

CASE STUDY OF THE FURTHER DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION PROGRAMME OFFERED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

The Further Diploma in Education was initiated in 1995 by the Department of Education (Faculty of Education) in association with Applied English Language Studies (Faculty of Arts), Mathematics, Chemistry, Botany and Zoology (Faculty of Science) at the University of the Witwatersrand. The purpose of the programme is to provide practising teachers with subject and subject teaching knowledge and skills over two years, part-time.

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The programme is aimed at secondary and senior primary teachers who have a Std 10 certificate and three year teaching qualification (M+3). In addition, the programme accepts NGO facilitators and teachers with higher qualifications who similarly wish to specialise in either Mathematics, Science or English. After the Diploma, students who have done well can move into a Bachelor of Education Honours degree, without first having to complete a degree. Over 50 % of the first cohort of teachers enrolled for the flexible learning B Ed at Wits were students who had previously completed the Wits FDE.

The Further Diploma in Education specializing in Mathematics, Science or English Language Teaching was launched with 141 students in February 1996. Each year since then, the new enrolments have been in the region of 110 students. At any one time there have been up to 260 teachers on the programme (all years).

The programme embraces an open learning philosophy and uses distance learning methods together with face to face sessions. Within the programme, there is a chronological sequencing of courses, designed to be completed over two years. In addition to materials and 'homestudy' sessions, there are four residential sessions of four days each in the first year and three sessions in the second. There are also two one-day workshops during the two-year period, in May and February respectively. The programme is therefore described as mixed mode - distance materials, combined with residential workshops, some tutor/lecturer support between workshops, teaching on assignments and collaborative learning with study partners. Mixed mode delivery allows students not resident in Gauteng to participate in the programme, and currently students are enrolled from Northern Province, KwaZulu Natal, Mpumalanga, Free State, North West Province and Eastern Cape.

The programme was conceived during the period in which a national Audit was of teacher education being conducted in South Africa, and hence was sensitive to many of the problems that beset teacher development programmes, particularly those at a distance. The Audit found that:

- the quality and appropriateness of teacher education courses was very weak in the areas of 'improving [teachers'] practice and enabling them to reflect on their practice';¹

³ SAIDE, 1996, Teacher Education Offered at a Distance in South Africa, Braamfontein: SAIDE and Juta, p. 67

- often institutions regarded teaching practice simply as a form of assessment (and this observation is not peculiar to distance education for teachers) with little, and in some instances, no support given to student teachers; and
- the courses also showed very little understanding of the realities of schools in South Africa and the contexts of teachers. The need to integrate schools in teacher development and recognize them as sites for generating and applying new ideas and practices was missing in most courses.

In response to this, the Wits FDE programme was set up with the following guidelines in mind:

- It is important to integrate school-based activities into teacher development.
- Course materials should be complemented with peer and school-based interaction.
- Courses, activities and assessment must be linked with classroom practice.
- Theory and practice should be integrated.

This translated into the following **programme goals**:

- the development in schools of quality learning and teaching relevant to a changing South Africa;
- the extension of teachers'
 - ⇒ educational knowledge,
 - ⇒ subject knowledge, and
 - ⇒ subject teaching knowledge and skills;
- the development of teachers as competent, reflective professionals within their community;
- the provision of opportunities for teachers to engage in classroom and school-based research;
- the enabling and fostering of collegial and co-operative ways of working among teachers;
- the opening of career paths for teacher through professional development and possible access to further degrees and diplomas.

The goals for the programme as a whole were developed jointly over a period of a month or two in 1995, and all the course co-ordinators work within them, although with slightly different emphases. Periodically (at the beginning every two weeks but now at least five times a year) there are workshops where curriculum issues are discussed with reference to the programme goals.

In terms of **content**, the programme focused both on educational studies and on one of the following three subject specialisations – English, Maths and Science. The educational studies contains courses on the *Contexts of Teaching, Curriculum and Classrooms*, and *Evaluation and Assessment*. In the specialisations, teachers look at the Theory and Practice of Teaching their particular specialisation. Certain of the courses also deal with the content of the subjects. Rather than try to cover all aspects superficially, the course designers have focused on key issues in content and method, and, particularly in the English course, have provided a selection of optional courses for teachers to specialise in areas of particular need or interest.

The main ways in which teachers are **supported** are: course materials, lecturers and tutors, and compulsory residential blocks. Other forms of support include tutorial letters, assignment feedback sheets, telephone, study partners, individual visits to the

university by learners and mid-cycle workshops. The appointment of facilitators to support students at the school level has not been possible because of financial constraints.

The **course materials** were, for the most part designed by lecturers in the academic departments at Wits – in some cases supported by NGOs. These lecturers were also the course coordinators and designed the residential sessions and set the assignments and examinations. An evaluation of the course materials and the teachers' response to them done in the 1998, found that the teachers like the course materials, read them, find them both challenging and relevant to their teaching situation, and use them in their teaching. This was attributed to the following three points:

The first point that needs to be made is that the *programme goals* [are] not only valid, but guide each course in a tangible way. The goals of this programme reflect a concern for the development of quality learning and teaching relevant to a changing South Africa, and each course contributes in a different way to the realization of these goals.

The second point is that the *course content* [is] well-researched and up-to-date. But it [is] also contextualized: students want to see themselves and their own situations in what they read about.

The third point is that the *teaching approach* used in the materials [helps] the students engage with the materials actively in a variety of ways².

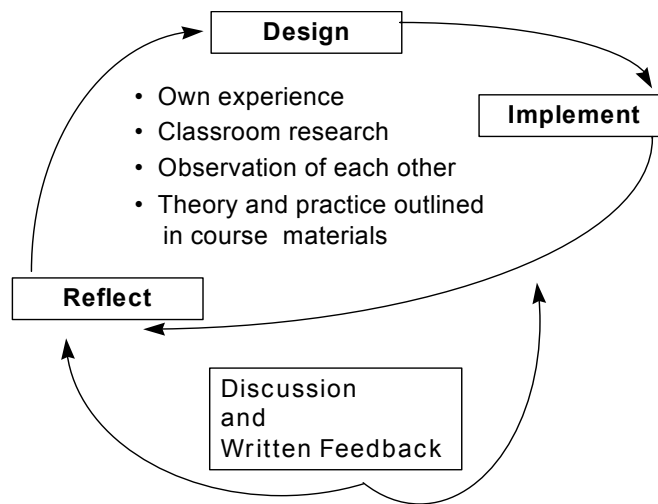
The second notable feature of the programme is the **assessment strategy**. Broadly speaking, consists of the following:

- self-assessment activities
- tutor-marked assignments
- course portfolio
- examination or examination equivalent project.

Each course in the programme has different versions of the above outline, according to the demands of the specific course. According to Wits regulations, the year mark is worth 50% and the exam mark is worth 50%. The exam can be an examination equivalent project.

What is particularly interesting about the assessment strategy is the way the repeated assignments take students through a cycle of design of teaching and learning strategies, implementation of those strategies, reflection and redesign. The following diagram illustrates this cycle:

² SAIDE, 1998, *Strategies for the Design and Delivery of Quality Teacher Education at a Distance: a Case Study of the Further Diploma in Education (English Language Teaching)*, researched for the President's Initiative by the South African Institute for Distance Education.



Even though lecturers and tutors do not visit the teachers in their schools, they design assignments which are clearly classroom-based. What is also evident in this diagram is the role of discussion and written feedback on assignments. The lecturer knows the students very well, and comments rigorously and positively on their performance in each assignment – in time for them to use the comments to improve their performance in the next assignment. The course also asks students to work with each other – observe each other, discuss approaches to assignments together, and support each other in the sometimes very lonely experience of distance study.

The programme had a very good throughput rate – over 90% of originally enrolled students completing the programme. This can be attributed to the firm management of each course by an officially appointed course coordinator, the high quality of the course materials, a policy of extensive detailed feedback on assignments, and use of the residential sessions to help students manage their study as well as to model the kind of practice that was preached in the materials. In addition, the numbers of teachers were small enough for the course coordinators to know and take a personal interest in all the teachers doing their course. Even though lecturers did not visit all teachers in their schools, they conducted research into the impact of their programme. In order to conduct the research they visited the schools and observed teachers in their classrooms. This growing understanding of the contexts in which their teachers work helped the programme staff to refine the programme in order to meet the needs of the teachers more effectively.

From 1999, the programme was not delivered by Wits, but by an associate college of Wits, Promat College, at two of their centres - in Cullinan (north of Pretoria), and in Pinetown (KwaZulu Natal). The rationale for this was to ensure that this quality programme was offered to larger numbers of teachers than the small Wits staff could handle. However, Wits did not simply abandon the programme once it was handed over. The course coordinators maintained a considerable role in quality assurance – they helped plan residential sessions, helped design the assessment tasks, and moderated all assessment. However, despite these efforts, there has not been a marked increase in the numbers of teachers enrolling for the programme, and there has also been a drop in the throughput rate. The exact reasons for this have not been researched. However, a major contributing factor must be the fact that Promat, a non-

governmental organisation relying on external funding, is having difficulties securing enough funding to continue as before.

There is no doubt that this programme is achieving its goals, albeit for relatively low numbers of teachers. However, the university still faces the challenge of finding practical ways to take this and its other flexible teacher education programmes to scale, without loss of quality.