

## **CASE STUDY OF THE ALTERNATIVE SECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAMME OFFERED BY NAMCOL (NAMIBIA COLLEGE OF OPEN LEARNING)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) is a publicly funded education institution that was established to provide learning opportunities for out-of-school-youths and adults. NAMCOL's core activity has traditionally been its programme of Alternative Secondary Education. This programme enables those who cannot or do not wish to attend formal schools to study for the Junior Secondary Certificate (Grade 10) or International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE or Grade 12) examination. The college has also started offering vocational courses.

The information in the box below gives you a picture of NAMCOL.

#### **NAMCOL at a glance Some facts and figures**

- ❖ NAMCOL came into being as a parastatal through an Act of Parliament on 25 September 1997. It is the single largest educational institution in Namibia with an enrolment figure of some 20 000 students.
- ❖ NAMCOL's Head Office is situated in Katutura in Windhoek.
- ❖ About 60% of the students live in the northern region. Students have the option of studying through traditional face-to-face or distance education methods. About half the students come to learning centres to attend part-time face-to-face classes (continuing education provision) and about half study by distance education. The College has also introduced an 'open learning' approach which is being piloted in some of the regions. This approach combines the best practices of the two methods.
- ❖ NAMCOL makes use of some 90 learning centres countrywide. These centres are mainly schools that offer their facilities for use by NAMCOL students in the afternoon. The centres are located in four main regions in the country: north west, north east, central and south. A regional manager in each region coordinates the NAMCOL activities and is supported by a team of people who are employed full time by NAMCOL.
- ❖ The College employs some 900 part-time staff. There are tutors who are employed as teachers at the schools and who offer tuition to NAMCOL students in the afternoon. The Head of the NAMCOL Centre is usually a principal or head of department at the school and takes responsibility for managing the centre on behalf of NAMCOL.
- ❖ The College makes its courses available to learners at less than 60% of what it costs to provide secondary education to learners in schools.

## Why do learners enrol in the alternative secondary education programme?

There are a number of reasons why people in Namibia need access to the secondary programme other than through the formal school system:

- Namibian schools cannot accommodate all the learners who want to get their secondary school certificate. Many pupils do not achieve the points they need to proceed to grade 10 and 12 and are 'pushed' out of school. Most of them are in the age range of 16-22, often living at home and supported by their families.
- To correct imbalances in the educational system of the past and offer adults who dropped out of school a second opportunity of gaining a secondary qualification. Many of them are teachers who only have grade 10 and who want to improve their qualification and their earning capacity. Others would like to prepare themselves for tertiary education.
- To offer people who are working an opportunity of improving their educational qualifications.
- To enable people who live in remote areas where they are far away from schools to gain access to education and training.
- To offer people with a low or no income access to a subsidised secondary educational programme.

It is obvious from the above that the target group is very diverse. Learners range in age from 16 – 60 years with the majority of learners being in the 16-22 age group. More than 60% of learners are women who suffer the effects of a sexist culture. Many learners are parents, often single parents and many of them are unemployed. The younger learners are never employed. Most learners are at the lower end of the socio-economic scale even though some of them are in the middle and upper range and they live in both urban and rural areas with the largest number located in the rural areas of the north. The majority has no access to modern conveniences and lives in conditions that make it difficult to study at home and very few learners get support from family, friends and employers. Often learners may not have passed grades 8 or 9 and some have been out of school for many years. For most of them English is a second, third or fourth language and their knowledge of the subjects varies considerably. Given all these factors it is understandable that learners have not developed good coping skills in approaching their learning and that they often have low self-esteem, have a low level of motivation and expect failure. These factors have an enormous influence on the kinds of learning and teaching methods and approaches that can be used in the programme to ensure that learners experience success.

## Learning and teaching approaches

Until 2001 learners had to choose between two ways of studying. They could enrol for the face-to-face tuition, which is offered at the 90 learning centres scattered throughout the country or they could register for the distance education mode.

### *Face-to-face tuition*

Those who enrol for face-to-face tuition attend classes at the 90 learning centres spread throughout the country. The learning centres are usually schools that have entered into an agreement with NAMCOL to allow access to their facilities to

NAMCOL learners. The NAMCOL tutors are usually teachers who teach the same subjects in the traditional school setting in the morning. NAMCOL learners can attend afternoon classes for four hours per week. However, they do not receive textbooks or other materials and are thus entirely dependent on the tutor who provides them with relevant notes. Learners can buy their own textbook but this is at their own expense. Class tests are often conducted to help learners to check their progress. The tutors are also responsible for marking any assignments set for each subject (course), returning these to the learners and giving them feedback in class.

#### *Distance education mode*

Learners who are unable to attend classes may enrol for the distance education programme. They receive printed self-study materials, tutorial letters for each subject (course) that provide information about the assignments and written feedback on their assignments. Each student submits at least 3 assignments per subject (course). A centralised team of tutor markers who live in and around Windhoek marks the assignments and provides learners with useful written comments aimed at helping the learners to improve their performance. In addition, workshops are organised during the two school vacations that learners are expected to attend. Participation in the workshops is not compulsory and free but learners have to organise and pay for their own transport and accommodation.

#### *Shortcomings of existing approaches<sup>1</sup>*

Through internal monitoring and evaluation processes NAMCOL staff have identified a number of shortcomings in the two learning and teaching approaches adopted.

- Learners in the face-to-face tuition classes are completely dependent on the tutor. Occasionally tutors fail to show up for classes and many of them are unprepared. Most of them use the same teaching methods as they do with learners who study full time in the traditional school set up. These approaches are not adequate for learners who study part-time and who need a range of different learning methods in order to cope with the volume of work in a short timeframe. In some areas it is difficult to find qualified tutors and the ongoing training of tutors remains a daunting challenge for the fulltime NAMCOL regional teams.
- The drop-out rate among NAMCOL's distance education learners is very high. Many learners feel isolated, have no suitable place to study and because they feel that the problems they face are 'insurmountable' they lose their motivation to participate in the course. The dependence on self-study materials that are written in English presents a major obstacle for most learners. Studying independently is a new learning experience and learners feel that they need much more contact with tutors to cope.

#### **Towards an open learning approach**

NAMCOL has a broad mandate to design, develop and offer programmes to address diverse educational needs and to contribute to the nation's social and economic development. According to the NAMCOL Act the college is expected to offer 'open learning programmes', involving 'modern instructional techniques' through the use of 'media' and 'technological equipment'

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<sup>1</sup> *Introducing an Open Learning Approach in NAMCOL's Programme of Alternative Secondary Education*, a consultative document, June 2000

In recent years there has been a move away from traditional correspondence courses supplemented by occasional lectures or contact with a tutor. Instead, many institutions have adopted an open learning approach, which aims to remove barriers to access and to provide greater flexibility, high quality learning experiences and improved learner support. Other open learning institutions have begun to offer their students a wider range of study options that draw upon a variety of media and learning resources. This means that NAMCOL is facing increasing competition in the open learning market-place.

At the same time, the College is attempting to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of its offerings. NAMCOL thus faces the challenge of improving the quality of its services without a significant increase in the cost to learners.

#### *A new way of teaching and learning*

Since 1997, NAMCOL has been piloting a new way of delivering courses that combines the strengths of both the face-to-face and distance education modes. All learners in the pilot areas are provided with a full set of self-study materials, written feedback assignments that are marked locally, tutor led tutorials at least once a month and vacation workshops. It is envisaged that this core package of learning materials and resources will be provided to learners in all parts of the country when the Open Learning approach is adopted. In addition, NAMCOL is investigating the feasibility of a range of proposals to further improve its services. They include

1. **Orientation for learners**
  - One-day workshop at the beginning of the year
  - Revised 'Good Study Guide'
  - Cassette tape in all Namibian home language
2. **Support from tutors**
  - Advice from tutor between tutorial sessions
  - Mobile tutors
  - Telephone conferencing with a tutor
3. **Study support**
  - Supervised study halls
  - Self-facilitated study groups
  - Learning coaches (facilitated study groups)
4. **Vacation workshops**
  - Making the attendance compulsory.
  - Arrange workshops at more centres.
  - Ensure adequate accommodation facilities for learners.
5. **Textbooks**
  - Loan scheme
  - Buy back and resell
  - Satellite open learning centres
6. **Assessment**
  - Multiple choice answer sheets read by computer
  - Mock examinations

## **Assessment requirements**

NAMCOL students have to comply with the same assessment requirements as full-time students who are enrolled in traditional schools. The assessment is prescribed by the Directorate for National Examinations and Assessment (DNEA) and NAMCOL students have to register separately for the end of the year examination at their nearest examination centre. The tuition fee does not include the examination fee.

### *Assessment for grade 10*

The total marks for each subject (course) consists of continuous assessment (CASS) marks plus the examination marks. Learners are expected to complete and submit all the assignments for each subject (course) and the marks awarded to the assignments count towards the CASS mark. Learners who do not submit any assignments receive an 'incomplete' mark and will not pass the subject. In the English and Afrikaans courses the learners must sit for a fourth examination paper on literature to make up for the lack of school-based assessment of oral work.

### *Assessment for grade 12 (*

No continuous assessment (CASS) mark is required. However, in English the learners have to do oral work that is assessed by trained officials in each region. The learners are strongly advised to complete and submit all the assignments that are set for each subject (course). The assignments are evaluated by tutors and tutor markers and learners receive valuable guidance intended to help them to be successful in their studies.

## **Concluding comments**

NAMCOL is offering thousands of learners in Namibia access to secondary education and through this improving their chances to embark on further and tertiary level education and training programmes. The aim of all this is to enable learners to achieve the qualifications they need to make a substantial contribution to the nation's social and economic development. However, access without success would not only dash the hopes and confidence of learners but would also damage the country's capacity building initiatives. NAMCOL is intent on making every effort to ensure that those who enrol are supported so that they can experience success. This is the only cost-effective option.