families, the residential element had a significant ‘value added’ impact on the overall programme. Certainly being away from one’s family does bring about elements of uncertainty about how wife, husband or partner and children are coping in their absence, which can lead to stress and lack of concentration. However, the circle of support provided by colleagues in the same situation, studying and staying together for several weeks, with a tutor, can go some way to alleviating some of these pressures. Certainly the social isolation associated with conventional distance programmes (van Schaik & Beckstrand, 2003) was much reduced. The regular social outings also helped to create a corps d’esprit and bond between tutor and course members that resulted in a high commitment to the programme. This in itself almost certainly impacted positively on the quality of their work. Sources as diverse as
external examiner reports, course evaluation questionnaires and independently admin-istered student satisfaction surveys supported this.

The main in-country management role involves such things as: marketing, advertising and recruitment; booking delivery venue and accommodation; in-country travel arrangements; co-ordinating assignment collection and despatch; and sending out programme/module delivery details to course members. In practice, little marketing is required. There is a huge demand in the country for the programme. For the last cohort there were 370 applications for 20 places as a result of one advertisement placed in the national press. Although the initial recruitment took place in Zambia, Bolton did scrutinise the applications and have the final say on which students were admitted to the course.

Quality assurance
The Education Department at Bolton has wide experience over many years of working in developing countries on a variety of different types of project. However, delivering one of its award-bearing programmes off-campus and overseas was a comparatively new venture. The Department was conscious that the programme had to be carefully planned and delivered to ensure the quality of the course was as good as anything delivered in Bolton.

Because the BEd was already an accredited qualification at Bolton, there was no need for a separate validation such as would be required if it was a new programme. However, an institutional appraisal was required to see if the chosen location, ISTEC, could support the programme in terms of resources and infrastructure. This duly took place when the head of Bolton’s Academic Quality Department, accompanied by the author and programme leader, visited ISTEC. Despite some concerns about library stock and computer facilities, which had to be addressed, the appraisal had a positive outcome.

To support delivery of the programme, the library was stocked with a range of additional titles based on module book lists prepared by tutors. These were purchased from the project funds. In-country staff from ISTEC were also appointed to act as general support tutors between Bolton staff visits. Although lack of contact here was not quite as problematic as one finds on more conventional distance programmes (Tollefson et al., 2003; van Schaik & Beckstrand, 2003), it was still seen as a useful additional form of support. A Steering Group comprised of local stakeholders within the community was also established to monitor progress and advise on issues where appropriate. At the beginning of the programme, a Course Committee structure was established, chaired by the director of ISTEC, and comprising Bolton tutor representatives, representatives from DTEVT, the TVTC and also two course member representatives. Course member representatives rotated between meetings, which usually took place during every residential period.

In order to evaluate the programme, both module questionnaires and programme student satisfaction surveys were carried out. The latter being processed by outside professional consultants to ensure objectivity. It was also decided to build in an in-country visit by an external examiner to complete the quality loop. The results of both were overwhelmingly positive barring a few comments about facilities at the venue.

Several well-intentioned but, the author suggests, ill-informed suggestions by colleagues not immediately involved in the programme, were made about
delivering the programme ‘on-line’, with all the relative merits being made about such a move. The following section examines some of the issues surrounding such a move.

e-Learning and the Internet – rhetoric and reality

Open learning … distance learning … open-distance learning … remote learning … distributed learning … and, more recently, e-learning. Do these terms all describe the same thing? Peters (2001) goes into more detail describing and differentiating between different models in terms of distance and proximity. Thus he refers to models such as: ‘correspondence model’; ‘conversation model’; ‘teacher model’; ‘tutor model’; ‘technological extension model’; and ‘transactional distance model’. None of which accurately describes this ‘Zambian model’.

What they all have in common is the fact that they are all designed as strategies to enable wider participation in education, at whatever level. Although conceptually the terms do represent slightly different things, in practice, the terminology is often used interchangeably. As Berg (2002) identifies, on an international scale there are as many different terms used as there are combinations of delivery mechanism. Although Daniel (in Harry, 2000, p. 292) states: ‘there is a conceptual fuzziness that is endemic in open and distance learning’, most writers on the subject agree that characteristics such as flexibility and learner/teacher separation are central to the overall concept (Hulsmann, in Harry, 2000; Keegan, 1996; Snell, in Hodgson, Mann, & Snell, 1987; Williams et al., 1999). The programme in question here is a distance learning programme in which only the location of programme delivery is at a distance (from the main Bolton Campus). In most other respects, although an ‘off-campus’ programme, delivery is essentially conventional in the sense that it is a ‘taught’ programme. This is similar to the model described by Moran and Myringer (in Harry, 2000) in which ‘distributed face-to-face teaching’ is heavily relied on. In a sense, this could be likened to conventional teaching but instead of the students going to the teacher, the teacher goes to the students.

The programme was conceived and designed for so-called ‘face-to-face’ delivery, rather than using more conventional distance learning approaches in which text-based resources largely replace the teaching role of tutors. This was to capitalise on the characteristics that exemplify the very best of traditional teaching–learning environments; in particular, the teacher–student and student–student interface. The programme did, to a certain extent however, increasingly rely on the use of e-mail for general communication.

Although the information and communication technology (ICT) at ISTEC was limited in its efficiency, it was sufficient for course members to complete modules successfully and meet the programme requirements. Indeed, the nature of the modules was such that course members were able to develop a range of basic computing skills. Most course members had little or no experience of computers before embarking on the course, yet all left with significant skills in this area, which they were able to apply throughout the programme in their assignments. Without significant investment in the ICT facilities, however, moving beyond such basic applications to delivery of the programme via e-learning was likely to be impractical. Not all course members had easy access to ICT/Internet facilities away from ISTEC. Further complications included the adverse affects of climatic conditions which often affected Internet operations, not to mention the regular vandalising and stealing of
the land-line cables. This echoes some of the problems identified by Tollefson et al. (2003) where power outages and downed phone lines during the ‘wet’ season meant students were cut off for several weeks at a time. If the Zambian programme relied to any significant extent on Internet delivery, such occurrences would almost certainly have a similar impact. Of course, with developments in satellite technology, broader bandwidth and better facilities overall, more use could be made of the Internet in future. Certainly, future reviews relating to the continued use of ISTEC as the location for the programme will look very closely at the position regarding ICT facilities.

Having said this, the author was always of the opinion that the programme was not designed to rely on such technology for delivery, rather, for it to provide appropriate support for the programme. The very strengths for which the programme has been applauded, by External Examiners for example, relate to its nature as a ‘face to face’ encounter. As pointed out above, the programme was conceived and designed for delivery as a more or less ‘traditional’ albeit interactive lecturer/student experience. What has become clear is that, on funding issues alone, any future programme review must look again at how best e-methods can be incorporated into the delivery. In some ways this could be seen as an ideological paradigm shift – moving from education of the collective to education of the individual. Garrison (1993, cited in Peters, 2001) refers to two distance education models: one where the emphasis is on self-study; the other on group (residential) study. The dominant model evolves according to both contextual constraints and culture. Thus far the Zambian model has developed according to the culture built up based on interaction between staff and students in the same location, and also the contextual limitations of the available ICT. In this case it will be less an ideological shift than a pragmatic one given that the ‘collective’ term here is not seen in the Socialist political-ideological sense. Garrison further states that the more accessible the subject matter/programme (using ICT) the larger the numbers of students involved, which leads to a reduction in the interaction between students and teachers. In essence the debate focuses on whether knowledge can be effectively assimilated in the absence of dialogue or debate. Of course dialogue can and does take place using e-methods as the medium. Webb, Jones, Barker, and van Schaik (2004) alert us to the relationship between passive and proactive use of e-learning dialogues and how participation rates have a direct bearing on course outcomes. Participation rates, however, are governed by ease of access, something which, as we have seen, is not straightforward in Zambia.

Webb et al. (2004) suggest that asynchronous (not immediate) as opposed to synchronous (real-time) e-learning communication can have positive outcomes. But in the author’s experience, with the long time lags between receiving and responding/sending e-mails, e-learning dialogue with Zambian course members may prove less than effective. This appears to have as much to do with culture, where time frames are often seen as arbitrary, as much as it has to do with accessibility. But this may be simply a question of ensuring appropriate induction and training in behaviour and application is provided.

Some time has elapsed since the end of the last cohort and in that time, a limited amount of new ICT equipment has been installed with better Internet facilities. Whilst Bolton is still very keen to maintain the collective (residential) education dimension, new developments may open the door to a ‘blend’ of e-methods and face-to-face experience which could reduce costs further. Against this must be considered that: ‘online tutoring can lead to greater demand in staff time rather than less’
(Barker, 2002, cited in van Schaick & Beckstrand, 2003, p. 12). All associated costs with staff time of course must be accounted for. So there is some scope for utilising e-learning elements within the programme in a blended approach, yet still retaining much of the preferred face-to-face delivery. In fact the ‘e-tivities’ described by Pavey and Garland (2004) involving such things as on-line lectures and quizzes, for example, could enhance the student experience within the existing model. Quite apart from the student experience, which should provide the focus of programme design and delivery, it is inescapable that financial considerations will impact on decision making. In Zambia, the whole question of funding proved to be problematic, causing the programme to almost flounder on more than one occasion. A brief overview here may prove informative.

**Funding issues – donor support**

The programme was initially funded by the Finnish overseas development agency, FINNIDA. Because the programme was concerned with capacity building as part of an international development programme, Bolton’s fees were modest. With barely half the first programme delivered, in-country problems resulted in a suspension of payments to Bolton, which resulted in a temporary halt to the programme. This created an uproar in the Zambian national press with critics of the government citing that they had squandered donor funding. The level of criticism initiated the government to act to secure funds for completion of the programme. This was achieved and the programme eventually came to a satisfactory conclusion.

Because of these financial problems, it did not look as though another cohort would go ahead. However, a rise in the incidence of HIV/AIDS in the country and a corresponding increase in donor activity related to combating the pandemic were to prove decisive in securing funding for further cohorts. One of the major donor organisations active in Zambia, SIDA, the Swedish International Development Agency, were already providing support to the Ministry of Health (MoE), but it was the HIV/AIDS Counselling Service Unit (CSU) within the Ministry who saw the potential benefits of providing further professional development for their staff. In 2001 the CSU approached the BEd in-country managers to request eight places on the BEd, funded by SIDA. Against a backdrop of migrating staff and the need for additional skills and competencies in the field, the CSU saw in the BEd programme an effective tool to help address both these issues. It has already been indicated that to provide a degree-level qualification provides some kind of career progression to help stem the haemorrhage of staff out of the system. More importantly, the modules on the programme were seen as helping course members to develop a range of key skills needed by HIV/AIDS counsellor trainers, and other medical practitioners, in the field. As a result of the health professionals joining the programme, this initiated the MSTVT to fund a further 12 students to make up a cohort of 20 students. Thus the in-country BEd programme was ‘revitalised’ for a second cohort and commenced in the autumn of 2000.

However, further financial problems, this time related to unfavourable foreign exchange rates and the drop in value of Zambia’s local currency, the Kwacha, against the pound, created even more problems with this second cohort. Effectively, the money ran out with a couple of modules still to be delivered. After discussions on the situation with senior management at Bolton, it was decided in the interests of good will (if not good business), to write off the debt and complete delivery of the
programme. A third cohort finally became a reality, funded through the World Bank, and was completed without undue (financial) incident.

Conclusion
It is hard to imagine that three cohorts have completed the programme successfully, given the logistics involved, funding uncertainty and the frequent communication problems encountered due to poor infrastructure and lack of effective equipment. All these things need to be carefully considered before increasing delivery using e-methods. In addition, proponents of e-learning also often sidestep the time commitment required by e-tutors to be on-line (Barker, 2002; van Schaik & Beckstrand, 2003).

Although expanding use of Web-based approaches was never seriously considered, this was not because of the available ICT at ISTEC. The level of interaction and richness of discussion that developed between tutors and course members over the duration of each programme was such that to remove this valuable aspect of the programme could jeopardise its ‘value added’ quality. In terms of cultural exchange, not always considered in the context of effective achievement, no amount of distance/e-tutoring could compensate for this. The thought of replacing this with even traditional distance learning resources was unthinkable. As Keegan (referring to Peters), observes:

> there was something unsettling about a form of education (distance education) in which interpersonal communication and face-to-face interaction in the learning group were eliminated, as these were regarded as cultural imperatives for education in East and West. (1996, p. 8)

With the programme being residential, there was also an important social dimension to the programme. A new ‘social secretary’ was elected by the group during each visit to arrange social activities. This was seen as an important group bonding exercise and paid dividends in terms of attitudes and commitment to the programme. The whole residential dimension to the programme provided a lively and productive two-way learning experience and also helped to foster an effective informal peer support mechanism, something lacking in more traditional distance programmes (Tollefson et al., 2003; van Schaik & Beckstrand, 2003).

At the time of writing the future of the programme is uncertain. What is certain, is that since the programme’s inception, of the 60 starters over three cohorts, the pass rate has been equivalent to 93%. Many graduates of the programme have been promoted to more senior and responsible positions in their own respective institutions and in some cases beyond. Several graduates have now been appointed principals or deputy principals throughout the Zambian TVET system and at least two of the HIV/AIDS counsellors now have a Southern African regional training responsibility. There are many ways in which a programme’s success can be measured, these are just a few. There is also, however, the question of sustainability related to capacity building. A strategy was originally built into the programme based on a gradual handing over of responsibility for programme delivery but a number of factors led to this being delayed. Space does not permit this to be explored here but it will form the focus of a further study.

Whilst application of e-methods will continue to be explored, perhaps in a ‘blended’ approach mixing both traditional and e-methods, the ‘Bolton/Zambia model
of distance learning at a distance’ will continue to be used as a template to guide future distance learning initiatives by the Education Department at Bolton.

Acknowledgements
An edited version of parts of this paper was first presented by the author at the ‘eLearning Africa’ Conference held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in May 2006.

Notes on contributor
Christopher J. Smith is a senior lecturer in technical and vocational teacher education (TVET). He works on both undergraduate and masters programmes within the School but much of his time and interest is taken up developing and managing off-site programmes for delivery overseas. This interest and his experience in industry has also led him to be called upon as a consultant working on international development projects for agencies including UNESCO, FINNIDA, SIDA, DFID and the EU. Chris has worked on such projects in countries as diverse as Bulgaria, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Kosovo, Libya, Nigeria, Palestine, Seychelles, Tanzania and Turkey. He continues to act as an external examiner for other universities on their vocational education programmes and has undertaken consultancy and research work for organisations such as ALI, Edexcel and FEU. His current research interests revolve around delivery of ‘blended’ off-site programmes and international development in general. He has presented papers on these and other subjects at international conferences in Brussels, Sofia, Addis Ababa, Nairobi and Dakar. Outside education and research Chris’ main passion is music, which he hopes to be the subject of a paper in the near future.

References


