

Problems Of Distance Education

I WOULD like to respond to the letter by A lithana in The Namibian of July 7 concerning the Centre for External Studies, Unam. Apart from some detail, such as the allegation about master copies of study material for the Diploma in Education (African Studies) being lost, the essence of the complaints about the service provided to students at the CES is unfortunately accurate.

Distance education is a highly specialised form of education that is growing incredibly fast worldwide, its value lying in the fact that it makes quality education for people who otherwise have no access to schools, colleges or universities a practical possibility.

Distance education also makes it possible for adult learners to increase their skill/knowledge in their field without having to leave their families and jobs.

At Unam distance education has been stated to be the means by which the majority of disadvantaged Namibians, who in colonial times were marginalised from a functional and fair education, can be reached. And in fact the steadily increasing enrolment at CES show that the need for distance education in Namibia is great.

This is particularly the case for teacher training courses.

The problem is that in Namibia distance education has been largely based on the South Afri-

can tradition of which Unisa is the biggest example. The approach is known for its emphasis on efficient administration rather than student support and rather low quality of study materials which to a large extent encourages rote learning and includes virtually only print as a medium. While this approach, known as correspondence tuition, has played an important role, the development of distance education since the sixties has proven it to be conservative and out-

dated.

In Namibia, in particular at CES, the Unisa tradition still prevails in the structure of the organisation. Because the inherited structure does not allow for efficient functioning of the two basic aspects of distance education, namely course material development and student support, CES struggles with providing the kind of distance education students need and are entitled to.

Within this system, CES staff have done

their utmost to solve crises as they arise and to keep student services going. The problems pointed out by lithana are therefore not new to staff. Especially recently there has been a growing awareness about and frustration with these problems.

As a CES staff member for the last six years, I feel CES must radically transform the entire approach to distance education. This would include changing the structure in terms of study material develop-

ment and production (including more media such as radio and audio cassettes); student support (developing regional centres into academic support centres rather than administrative centres only); management and administration and research and evaluation.

While some changes have occurred since the University takeover in 1991, such as the name, a complete transformation of structures within CES is essential.

Without the full support of University management, the transformation is impossible. Without the transformation, CES will be unable to address the needs of our students fairly and consistently.

In spite of difficult cir-

cumstances and limited resources, CES managed to train many students who indeed would not have otherwise had the opportunity for higher education.

More significantly, our students are people of immense determination and courage, who not only have to cope with problems as outlined by lithana, but also have to deal with full-time work and family commitments. They are active, taxpaying members of society who deserve much better. They are the single most important reason why it is crucial to transform organisational structures of distance education at Unam.

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Letters to the Editor

