1 DOCUMENT 1

Three scenarios for teacher education offered at a distance

In the mid 1990s, shortly after the move in South Africa to a government of national reconstruction, an audit of teacher education was carried out. One part of the audit was a study of teacher education at a distance. The authors of the report explored the relationship between distance education and conventional face-to-face college or university provision through an analysis of three possible scenarios. The report was critical of the quality of most teacher education through open and distance learning in South Africa. The juxtaposition of these three scenarios can serve to initiate dialogue on the comparative merits of a new program of ODL in relation to the existing provision.

Possible Futures

This study explores existing distance education in South Africa. Serious problems exist that call for drastic restructuring. In the critical areas for policy decision, three scenarios emerge. The first scenario is one of status quo:

Scenario One: Tinkering with the System

This scenario proposes a status quo position. The few suggested reforms are financial cutbacks and physical resourcing (building new lecture halls and colleges). Some policy work will be done to achieve a system that is cheaper (rather than more cost effective), financially accountable, and administratively efficient. Little change is likely to occur in expensive and difficult areas such as curriculum reform or in politically sensitive ones such as quality assurance or college closures and staff retrenchments.

In this scenario, the following are likely to happen:

- Poor-quality courses will drive out high-quality ones as curriculum development and student support are expensive.
- Large providers will force out small providers as large providers benefit from economies of scale.

In South Africa, this is likely to kill the little innovation that does exist and allow distance education to continue with minimal student support.

Market-driven education systems tend to encourage competition. In higher education in South Africa, this has definite consequences for quality and equity. There are too few competent writers to produce high-quality courses; too many courses compete for too few students; and new courses of poor quality will appear as institutions compete for students. Prices will be driven down, but so will quality. Moreover, it is likely that the students studying at these "second-rate" providers will be the historically disadvantaged: the poor, rural residents, black Africans, and women.

Distance education will be regarded as the "poor relation" in teacher education. However, distance education will continue to expand as predominantly black African women teachers upgrade qualifications. Because of the poor quality of distance education, there will be little improvement in schools, but the cumulative costs of teachers' salaries will deplete needed funds. The quality of education in South Africa is likely to spiral downward.

Scenario One would be a disaster. Scenario Two conceives of an immediate and drastic restructuring of the distance-education sector.

Scenario Two: Restructuring Teacher Education at a Distance

This scenario proposes an overhaul of the distance-education sector but maintains distance education as a separate sector.

Better courses are produced, small providers collaborate to ensure cost-efficiencies, and more regionally based tutor support is improvised (often using contact colleges as tutorial spaces). However, change in the system is difficult. Old notions about correspondence study are tenacious and, although numbers are large, they are insufficient in asserting distance education as the most important education sector. Tradition dictates that in a system that separates distance and contact study, the latter is seen as the "real" education and the former remains the lesser option. This is exacerbated by the fact that mainly poorer, often black African women, study at a distance while wealthier, urban males take time off to study through contact means.

The problem emerges that important educational aims, such as CPD, are unrealized because of the vested interests of contact colleges and the poor image of distance education. The more effective materials—both print and video—do not enter contact colleges. These institutions then face a scarcity of appropriate texts and inadequate expertise in certain subject areas. Distance-education colleges have largely surmounted these

problems as they rely on courses that are produced by smaller teams and tutored by non-subject specialists.

In a sense, neither sector succeeds. Distance education remains tainted as inferior education but expands because it is cheaper to use. Contact education is regarded as good education but faces various shortages that affect quality and pressurize staff. It is expensive, and is, therefore, contracting. Instead of taking advantage of new technologies that integrate distance and contact education to create a mixed-mode system (with cost, skills, and equity advantages), both sectors in South Africa suffer in different ways.

Although certain temporary measures must occur to save money and time, it is imperative that these facilitate the development of Scenario Three, which proposes an integrated teacher-education system.

Scenario Three: Moving to an Integrated System

Scenario Three proposes a system committed to open learning in which all institutions are re-created as mixed-mode institutions. It requires a systemic overhaul so that resource-based learning becomes the basis of all teacher education, with the provision of targeted contact teaching for skills training.

The system works through a national agency, which enables a network of colleges and sites to cooperate in delivering quality education. Some courses may be run entirely through a nationally developed distance-education center, others may be developed by local cooperatives and shared nationally.

Regional cooperation and national networking is given priority. Most education will be school-based but supported by resources and mentors employed through a local college (or consortium of colleges). The market may be used to select materials, but unproductive competition and duplication will be avoided through the national network and incentives for collaboration.

Rapid developments in digital technologies are exploited to make the system increasingly cost-efficient. The savings enabled by an integrated education system and administrative efficiencies made possible by computer networking persuade the National Department of Education to invest heavily in this type of infrastructural development rather than in building more lecture theatres and colleges. Surprisingly, networking

integrates historically disadvantaged colleges, particularly in rural areas, more effectively than expensive and rigid old development technologies. Because of its commitment to equity and justice, the new system thoroughly researches the implications of new technologies for learning and for inequities in power and wealth in a divided society such as South Africa. It also makes media literacy an important part of new teacher-education curricula.