

# TEACHER UPGRADING THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

C. G. KRUGER

North West University South Africa [owscgk@puk.ac.za](mailto:owscgk@puk.ac.za)

PROF. E. J. SPAMER

North West University South Africa [owsejs@puknet.puk.ac.za](mailto:owsejs@puknet.puk.ac.za)

## ABSTRACT

In 1994, after the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa, there were more than 85,000 teachers in the system who had no tertiary qualifications or were inadequately qualified. Most of these teachers lived in rural areas, and had no access to tertiary institutions. This situation required a unique approach to overcome the problems specific to the demographic and socio-economic circumstances of the country.

The North-West University in South Africa took up the challenge and became involved in the huge task of upgrading the qualifications of these teachers by implementing a distance education programme. A flexi programme has been implemented by the establishment of thirty-two learning centres in locations throughout the country, which are accessible to these students. Full time lecturers and trained part time facilitators offer contact classes twice a month. Vacation schools provide additional learning opportunities. The recruitment and enrolment of students, distribution of study material and other administrative duties are supplied by supporting companies.

Quality control for all these programmes is ensured by benchmarking against the programmes presented on the main campus i.e. B.Ed Hons., ACE and NPDE. Currently more than 17 000 teachers are enrolled in modules presented in the flexi mode and a passing rate of more than 70% attests to the success of the programme.

## Key words:

Teacher; upgrading; distance; education; South Africa;

## 1. The dilemma of education in South Africa before 1994

During the years of apartheid, very few black or coloured teachers had the opportunity to attend tertiary institutions. Often teachers who had barely completed their own secondary education were teaching maths and science to Gr. 12's. In 1994, after the dismantling of apartheid the full extent of the problem became apparent and the Department of Education was left with the following dilemma: more than 85,000 teachers in the system had no tertiary qualifications or were inadequately qualified. The legacy of under- and un-qualified educators, with the lack of competencies in key learning areas, continued to undermine the teaching environment and conditions of service of educators, especially in rural areas. Educators and communities alike were demoralized. Teachers were not being properly remunerated because of their lack of qualifications and parents were becoming more concerned about the poor standard of education in schools.

In 2003 Mr Nelson Mandela expressed his concern about the standard of education in South Africa:

***“There is much work still to be done before our nation and our people achieve the education system that they aspire to and that they deserve”***

10<sup>th</sup> anniversary Gala dinner speech CEPD 2003

## 2. The achievement gap increases

The reasons behind the widening achievement gap between previously advantaged and disadvantaged learners were multi-faceted. With the vast growing black population there was a pressing need for more qualified teachers. To fill this need, even more unqualified black teachers were appointed at schools with the understanding that these teachers should continue with their professional development by doing in-training courses. This situation, aggravated by poor socio-economic reasons resulted in the very low standard of education for these unfortunate learners. Disheartened learners often quit school prematurely and entered the labour force, earning meagre salaries. Very few learners completed Grade 12.

## 3. Factors hampering training of unqualified teachers

Because of long distances and lack of funding, these teachers found it very difficult to attend tertiary institutions and time was running out for the thousands of learners craving for better standards of education in public schools. Most of these teachers lived in rural areas, and had no access to tertiary institutions. Thus the children who were to benefit from the newly established democracy were still disadvantaged as far as their education was concerned.

The situation was no different in the North West Province. Like other tertiary institutions, the North West University (then known as the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education) could accommodate only a small number of students on campus. At that stage prospective teachers completed a teacher's Diploma through the old Potchefstroom Teacher's Training College, which only catered for full-time students. The College did not have the resources to accommodate those thousands of teachers, who were in desperate need of further training.

The Department of Education was faced with huge challenges, which included the need to provide pre-, and in-service education competencies, geared for and adapted to rural contexts. There was a growing gap between the demand for, and the provision of, qualified educators and the demand was growing fast.

#### **4. The North West University rises to the challenge**

After the Northwest University (NWU) identified the problem situation the Faculty of Education Sciences took up the challenge and became involved in the huge task of upgrading the qualifications of these teachers by implementing a distance education programme – aimed at previously disadvantaged teachers. Part of this challenge was to rapidly deliver the training to a large number of teachers with varied levels of previous education and training, and still base this training upon accredited and recognized training systems.

At first on-campus lecturers themselves facilitated the respective programmes. The rural areas in and around the Potchefstroom campus seemed the most obvious starting place for this model of distance education aimed specifically at previously disadvantaged teachers. In 1998 it became clear that the programme should be made available to those thousands of other desperate teachers in a similar situation all over South Africa. Programmes were expanded and implemented by establishing thirty-two learning centres in locations throughout the country, which are accessible to these students.

#### **5. The unique situation required a more specialised approach**

Student numbers increased rapidly: Word about this programme soon reached the many under-qualified teachers throughout South Africa, who were in dire need of professional development. Although many private students enrolled for this model through the NWU, The National Education Department also showed commitment to the improvement of education by awarding bursaries to students to enable them to enrol for the National Professional Diploma and improve their qualifications.

The faculty soon realized that the needs of these prospective students were very different from those students who were studying education full time at Universities and Colleges. As most of these teachers had little or no experience

of tertiary studies, they needed more help more often. Many of these teachers did not have the means to enrol for full time studies at a tertiary institution and since these teachers were employed, full time study was not an option. The need for a more flexible program to provide in the students' educational needs became evident.

## **6. Full time lecturers were appointed for the distance education programme**

As the number of students for these programmes grew, the need arose to appoint staff/lecturers who would be responsible for distance education exclusively. Full time lecturers were appointed in 2004 to run the off-campus programmes of this university. These lecturers were assigned to plan, co-ordinate and deliver the programme and are also responsible for the development of relevant study material and quality control. A flexible program was designed to provide in the educational needs of these teachers, where students could study in their own time within the stipulated time frame, but could still rely on assistance from academic staff whenever necessary.

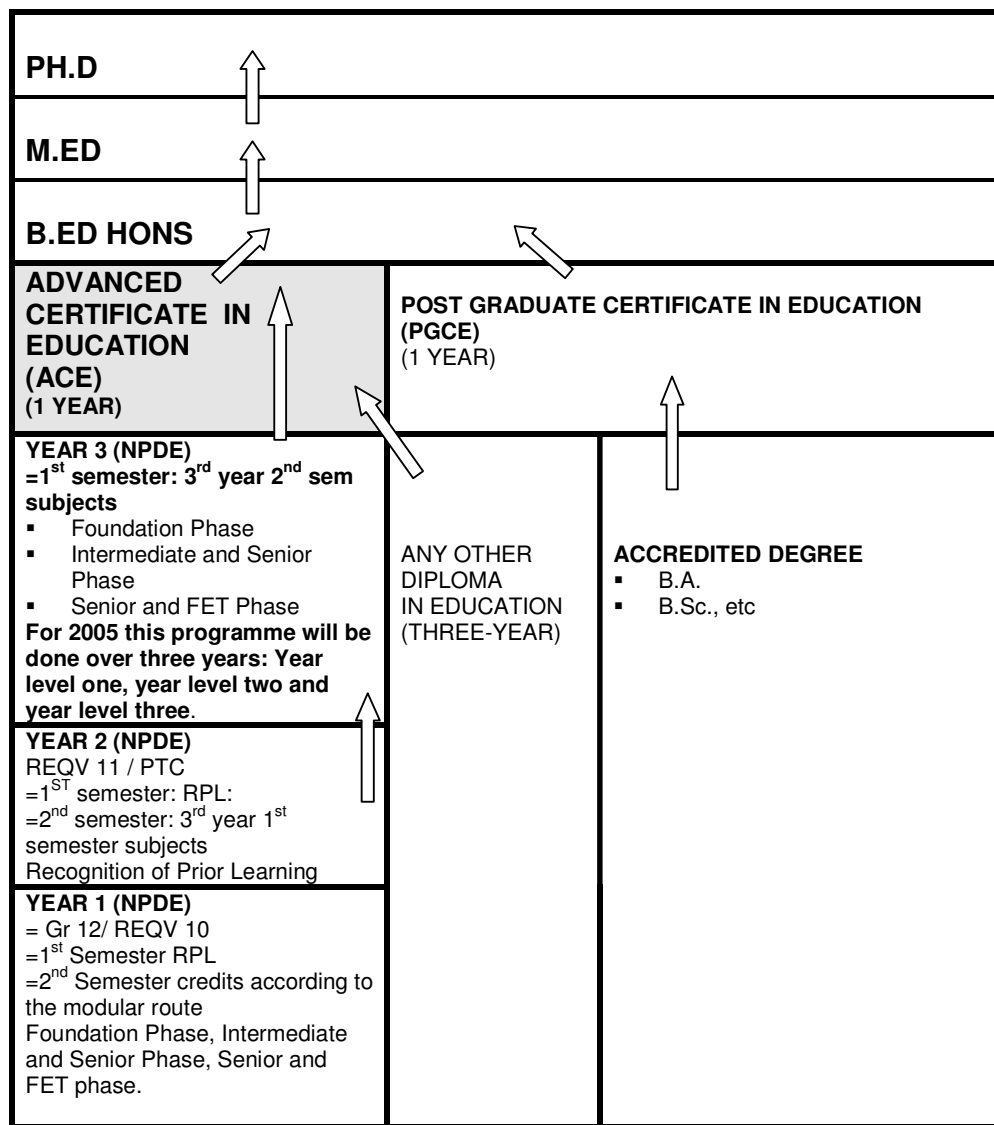
Quality control for all these programmes is ensured by bench marking against the programmes presented on the main campus i.e. B.Ed Hons., Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) and National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE).

### **Programmes offered:**

RPL: recognition of prior learning: As students are employed and have relevant previous experience of the teaching profession, they start by compiling a portfolio as evidence of all prior learning. Should this portfolio provide the necessary proof of teaching skills and professional knowledge, it qualifies the students to progress to the first year of NPDE (NQF level 4)

National Professional Diploma in Education	4 years
Advanced Certificate in Education	2 year
B.Ed.Hons	3 years

## QUALIFICATION STRUCTURE



### 7. Extending programme to rest of the country

At first only six centres within North West Province were established where the programme would be facilitated. So-called “off-campus” lecturers would then go out to these centres on Fridays and Saturdays and sometimes also during the week to facilitate the programmes at the different centres. They assist students in the different modules of the respective programmes by explaining assignments and helping students with academic problems they might have encountered.

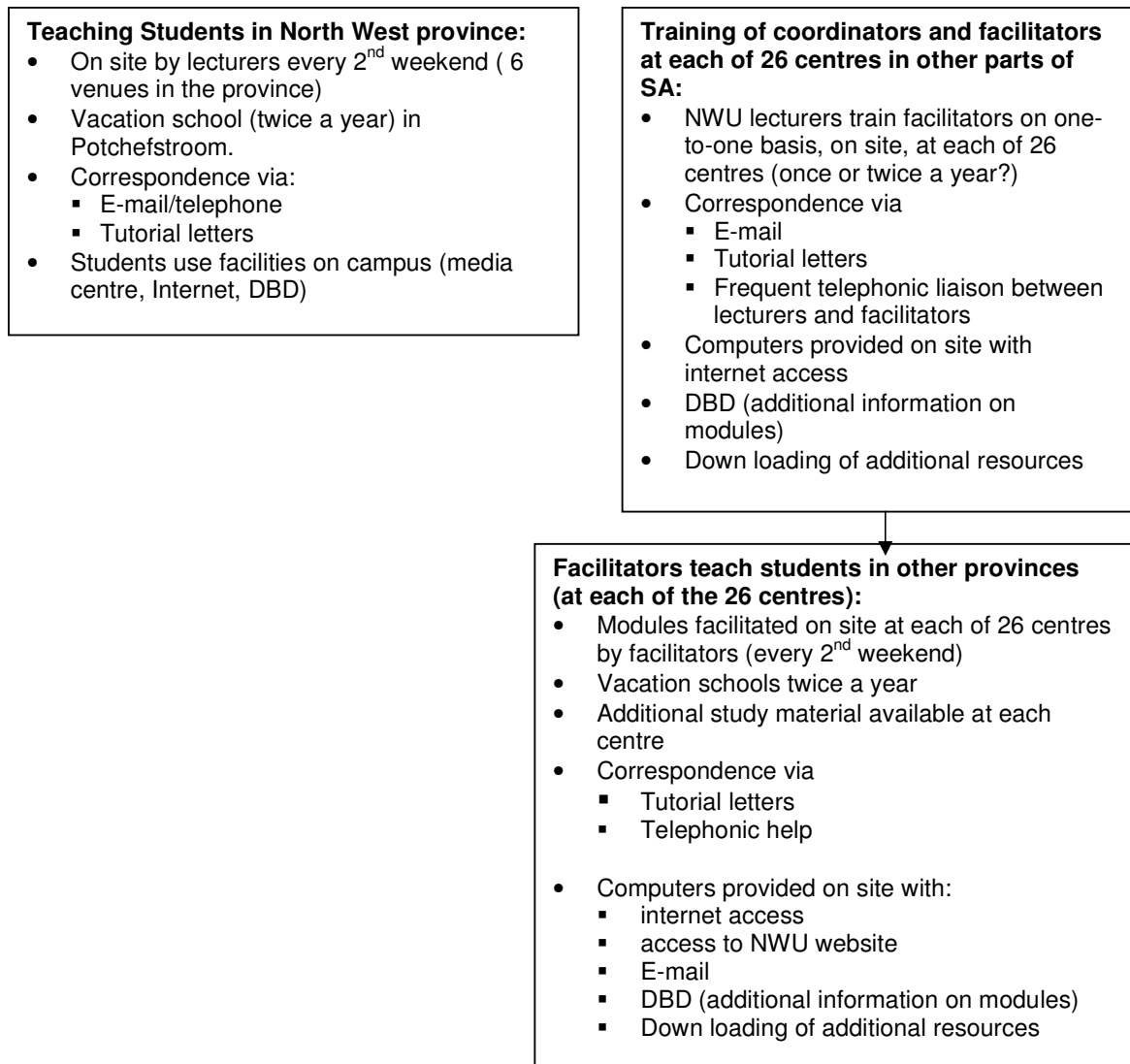
The National Department of Education saw the programme as an ideal way to implement new policy on education and the demand for this type of education grew rapidly. It was deemed necessary to open another 26 centres throughout South Africa during 2004 (see diagram1). At each of these centres a coordinator was appointed as well as between 9 and 12 qualified facilitators who would assist with the facilitation of the respective modules. Many of these centres are situated in far off rural areas, which were selected according to the density of the student population. As 95% of the students are previously disadvantaged and mostly live and work in these rural areas, they could now attend contact sessions at centres nearest to them where modules are facilitated twice a month. Students now also had much easier access to additional resources provided at each centre. Vacation schools facilitated at each centre provide additional learning opportunities.

This programme also proved a convenient way for private students employed in teachers' post or working as teachers' assistants, to attain an approved qualification. South African students currently working abroad, also find the programme very accommodating. Through electronic mail and tele-conferences, they are assisted with problems they may encounter.

#### **8. Roles of co-ordinators and facilitators at each centre**

- Co-ordinators or centre managers ensure the effectiveness of contact sessions at each centre. They manage the centre's facilities, timetables and administration. Co-ordinators report back to the designed person at NWU.
- Facilitators with appropriate qualifications are assigned to facilitate the relevant modules and to give the necessary support to students. It has been found that continuous support and communication is of vital importance. Facilitators are trained and assisted by NWU lecturers responsible for the particular modules. They also receive tutorial letters four times a year from the lecturers regarding academic information, which should be passed on to the students.

## DIAGRAM 1: MODE OF DELIVERY Teaching and training by North West University Lecturers



### 9. The model today:

Currently this university is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest institution involved with training of teachers in South Africa as there are between 17 000 and 18 000 students enrolled in this distance education programme of the university.

## **10. Resource centres and providing facilities for E-learning**

In order to make study material more accessible, a resource centre has been established at each of the centres where material, needed by the students to do the necessary research for assignments, is kept.

Because of the continuing upgrading and revision of study material, the faculty had to think of a better way to keep students informed on a regular basis. E-learning seemed the most likely solution to the problem, but most students had never been introduced to any modern means of communication and did not have access to computers in the area where they work or stay. The faculty is currently in the process of providing each centre with the necessary Internet and e-mail facilities to enable students in the rural areas to have access to the library facilities of the NWU. Consequently communication between students, facilitators and lecturers has become much easier via e-mail. As the course also includes a computer-training course, this step was an absolute necessity.

Digital Book Discs (DBD's) with academic information of each module are available at each centre to enable the student to watch lectures should he/she not be able to attend a contact session. Additional resources like video clips (concerning the respective modules) can also be downloaded at the various centres. By implementing this project we anticipate a much higher passing rate amongst our students. The coordinators and facilitators are also trained on how to help students to use these facilities at each centre.

## **11. The role of supporting companies**

Because of the huge number of students, supporting companies assist with recruitment and enrolment of students, distribution of study material and other administrative duties.

## **12. Critical evaluation: Successes and possible room for improvement**

### **➤ Successes**

During the last 10 years thousands of teachers have acquired their teaching qualifications through the distance education programme of this university. Currently more than 15 000 teachers are enrolled for this distance education model and a passing rate of more than 70% attests to the success of the programme.

The programme is very popular and successful amongst teachers who want to complete or further their qualifications. It enables them to interact with qualified staff regarding their specific academic programmes at any of the different sites without having to travel long distances or take unnecessary study leave, which would disrupt their learners. The very fact that various Provincial Education Departments have allocated contracts to the NWU for the training of



teachers at this institution through distance education illustrates the urgent need for this model.

➤ **Room for improvement**

- As most of the students are from previously disadvantaged groups, they often do not possess effective study methods and technological skills. Courses to train students in these skills are currently being designed.
- Study material is being revised to make all content more user-friendly.

### 13. Our vision

The constitution of South Africa ensures the right of all children to quality education. This implies that every child deserves competent and qualified teachers. Access to high quality schooling is regarded as the cornerstone of a democratic society, which aims to give all citizens a fair start in life and consequently equal opportunities as adults. The NWU is of the opinion that if we provide teachers with this opportunity of quality professional development, their learners will receive quality education. This will result in better qualified citizens, who can eventually contribute to the uplifting of the economy and ensure a better future for all the citizens of the country.

Nelson Mandela, stressed that policy without action will not lead to the attainment of set goals regarding education:

***“...it is no longer sufficient to say that the doors of learning and of culture would be opened and education would be free, compulsory and equal for all children. We now had to be specific about how we were going to achieve those goals.”***

The education system has yet a long road to total freedom but the NWU believes this model is a big step in the right direction.

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