

The Challenges to distance education in technical and vocational Education in the Caribbean: The case of the special diploma in teacher training at the University of Technology, Jamaica

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Abstract

The Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies, University of Technology, Jamaica has undertaken the offering of a special diploma in technical teaching in pedagogical skills to in-service teachers in islands of the Caribbean on a pilot phase, in collaboration with the commonwealth of Learning (COL). Institutional lessons learnt from the administration and monitoring of the first two pilots were used to modify the programme for the third pilot.

Several challenges relating to participant motivation, availability and access to the technology; institutional support, facilitating and monitoring; as well as the blended mode of delivery will be discussed in this paper. Despite these challenges fifty three percent of the students successfully completed the programme and graduated from the University. These small wins are showing that in spite of the challenges, distance education mode provides a viable opportunity for offering TVET training.

BACKGROUND

In the 1990s concerns about the low status of Technical Vocational Education (TVE) in the Caribbean was highlighted at a Commonwealth of Learning (COL) conference on Distance Education Conference, in Hong Kong. At a time when TVE is being viewed as the vehicle through which developing countries can achieve economic development. Caribbean representatives decided that it was time for action and so a follow-up meeting was held in Vancouver where a decision was taken to launch a Caribbean initiative to address the issues relating to advancement of technical vocational education.

At a meeting administered by COL and CARICOM in 1992 participants had initial discussions about developing a Core curriculum for the training of TVE teachers. Other early participants in the discussions were the Regional Training Council on TVET and the International Labor Organisation. The major objective of this workshop was “to provide Technical and Vocational teachers with a recognized base qualification”

A significant consequence of the meeting was the development of an action plan to address the pedagogical needs of TVE teachers at four levels identified in the Caribbean: pre-vocational courses in secondary schools, apprentice and vocational area courses, diploma and technician level courses and degree level professional level courses.

There was acknowledgement that upgrading of TVE teachers should occur in both content and teaching skills, however the complexity of offering a single programme which provided specialized training and pedagogical training through distance education would be too problematic to develop in a short time. Moreover, there were some institutions already offering programmes in the various technical and vocation areas. Initially the programme would provide pedagogical skills only, working on the assumption that students have already acquired their content qualification. Although the diploma focuses exclusively on pedagogy, it will still address an important need since all teachers in all subject areas will require pedagogical skills to perform effectively.

There was also the need to do a better job of preparing students for the world of work in a changing globalized economy especially in regions where tradition economic activities were failing.

CORE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Having established the competencies for the Core Curriculum the eleven modules which emerged were contracted to recognized curriculum writers in the commonwealth. This was a daunting task to prepare curriculum materials for such a diverse target group. Without surprise, the result was inconsistency in the standard of the first draft. The pilot of the material was done incrementally by units and so the unevenness of the material was not detected in the initial evaluation of the material.

Although the original objective of the Core curriculum specified that there should be a recognized base qualification there was no reference to awarding of a credential, articulation or recognition for remuneration in any of the discussions.

ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIP

COL decided to address the need for an institutional partnership in 1999 when they approached UTech and enquired if it would manage the pilot offer this Core curriculum for untrained technical educational teachers in the Caribbean. In addition to the COL and UTech, the other partners are Faculty of Educational and Liberal Studies and National tertiary institutions in the participating countries.

A Regional Steering Committee meeting was convened in St. Lucia to discuss how the core curriculum would be implemented in the Caribbean. Representatives from UTech and the English speaking Caribbean states reviewed the core curriculum and learning materials and revealed the inconsistency in the competencies and standard of the materials. There would have to be a revision of the materials before they could be piloted. In addition to supporting the initiative for the development of the Core curriculum and the learning materials COLs decided to support the review of the materials for a diploma level programme, train tutors for distance learning and conduct evaluation to inform decisions for the improvement of the programme. The graduate of the programme would receive an under-graduate diploma granted by UTech.

The Role Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies (FELS) at Utech

Although the FELS had phased out its under-graduate diploma, it embraced the challenge to offer this programme as it was seen as an opportunity to launch distance education in the Faculty and further extend its influence in the Caribbean. Lecturers in the faculty had the task of reviewing the modules and units with the major objective of aligning learning outcomes and content with the pedagogical skills offered in the under-graduate diploma programme. To enhance students learning, the curriculum and learning materials had to be adapted for the Caribbean experience. This was a huge undertaking for lecturers who already carried a full workload. However, this was an opportunity for acquiring new skills in writing material for distance education programme. Despite the enthusiasm for the project there was a delay in meeting the stated deadlines. Enough time was not scheduled for editing and completing of the twelve modules and forty-four units in the programme.

After the implementation of the programme, FELS takes responsibility for the moderation of student achievement on an on-going basis and will participate in the assessment of the Teaching Practice Exercise, maintaining standard and quality assurance for the programme. Each of the twelve modules has a FELS advisor available via e-mail and telephone conference call to assist with any problems raised by the in-country tutors and

their students.

A second Regional Steering Committee meeting was held in Jamaica in 2000 to continue the discussions on the implementation of the pilot of the Core Curriculum and learning materials. It was decided that the pilot would be offered in six states in September 2001. COL decided to extend its role in the partnership by providing training in distance education for the tutors who would facilitate the programme in each of the six states. It would also contract an evaluator for the core curriculum and the implementation process.

Selecting an award for the Diploma

The title for the diploma was an agenda item at the Regional Steering Committee meeting in Jamaica. UTech required a clear distinction between the new diploma which offered forty credits of only pedagogical courses and the regular teaching diploma which had more than twice the number of credits with a content specialization component. Eventually UTech decided to name the award -The Special Diploma in Teaching (In-service)

This Special Diploma programme provides an excellent opportunity for the participants who have come from industry/ work place with the required qualifications and demonstrable skills in their content area to acquire the pedagogical skills. The fact that they will be able to conduct action research and test these skills as the progress can only serve to enhance their professionalism and the status of TVE in the region.

Unique Regional Administrative Arrangements

The Special Diploma programme is currently being offered under franchise between UTech and Clarence Fitzroy-Bryant College in St.Kitts; the Ministry of Education in the Bahamas and the T.M. Marryshow College in Grenada. Under this agreement each institution implements the programme to meet the standards and guidelines established by UTech. The students are registered as UTech students but have face-to-face sessions with in-country tutors who provide assistance with the learning materials and conduct the assessments.

From the beginning of the project a participatory design in decision making was established so there is in-put from Regional Steering Committee members in each of the participating states and COL. UTech provides assistance to module tutors in the participating states, enables access to the library for students in the programme and ensures quality assurance for the award.

Articulation Arrangement

Under a franchise agreement with the participating states, The Special Diploma in Technical and Vocational Education Teaching may enable graduates to articulate into UTech's Bachelor of Education degree. However, the diploma has fewer credits than UTech's normal diploma which would contain the content specialization areas. Participants enter the diploma with varying entry qualifications, experience, academic and technical competence therefore articulation into UTech's B. Ed. degree will require assessment of prior learning on an individual basis and may require that prospective students undertake some bridging courses depending on their academic and professional qualifications.

Choice of Technology to Support the Programme

The Core Curriculum and the associated learning materials are text-based intended to be

used as hard copies in the distance programme. Although this is an old technology the prevailing conditions in the Caribbean states dictate that this would be an efficient and economical way to offer the programme in the shortest possible time to the target group. By the time the programme was taken over by UTech nine years had elapsed. More time would have been required to develop an online version of the programme.

Moreover, students have limited access to computers in the Caribbean. Where access is available on-line costs are extremely high for connectivity. Telephone lines costs are charged per minute along with internet service costs which make online learning prohibitive for the majority of students.

Having the learning materials for forty four units in text means several hundred pages of paper to be circulated to relevant stakeholders. Consequently, UTech and COL decided to circulate the material on CD-ROM. The CD- ROM technology considerably reduce the circulation costs for UTech but resulted in increased costs which were not even factored into the budgets of the participating states. In the Bahamas some students were given the learning materials on CD as those who did not have personal computers could access this at the Ministry of Education Resource Centre.

The pilot makes adequate use of email and the telephone which reduces considerably the need for face-to-face meetings and on site visits. COL has facilitated the establishment of e list servers. The first list server enabled members of the Regional Steering Committee who have email access to communicate on issues relating to the offering of the Special Diploma. For those members without email access messages which are posted on the list serve are sent by fax. Three other list servers have been created, one for tutors, country coordinators in the Bahamas, St.Kitts and Grenada to communicate with the administrators of the programme at UTech. The other list serve is used in the Bahamas in the delivery of the programme. Some module tutors have used this list serv extensively to provide general information to students, post grades and offer support to students.

MSN Messenger/Chat Room

In the Bahamas the regional representative is a computer specialist and she was instrumental in setting up interactive sessions on the internet for tutors, students and module advisers at UTech. Initially The Bahamas used MSN Messenger for weekly meetings with participants; however, they quickly changed to MSN Chat and established a chat room (Bahamas Tvet Teachers) for their weekly meetings. This technology was utilised quite effectively at relatively low cost.

To further enhance the administrative process the pilot has a monthly telephone conference involving UTech personnel, the respective country coordinators, steering committee representatives and COL educational specialist which discusses and resolves problems on a timely basis

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE SPECIAL DIPLOMA OKAY

Cost:

To date, only three of the six countries which have decided to participate in the pilot of the diploma have actually done so. The other three have cited inability to finance the programme as the major difficulty. They are unable to meet the UTech administration fee which is approximatelyUS\$1000 per student over a twenty-four month period of the pilot and the local in-country costs of offering the programme. The local in-country costs had to cover classroom space, payment for module advisors and material production and distribution.

It is interesting to note that, there is an expressed need for the programme in Jamaica as well, but the cost has been prohibitive.

The Bahamas pays the entire cost of the programme for their students while in St Kitts and Nevis participants are asked to pay for fifty-percent of UTech's administrative costs. Cabinet intervention was required in St. Kitts to approve the expenditure on the programme.

Members of the regional Steering Committee recognize this cost challenge and sought alternative means of funding the programme. One initiative so far was to submit a proposal for funding from the Caribbean Development Bank through the Association of Caribbean Chief Education Ministers.

Orientation & Induction into the Programme

Participants in the first two pilots were not engaged in a thorough orientation programme similar to what the fulltime students would experience on the UTech Campus. They therefore complained that did not feel as if they were UTech students. Although the first two pilots were officially launched the UTech "feel" was missing. This was corrected with the Grenada pilot. New students or those new to distance education, or those who have not studied for a long time lack confidence and motivation and need to be oriented properly into the programme.

Failure to recognize that distance students need to have access to the same support services as internal on campus students, although available in a different format was a grave oversight on the part of the implementers of the first two pilots.

Communication

Another major challenge experienced is that of ensuring effective communication among all the stakeholders in this regional programme. The fact that all the persons participating in every level of the programme are doing so as an addition to their full work load has made it difficult for them to place the issues surrounding the pilot a top priority. Although list servers were available they could have been used more effectively. The preference for person-to-person contact was evident in this programme as several more issues were raised and discussed in the monthly conference calls.

The level of activity between the Tutors (in the States) and the Module Advisors at UTech in the first two pilots (Bahamas and St. Kitts) was not very high for a number of reasons. The names and contacts of the Module Advisors for each of the modules were provided to the Country Co-ordinators, but when problems arise, the Country Co-ordinators seem to prefer to contact the administrators of the programme at UTech and COL. The module advisors at UTech still had their full teaching schedules which often clashed with time scheduled for meetings with tutors. The most significant explanation for decrease activity was that tutors in the states were highly qualified experienced teachers who would not have encountered content or delivery problems for which they would have sought assistance.

The level of activity increased with the Grenada Cohort since it was realized that the programme needed to be monitored much more closely by UTech and that "nothing" should be taken for granted in a distance programme. This monitoring is done mainly through emails and telephone and increase reporting schedules. The value of this monitoring is seen in the completion schedules of Grenada who are on target with their planned schedule.

Motivation

Like other distance education programmes, there are challenges of motivating students to progress through the programme. Administrators and tutors in the participating states must be commended for their efforts as they used different techniques to accelerate students through the programme which had a number of teething pains. There have been many positive comments about the impact of the participants in the schools in which participants work.

Time

When the pilots were analyzed we found that time was one of the strongest challenges. Time for administration, student support and learning materials were always issues for discussions at all levels of the programme.

Students – The negotiated time release from work were not always respected by the administrators of the schools and so participants (in-service teachers) were not always able to attend the group face-to-face meetings with the tutors since the schools timetabled them to teach during the scheduled released days. The timelines for completion of units and modules were not adhered to by students since they perceived “open and flexible” learning to mean anytime. This was a serious misunderstanding with some students/

Administrators - Country Coordinators were not granted released time to coordinate this programme. They therefore had to manage the demands of the programme along with their regular work loads without further compensation in some cases. The tutors seemed also not to get the time to grade the students work and give prompt feedback

Learning Materials - To complete the diploma in two years by distance seemed achievable initially. However, from all reports it seems as though more time was needed for the completion of the diploma by distance for the in-service teachers. This again is questioned since students engaged in similar distance programmes in the region are able to complete a first degree in two years by distance.

Feedback

Feedback and turnaround time became a real challenge for one pilot. In order for the feedback to be used by the student in an optimal way to improve their performance, students need to receive it in time. This was a major setback for the students in one pilot where the assignments were not processed. Because formal contracts were not drawn up for tutors students did not receive appropriate feedback and tutors apparently did not treat this as an important part of their responsibility. Although UTech called for reports several times and were promised reports which came very late, the state of the programme in one pilot became grave concerned when UTech personnel visited the programme.

Learning Materials

From all reports the Learning Materials are meeting the pedagogical needs for TVET in the Region. The Learning “package” which includes print, CD, videotapes, audiotapes and interactive computer are well managed and appropriate. However, video conferencing and audio conferencing can enhance the learning process. Converting the learning materials to online material is now the challenge that the programme is facing.

Geographic Location

The unique geography of the islands of the Bahamas and Grenada posed some serious

constraints to the model that was used. Participants in the Bahamas pilot were located on five islands: New Providence, Grand Bahama, Cat Island, Abaco and Eleuthera. Grenada also has students located on Carriacou. This presented challenges for the face-to-face meetings for these students who were supposed to meet at schedule times with tutors. In the case of Grenada the students got the time off from work but couldn't afford the high cost of transport to the mainland. Technology therefore had to be used to communicate with these students so that they can get the much needed learner support from the tutors.

Faculty Preparation for Distance Learning

This paper would be incomplete if mention was not made of the preparation of the university faculty in the knowledge of, their interest in, and the incentives for providing distance learning.

Success

The University of Technology has benefited from the collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning developing expertise in regional education and in particular TVET. The Bahamian students crossed the stage for graduation at UTech's 2005 graduation and we hope to see the St. Kitts students graduating in November 2006. The Grenadian cohort is keeping an excellent completion schedule and the students should graduate in 2007. A number of other territories have indicated their intention to come aboard with this programme shortly.

LESSONS LEARNT: THE WAY FORWARD

By all standards the development of this programme was too long which necessitated so many revisions in the process. In the future a more systematic approach to the process is required which will consider all the major elements with a more coordinated effort.

Many issues have arisen regarding this programme. In many respects sobering reminders of the challenges and complexities associated with the adoption and diffusion of new technologies and instructional modes are highlighted. We have seen how the challenges of the first two pilots became lesser of a challenge in the third pilot after problems were minimized and adjustments were made. Proper orientation, communication and monitoring of the programme must be maintained. The conversion of the learning material to online should offer more options.

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