BACKGROUND PAPER 4b

Minimum Targets for Distance Education in South Africa - 2003

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The Ministry of Education is concerned about the number of poor quality distance education programmes that exist in higher education, especially those that are large scale, and has charged the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as the responsible body to take firm measures to ensure that the quality in these programmes is addressed.

The point of this minimum targets document is to provide the Higher Education Quality Committee with a limited but precise set of targets based on current knowledge of poor practice in distance education to be applied rigorously to distance education programmes with a view to accreditation, conditional accreditation or de-accreditation.

The rationale for this is as follows. A good set of quality criteria is necessary to develop an understanding of what distance education is and how it should be done. However, often a comprehensive set of quality criteria/standards is overwhelming - the standards are too comprehensive (and may even be too high, given contextual constraints), and so there is a tendency either to ignore them or to pay lip service to them. Because they are too all embracing, bad practice which is remediable might well escape attention. It is therefore helpful to identify particular areas of bad practice in the current context, identify the criteria/standards that relate to them, and then develop specific minimum targets which should be attained by all programmes. In the implementation of the minimum targets particularly in the application of minimum targets to programmes with a particular focus (such as teacher education, or commerce), the accreditation team may need to adjust the targets to make them appropriate for the particular programme type or focus more attention on some of the minimum targets than others. In addition, in subsequent rounds of accreditation, the team may choose to raise the level of the targets, or even introduce new areas of focus.

The role of minimum targets derived from examples of bad practice is to give precise indications of how to reduce bad practice in particular aspects of educational provision, rather than to give a complete description of good practice. The targets are usually predominantly quantitative, rather than qualitative. Clearly, attainment of minimum targets will not by itself lead to good practice, which is by its very nature open-ended, innovative, and responsive. Hence, this document should be read together with the comprehensive set of criteria for quality distance education developed for the National Association of Distance Education Organizations of South Africa (Nadeosa), *Criteria for Quality Distance Education in South Africa - 2003*. This longer document provides a comprehensive set of criteria/standards for good practice in distance education.

The examples of bad practice contained in this document are derived from research for the Council on Higher Education's Distance Education Task Team, as well as consultation with distance education stakeholders through Nadeosa (National Association of Distance Education Organisations of South Africa), as well as the experience of

SAIDE in evaluation and support of distance education programmes over a number of years.

ORGANIZATION OF DOCUMENT

The minimum targets (derived from an understanding of current bad practice) should be seen in terms of standards for good practice in distance education. Hence, for each aspect of bad practice identified, the standard for good practice is presented, drawn from the document, *Criteria for Quality Distance Education in South Africa - 2003*. Then follows a description the problem that manifests in the bad practice, so that there is some basis for setting the minimum target. Finally, in addition to the minimum target, there is a statement of the evidence that could be investigated to form a judgement on whether or not the target has been reached.

The examples of bad practice, the description of the problem, together with the relevant criterion/standard and the minimum target/s are organised into the categories below. These, taken together, are the main systems in terms of which distance education provision is organised:
- Staffing
- Programme development
- Course design and course materials development
- Assessment
- Course delivery and learner support
- Programme monitoring and evaluation
- Finances/planning

MINIMUM TARGETS

The following standard (from *Criteria for Quality Distance Education in South Africa*) applies to all providers offering distance education programmes.

> *Prior to offering programmes of study by distance education, the provider has explicitly designed systems for administering and teaching learners at a distance and has planned for contingencies in order to meet its stated aims in terms of academic quality and standards.*

The systems that need to be designed (or adjusted) for distance education are the main categories in this document:

- Staffing
- Programme development
- Course design and course materials development
- Assessment
- Course delivery and learner support
- Programme monitoring and evaluation
- Finances/planning

[Note that administration and management issues have not been dealt with separately, but have been integrated into staffing, course delivery and learner support.]

STAFFING

Course coordinators responsible for too many courses/students

Relevant standard

Numbers of learners enrolled on a programme do not exceed the capacity of the staff and the administrative infrastructure to provide for learner support and assessment needs in terms of the criteria in this document.

Description of problem

There is an underestimation of the amount of work that is involved for academic/course coordinators in supervising materials development, assessment design, tutor training, monitoring and support, quality management of assessment, response to student queries, and processes for monitoring and review. At some distance education institutions, academic staff is responsible for the coordination of between five and ten courses. This means that their time is spent almost entirely on writing of tutorial letters, and they have no time to engage tutors, train and support them, and ensure that their work is up to standard. This effectively means that, although learning centres may be in place, and the facilities exist to employ tutors, time constraints make academic/course coordinators fall back primarily on correspondence methods.

There is also too little recognition of how the workload increases for the numbers of students registered on the programme. If there is to be a tutor: student ratio of 1:30, a course of 1000 students will need about 30 tutors. To train, monitor, and moderate the assessment of these 30 tutors, supervise monitoring and review, and sign off payment is a fair amount of management. Moderation alone would involve looking at about 500 assignments/examinations over a year, which involves 125 hours or 16 days of work. Tutor training would involve 5 days (including preparation), supervision of marking procedures another 5 days, monitoring and review about 15 days, development of tutorial and assessment material about 15 days, admin for tutors about 10 days, and response to student queries, about 30 days (15 minutes per student per annum). This is a total of 101 days. If, in addition, course coordinators are required to tutor students on the programme themselves, then a further 40 days could be added. Presumably the academic staff member needs some time for his or her own research, participation in faculty affairs, and participation in the wider educational community. If about 30 days are allocated for this, then the coordination of one course is a full-time job of about 170 days per annum.

Minimum targets

- The job description for course coordinators lists roles and responsibilities as well as an estimate of the amount of time to be spent on each aspect of the coordinators' work.
- The programme has strategies for scaling up and down the number of course coordinators when numbers of learners increase or decrease.

Evidence

- Contracts/job descriptions of course coordinators
- Agreed norms for numbers of course coordinators needed per number of enrolments based on the course design and the quantified job descriptions of the course coordinators.

Inadequate systems for appointment/payment of part-time tutors

Relevant standard

> *Arrangements are in place for the proper recruitment, training, monitoring and payment of the necessary part-time and contract staff.*

Description of problem

In many predominantly face-to-face providers, the systems are lacking to appoint and pay short term part-time staff. This creates problems for programmes that require the hiring and payment of tutors for weekend contact sessions and/or marking of scripts. A decentralised learner support system is impossible without the ability to appoint such tutors in flexible ways, and if tutors are not paid promptly, the provider will not be able to retain them. This usually means that the programme staff, rather than the HR department of the institution need to manage the contracts and the payment.

Minimum target

- Contracts for part-time tutors are possible for periods of shorter than 12 months (potentially as short as a single day), and for working hours that are clearly part time. Contracts outline clear deliverables and a process for payment.

Evidence

- Contracts/job descriptions for part-time tutors.

Inadequate administrative support

Relevant standard

> *The educational provider employs sufficient administrative and technical staff to handle the specialized tasks of registry, despatch, management of assignments, administrative support, as well as technical support to learners and staff with required IT hardware and software.*

Description of problem

Distance education programmes typically require more administrative support than face-to-face systems. Staff are needed, for example, for decentralised registration of students; materials production and despatch maintenance of information management systems; administration of decentralised contact sessions; and assignment management (receiving, opening, sorting, distributing for marking, entering marks, returning). The international norm for dedicated distance education institutions is one administrative staff member for each full-time academic staff member. In South Africa, this may be over-ambitious. But

there is a need for increased administrative support. This could be in the form of full-time appointments, but part-time or sub-contracted support can be brought in to scale up capacity at critical times - for example, when assignments need to be sorted or materials despatched.

Minimum target

- For programmes with student numbers of 500 or above, the ratio of administrative to full-time academic staff should be one to two.

Evidence

- Staff lists
- Contracts for part-time administrative assistance
- Sets of administrative procedures for key distance education functions - registration, assignment management, examinations, production and despatch.

PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

Inadequate information on target audience

Relevant standards

The provider has developed a learner profile that identifies the characteristics and situation of students projected to study through distance education. This profile should include:
- *demographic factors - for example, age, gender, geographic location, and occupation/employment;*
- *language profiles - including language ability in main language of teaching and learning, language background, and multilingual language ability;*
- *motivation for learning - for example, for career purposes or personal interest;*
- *educational background/learning experience - for example, prior learning and experience, prior qualifications, experience of distance learning, learning skills and styles, and language background;*
- *special needs - for example, barriers to learning, physical handicaps or learning difficulties;*
- *resource factors - for example, financial resources, place of learning, times available for learning, access to electricity, access to media and technologies;*
- *experience and knowledge of technology; and*
- *success rates of past and present learners.*

The course is developed with the needs, knowledge and experience of the target learners in mind.

Description of problem

Analysis of the needs of the target audience and collection, maintenance and use of learner information is critical in distance education. Because the learners are not very

often met face-to-face, an extra effort needs to be made to understand the varying contexts and needs of the learners. If learner profiles are not known, the programme and course cannot be designed with needs, knowledge and experience of the learners in mind. This results in unnecessary drop-out.

Minimum targets

- Learner profiles are analyzed and the implications for course and programme design are drawn out.

Evidence

A learner profile containing at least the following:
- demographic factors - age, gender, geographic location;
- full contact details;
- educational background/learning experience - prior qualifications, experience of distance learning, and language background;
- current employment information;
  and, when electronic learning methods are to be used:
- experience and knowledge of the technology required for the programme.

Length and complexity of programmes do not justify credit rating

Relevant standard

> *The amount and complexity of work required to complete the course merits the credits which it has been allocated. This also applies to the assessment for recognition of prior learning and experience.*

Description of problem

Because of the fact that the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has asserted that it is the credits rather than the duration of the programme that determines whether or not a qualification can be awarded, some providers have been claiming that part-time/working students can be awarded qualifications in periods that are exactly the same as if the students were studying full-time; for example, a 360 credit first degree in three years part time[1]. The NQF has provided a rule of thumb that each credit is equivalent to 10 notional learning hours. However, this is often ignored - more students will generally be attracted to programmes that appear to offer more for less time and money. In addition, if the provider offers a programme in less time, delivery costs will be reduced considerably.

There are norms for the number of credits that can, under normal circumstances, be earned in a single year of part-time distance education study. International norms state that a part-time distance education student can be expected to work 12 to 15 hours a week on a distance education programme for approximately 40 weeks per year - a total of 600 notional learning hours. This includes time for independent study from course materials, time spent participating in contact sessions or practicals, and time spent on assessment. If

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[1] There are increasing numbers of full-time distance education students at dedicated distance education institutions such as Unisa, and so of course this issue will not apply to them.

students are expected to do more than this in a single year, then either the course is overloaded, or the amount of work required is insufficient to merit the credits awarded.

Minimum target

- If programmes are directed at employed and/or part-time students, the programme plans for students to earn between 60 to 72 credits in a single year[2].
- If there are thorough processes for recognition of prior learning that allow for students to be assessed to achieve credit for part of the programme, then the number of credits per annum could be increased to between 80 and 90 credits.
- In the case of full-time distance students, the norms for face-to-face programmes apply.

Evidence

- Programme description specifying credits and minimum period of time in which these can be attained
- Course design for different courses in the programme with elements quantified (i.e. notional learning hours on independent learning, assessment, and other teaching and learning strategies such as contact sessions).

Level of programme below NQF level of the qualification to which it leads

Relevant standard

> The level of challenge of the assessment in a programme is appropriate for the level of the qualification to which it leads.

Description of problem

In a number of programmes, good pass rates are achieved not because the teaching and support is good, but because the learning and assessment demands are low; for example, an Honours level programme requiring mainly rote learning or the mastery of a single textbook. If the courses on a programme have good pass rates not because the teaching and support is good, but because the learning and assessment demands are below the acceptable level for the qualification to which the programme leads, there is clearly a problem. The only evidence currently that is regularly available to judge level are external moderator's reports. As the requirements of the HEQC take effect, there should also be reports from benchmarking processes. Level needs to be assessed by peer experts in the relevant discipline/field.

Minimum target

- External moderator's reports on all the exit level courses in a programme confirm that the demands of the programme are appropriate for the NQF level of the qualification to which the programme leads.

Evidence

Reports of external moderators.

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[2] In other words, between 600 and 720 notional hours of learning

COURSE DESIGN AND COURSE MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

Incoherent courses with disorganized learning packages

Relevant standard

> *For each course, there is a publicly accessible and learner friendly description of the aims and learning outcomes; entry level skills, knowledge and experience; credit rating and/or notional hours of learning; target learners; teaching and learning strategies; content outline; items in the learning package (including elements such as study guides, textbooks, tutorial letters, audiotapes and videotapes and so on); assessment strategy; and a year plan containing key dates for learners.*

Description of problem

In many courses, there is little attempt to explain the different elements of the course and provide learners with a guide to the different components of the course material. Learners are not advised even about the sequence in which they should study the courses on the programme. Sometimes learners receive incomplete sets of course materials, receive them in the incorrect order, or too late to make use of them for the purposes of assessment.

Minimum targets

- For each course, there is a learner friendly course guide describing at least the following:
  - Purpose and overall outcomes
  - Target learners
  - Synopsis of content of modules/units
  - Teaching and learning strategies
  - Year plan with key dates for learners
  - Assessment strategy (formative and summative assessment, with weighting of various components and due dates).
- For each course, learners receive a list of the components of the course material/course pack/learning package (consisting for example, of course guide, study guide, tutorial letters, textbook/readings, and assessment guide). It is clear from the covers/labels what each component is and how it fits into the course as a whole.

Evidence

- Course guides
- Lists of contents of course packs/learning packages
- Course packs/learning packages.

Insufficient lead time/financing for course materials development

Relevant standard

> *The development of course material is based on a project plan which describes, for example, finances and other resources, the delegation of responsibility among those involved, and an adequate time schedule for the work.*

Description of problem

Since materials need to be ready at the beginning of a course/programme, lead time and upfront financing are needed not only for developing and evaluating course materials, but also for producing and distributing them. Internationally, norms for materials development are between 10 and 100 hours for every hour of student learning. In South Africa, most course writers (often without any staff development) are expected to produce materials at a rate of below one hour for every hour of student learning. International experience illustrates unequivocally that it is impossible to produce materials of even reasonable educational quality with such a small investment of time. It is not only the materials writing person hours that should be considered in course materials development. Planning, writing, critical reading, developmental testing, layout, editing, proofing, production - these processes cannot be done simultaneously.

Minimum target

The budget and course materials development plan for a programme allows
- a development time of at least five hours for each hour of student time (inclusive of planning, writing, critical reading, developmental testing, layout, editing, proofing, production)
- a minimum lead time of between nine months and one year.

Evidence

Course materials development plan with budget.

Materials out-of-date

Relevant standard

> *The materials are periodically reviewed in the light of ongoing feedback from learners and tutors and advances in knowledge and research.*

Description of problem

Because of the difficulties of revision of printed/published course materials, often courses are used for too long and are not updated. They often have reference lists where the most recent references are from the 1980s. Aside from changes in the discipline/field, the courses often do not even reflect changes in the world (for example, there are Geography textbooks that still refer to East and West Berlin). There are no standardised procedures or timelines for curriculum and course review.

Minimum target

Courses
- are reviewed every three years with a view to amendment/updating, and
- evaluated every five years with a view to discontinuance or major revision.

Evidence

- Course materials with reference lists that reflect recent sources (i.e. within the last five years)
- Plans for course review.

ASSESSMENT

Absence or inadequacy of formative assessment

Relevant standards

> *Assessment is recognised as a key motivator of learning and an integral part of the teaching and learning process. It is used to inform teaching practice and improve the curriculum.*

> *There are a range of formative and summative assessment tasks and methods which ensure that all learning outcomes are validly assessed.*

> *There are clear procedures to receive, record, process, and turn around assignments within a timeframe that allows learners to benefit from formative feedback prior to the submission of further assessment tasks.*

Description of problem

Although it is key to any educational programme, in distance education formative assessment is crucial. This is because students with limited time often engage with materials mainly or only in relation to tasks set for assessment. However, many distance education courses do not provide opportunities for formative assessment. Absence of formative assessment denies students what is often the only opportunity to get individualised feedback on their work. Furthermore, if formative assessment does not contribute to the final mark, then the motivation for students to do the tasks diminishes - it must be remembered that distance education students are usually fitting their study into already full lives, and if an activity is not compulsory, there is the tendency to overlook it. The following indicates some of the varieties of less than satisfactory assessment practice in South African programmes at the moment:

- There are assignments, but they are not compulsory and do not count for the year mark. Only the examination mark counts.
- There are assignments, but, though compulsory, they are not marked individually. Students mark their own assignment against generic tutorial letters/answer sheets. However, it is only if students submit the assignment that they are given entry to the examination.
- There is one assignment, and it is marked and feedback provided to the student, but the assignment does not count towards the final mark. Only the examination counts.

Minimum targets

- At least 15% of the notional learning hours of a course[3] is allocated to student preparation of formative assessment task(s).
- Individualised feedback on the task(s) reaches the student before s/he prepares for the summative assessment.

The formative assessment contributes at least 25% of the student's final mark.

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[3] This means just under 20 hours in a course consisting of 120 notional learning hours. Depending on the nature of the course, this 20 hours could be allocated to a single task or be distributed across a number of smaller tasks.

Evidence
- Records of student performance itemising formative and summative assessments with marks
- Assessment strategy.

Inadequate quality assurance of tutor marking

Relevant standard

> *Where part-time tutors are involved in assessment, they are trained for the task, and academic staff monitor and moderate both formative and summative assessment to promote reliability and fairness.*

> *Marking procedures for both formative and summative assessment ensure consistency and accuracy of marking and grading, and the provision of helpful feedback to learners.*

Description of problem

Because of large numbers of students on some distance education programmes, academic staff often delegate the marking of assignments to tutors, and do not maintain sufficient control of standards. Even with experienced staff, there is great variability in the approach to marking, but with large numbers of students, and part-time staff, there is an even greater chance of variability. Best practice in the standardization of tutor marking characteristically involves organizing marking sessions for each assignment in which course coordinators assist groups of tutors to work collectively through a number of assignments to work out a common approach to grading and to ways of responding to common problems. These marking sessions also provide an opportunity for internal moderation, usually by course coordinators. Marking sessions also tend to improve turnaround time as much of marking is done in the sessions, and it is easier to control how long the rest of the marking takes.

Minimum target

The marking procedures include
- a process for standardizing grading and the provision of feedback prior to the assignments and examinations actually being marked
- internal moderation of at least 10% of the scripts.

Evidence
- Outline of procedures for standardising marking with schedules
- Reports of internal moderators.

COURSE DELIVERY AND LEARNER SUPPORT

Materials not delivered on time/ failure of electronic delivery systems

> *The production and delivery of course materials is fast, accurate, and reliable. Where existing systems prove inefficient, creative alternatives are found.*

> *There are emergency methods of communication for use in the event of a failure of the primary channel of communication, and these are fail-safe.*

Description of problem

In a distance education programme in which the main means of communication of the curriculum is the course materials, it is only when students receive the materials that they can start learning. Failure to produce and despatch the materials on time is non-delivery of the programme.

If programmes use sophisticated technology - satellite broadcasts, video-conferencing, or the internet for online discussions - the teaching and learning is dependent on ensuring connectivity i.e. that the technical infrastructure facilitating the delivery is functional - ISDN lines, electricity, internet service provider connections. If there are technical problems, the teaching and learning does not happen - it is just the same as if no course materials had been delivered.

Minimum targets

- Students receive the printed/published materials for the module (or unit) of their course within the first week of the official start of the module/unit.
- When electronic delivery methods are used (TV, video-conferencing, internet online discussions), connectivity is assured 90% of the time.

Evidence

- Learner feedback on course delivery
- Year plans indicating period(s) during which course is offered
- Monitoring reports.

Contact sessions not integrated into course design - extra payment required

Relevant standard

> *There are sufficient contact sessions to ensure that the learners are able to achieve the outcomes of the course. These contact sessions are integrated into the course design, rather than being an add-on extra.*

Description of problem

There appears to be a lack of understanding of the particular character of learner support in distance education programmes. In distance education learner support is not simply individual counselling, or administrative support. It is not like the academic development that is offered to certain groups of students at predominantly face-to-face institutions. It is support for every student, directly affects the success of the student on the course, and is part of the teaching and learning on the course. It is more like the official lecture programme at face-to-face institutions - a recognised element of the curriculum. However, in many DE programmes in the country, this kind of learner support is not built into design of course, but students do it as an optional extra, very often for an additional fee. What should happen is that whatever is needed to help learners achieve the outcomes

of the course needs to be included in the course fee and integrated into the course design. Contact sessions/tutorials can, of course be conducted with the use of various forms of technology, rather than requiring tutors to meet learners face-to-face. They can be individual tutorials or group tutorials. The point being made is that academic learner support initiated by the provider, rather than by the learner (i.e. a scheduled and costed teaching and learning strategy) should be integrated into the course design.

Academic learner support characteristically takes the form of contact sessions or tutorials that enable distance education students to meet each other, and be guided by tutors as they work through the course materials. However, in many distance education programmes, this is interpreted in a limited way - lecturers travel round the country close to the exams and have two hour examination preparation sessions. This is clearly insufficient for it to be of real help to the students as they work through the materials and the formative assessment tasks.

Minimum target

- At least 10% of the notional learning hours of a course are devoted to providing contact sessions[4] for students.
- Students are not charged extra for the scheduled contact sessions.

Evidence

- Year plan indicating contact sessions/tutorials, with specifications of the kind of work students need to do in between and at the contact sessions
- Fee schedules with information on what services the fees cover
- Learner support policy documents, if available.

Tutorial/contact session groups too large for real two-way interaction

Relevant standards

> *Learners are encouraged to create and participate in 'communities of learning' in which the individual learner thinks and solves problems with others engaged in similar tasks. This is facilitated through a range of learner support mechanisms - peer support sessions, tutorials/contact sessions, teaching on assignments, support in the workplace (mentoring), email and internet communications, and so on.*

> *The tutor/learner ratio is sufficiently small to enable tutors to know their learners as individuals, be able to support them in their study and monitor their progress.*

Description of problem

In a number of distance education programmes in the country, contact sessions take the form of lectures to large numbers of students at a central venue. Typically in this approach, lecturers from the central campus go on a tour of the main learning centres around the country and have one or two hours at each centre with 50 or a 100 students. The two hours are usually focused on 'examination preparation'. In these kinds of

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[4] These may be virtual or face-to-face.

sessions, although students can ask questions, there is very little opportunity for real interaction. In such a large group students don't get to know each other or the lecturer, and students are faceless and nameless to the lecturer. Clearly in such a situation, the main aim of learner support - the development of communities of learning in which the individual learner thinks and solves problems with others engaged in similar tasks - cannot be achieved.

Minimum targets

Whether for face-to-face or online support
- The tutor/student ratio for tutorial groups is no larger than 1:35.
- A tutor has to teach and mark the work of no more than two such groups in a single course.

Evidence

Class lists indicating the responsible tutor
Job descriptions and contracts for tutors.

Telephone support not available at times appropriate for target audience

Relevant standard

> *There are opportunities for individual academic support for learners either by telephone, by appointment, or online.*

Description of problem

Often, although providers claim that they offer telephone support for learners, on further investigation, it is clear that the times at which it is offered make it almost impossible for the target learners to access it. For example, in many in-service teacher education programmes, the telephone consultation times are 8h00 to 15h00 on weekdays. This is exactly the time that teachers are occupied at school and cannot take advantage of the service. This is particularly problematic if the telephone support is the only way in which the learners can contact the provider.

Minimum target

- Arrangements are made so that learners can contact the provider telephonically at times convenient to the learner.

Evidence

- Student evaluations of accessibility of telephone support
- Information in programme and course guides of times at which telephone support is available.

PROGRAMME MONITORING AND EVALUATION

No means to determine inactive students

Relevant standard

Records of course results and other management information can be analyzed to

- *Give completion rates for each group of learners*
- *Identify at risk learners*
  Identify inactive learners.

Description of problem

It is relatively easy to present inflated student numbers for distance education programmes, if it is only registration information that is used. Students can be registered but dormant in every other way and not costing the provider any money to service. There need to be ways to determine whether or not they are active; for example, by submission of assignments or participation in contact sessions. Otherwise, accepting a subsidy for these students, or using the numbers to advertise the popularity of the programme, is dishonest.

Minimum target

For all students registered on the programme, there are records of
- attendance at contact sessions/tutorials/practicals (where appropriate), and/or
- submission of formative assessment.

Evidence

An information management system that provides
- information of student attendance at contact sessions/tutorials/practicals/other teaching and learning events, and
- student performance in formative and summative assessment.

Monitoring not done or acted on

Relevant standards

> *The provider engages in benchmarking and uses appropriate monitoring and evaluation techniques to gather and analyse data to use as a basis for setting priorities and planning for quality improvement.*

> *There are demonstrable processes and ongoing efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning according to priorities identified in through monitoring and evaluation processes.*

Description of problem

There is far too little investment of either time or resources in monitoring of programmes. This is an issue for all programmes, whether face-to-face or not. But it is more critical in distance education: the increased complexity of the systems and the remoteness of the

learners from the centre mean that it is difficult to pick up informally when things are not happening. Formal monitoring systems have to be developed to provide information to the management at the centre, so that action can be taken before it is too late. There are customarily three problems with monitoring systems:

- the plans for monitoring are overambitious - too much information is collected, and the nature of the information is difficult to analyse;
- data is collected but never analysed and reported on;
- no action is taken on the basis of the reports.

Minimum targets

There is analysed monitoring information about

> Tutor performance (including, where appropriate, attendance)
> Learner attendance (where appropriate)
> Learner performance
> Successful despatch of materials.

- There are analysed reports of learner feedback and, where relevant, stakeholder feedback on courses.
- Monitoring reports/learner feedback are considered in management/curriculum meetings and action taken to adjust processes accordingly.

Evidence

- Monitoring reports
- Management information
- Action plans/ minutes of meetings reflecting changes as a result of monitoring

Throughput rates low

> *Sufficient numbers of learners complete the individual programmes and courses successfully to justify the cost in time and personpower for the design of the programmes, courses and learner support system. Pass, throughput and retention rates are monitored.*

Description of problem

Although completion rates (i.e. pass rates on individual courses) are generally relatively unproblematic, throughput (the number of originally enrolled students that complete the whole programme successfully) in distance education programmes is generally low. There is a wide range of throughput rates on distance education programmes - the research done for the CHE Distance Education Task Team showed a variation of 5.4% to 85%. Low throughput rates are predominantly but not exclusively in longer programmes (degree programmes), and in 'difficult' programmes such as a Bachelor of Science. There is an argument for being lenient on distance education programmes with regard to throughput rate - the opportunities for flexibility, taking individual courses rather than the whole programme, for 'interest', and the strains of part-time study could account for higher drop-out rates than are customary in full-time study. However, a number of other factors could also be responsible for low throughput, including:

- Inadequate learner support

- Admissions policies that are too open, allowing access to programmes to students without the necessary background to succeed in them
- Course materials that do not teach properly
- Insufficient formative assessment and/or little feedback on assessment.
- It is the responsibility of programme staff to ensure that appropriate students are admitted onto programmes, and that the teaching, learning, assessment and support systems are good enough to provide those students with a reasonable chance of success.

This is important, not only from the point of view of the students, but also from the point of view of cost effectiveness of the programme. To take a hypothetical example: if the purpose of the programme is to add to the pool of Science graduates in the country, and R2 million is budgeted for the delivery of a programme to achieve this purpose for 200 potential graduates, then R10 000 is being spent on each graduate. If only 5% of initial intake graduates, then the cost per successful student rises to R100 000, which is clearly unaffordable.

Minimum target

[The Department of Education needs to provide relevant throughput rates here on the basis of their funding formula]

Evidence

- Throughput rates for the programme over two or three cohorts of students (for a distance education programme, the time period over which to judge throughput rate should be 3 years for every 1 year of full-time study)
- Costs per successful student and costs per registered student.

FINANCES/PLANNING

Inappropriate levels of cross-subsidization

Relevant standards[5]

> *Programme planning and budgeting are aligned, with potential income clearly identified, and appropriate levels of resource set aside for course design and development, for administrative systems and for supporting learners.*

> *Proper evaluation systems are in place to compare estimated goals and budgets with actual achievements.*

Description of problem

Research into the costing of large scale distance education programmes indicates that when student numbers are 500 or above, it begins to be possible to run such programmes on student fees alone combined with reduced subsidies from government even where

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[5] In each case, the relevant standard is drawn from the *Criteria for Quality Distance Education in South Africa - 2003*. The numbering of the original document has been retained for ease of reference.

there is substantial learner support provided. This makes it possible for these programmes to cross-subsidize other programmes. Although some cross-subsidization across programmes may be necessary in order to achieve the provider's mission, often the provider makes no investment at all in the improvement of quality of the large scale programmes. This is problematic because the students paying the fees do not get the benefit of their investment. There is a need for programme based budgeting with regular financial reporting so that resources can be tracked and a reasonable proportion used for quality improvement for the students whose fees are paying for the programme.

Minimum target

- The programme budget should include allocations for course design, assessment management, contact sessions (or other teaching and learning strategies), monitoring, and adequate academic, administrative and part-time tutoring staff to ensure that the other minimum targets in this document are met.
- This budget should account fully for all income received by the programme.
- If funds from any of the courses in the programme have been used for institutional cross-subsidization, the institution needs to justify why the money has been spent elsewhere rather than on the further improvement of the programme from which the money has been generated.

Evidence

- A budget for the programme with at least one financial report on expenditure against budget per annum.
  The budget should contain at least the following:
  - Fee income as well as subsidy
  - Advertising/marketing
  - Course materials purchase/printing (course guides, study material, as well as tutorial letters and assessment information)
  - Course design (course materials development or adaptation, assessment design, design of teaching and learning strategies such as contact sessions)
  - Staff costs (full time as well as part time)
  - Full-time: for eg programme manager, course coordinators, administrative assistants
  - Part time, in which amount payable is dependent on
    - Marking
    - Teaching load
  - Tutor training
  - Assessment
  - Teaching and learning strategies eg contact sessions
  - Contribution by programme to organizational overheads
  - Monitoring and evaluation (unless included under the other headings).