

## **Distance Education at the University of Buea, Cameroon**

Fedelis Lekeaka Alemnge

Faculty of Education, University of Buea, Cameroon

### **Abstract**

*The Distance Education programme in the University of Buea started in 2008. It is aimed at upgrading the knowledge and skills of teachers of Nursery and Primary schools to degree level. The B.Ed in Nursery and Primary Education is an eight semester programme. It is primarily print based and tutorials are delivered face-to-face in study centres in different regions of the country. This is reinforced by telephone tutorials in between the tutorial sessions. Tutorial meetings last one week and are held twice each semester, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the semester. Assessment is based on continuous assessment in the form of two take home assignments which counts for thirty percent of the marks and an end of semester examination which covers the remaining seventy percent of the marks. The programme is funded from government subventions and fees paid by students. The first batch of students graduated in the 2011/2012 academic year.*

**Keywords:** Distance Education, Education, University of Buea, Higher Education

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### **Introduction**

The University of Buea was created in 1993 as part of Higher education reforms at the time in Cameroon. Conceived in the Anglo-Saxon tradition; the university seeks to foster the values of that system while situating itself within the bilingual and multicultural context of Cameroon. It is located in the town of Buea, former capital of German Kamerun and Regional Capital of the Southwest Region of Cameroon. The mission of the University of Buea is to provide opportunities for quality education through teaching and research in an environment that is conducive to such pursuits and in ways that respond to market forces. The University of Buea is made up of seven faculties (Arts; Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine; Education; Engineering and Technology; Health Sciences; Science; and Social and Management Sciences) and two professional schools, the Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters, (ASTI), and the College of Technology (COT).

The Ministry of Higher education adopted distance education as an alternative mode of delivery in order to overcome challenges such as limited access, insufficient diversity in provision, gender parity, reduced funding, quality assurance and good governance. These changes arose from increasing pressures to respond to market forces and technological opportunities with limited resources and the ever changing needs and demands of society.

In this connection, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced and promoted the one teacher one computer policy (aimed at developing the computing skills of teachers and enabling each to own a computer), training of teachers of higher education in China in distance education, launching of a Master's of Distance Education programme for Public Universities and initiating distance education programmes in the universities of Dschang, Buea, Douala and Yaounde I.

Following the enactment of the higher education law on Distance Education No. 005 on 16 April 2001, the universities of Buea, Douala and Yaounde I began seeking ways of providing increasingly

their programmes to the public through this mode of delivery. Aware that our schools are suffering from an acute shortage of teachers in terms of quantity and quality, and bearing in mind the envisaged new policy in teacher education aimed at training teachers to have a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's degree, the university, through its Faculty of Education conceived a programme to address this gap in Basic Education.

In light of the foregoing, the Faculty of Education designed and developed a Distance Education programme aimed at upgrading the knowledge and skills of practicing teachers in private and public nursery and primary schools in both the Anglophone and Francophone sub-systems of education in Cameroon. The courses offered, the pedagogic and evaluation systems adopted are similar to those used in the on-campus programmes in the University of Buea and in the typical Faculties of Education in Africa, Europe and America. Emphasis is given to the development of their academic knowledge and pedagogical skills. The distance education programme in the University of Buea focuses on upgrading the knowledge, skills and qualifications of primary and nursery school teachers to degree level.

### **Mission**

The Faculty of Education strongly believes that to address quality education in nursery and primary schools, the University of Buea should take the lead in opening up university education to practicing teachers in the field for this level of education. Teachers in nursery and primary schools are left on their own without opportunities for academic and professional growth. Today, the nursery and primary schools curricula are pressed with increasing new disciplines such as environmental education, peace education, human rights, HIV/AIDS, citizenship education, new approaches to teaching, and Information and Communication Technology as a pedagogical tool and as a curriculum content material. There is therefore an urgent need for increasing academic socialization of these practicing teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Objective**

The main objective of the programme is to offer Nursery and Primary School Teachers the opportunity for academic and professional development that will enable them offer quality education to millions of Cameroonian children. The Specific Objectives of the programme are:

- Develop a broad perspective on the role of nursery and primary school teachers as agents of change in Cameroon's Basic Education in this age of ICT revolution and globalization.
- Develop their academic and professional competences for effective educational offerings.
- Make them learn and understand new approaches to ensure quality education.
- Enable them shift focus from teaching to learning.
- Understand and develop competencies to organize learning experiences for inclusive/integrated/special education.
- Develop ability to manage schools.
- Understand more needs, interests and characteristics of nursery and primary school children, and Develop awareness for professional morals and ethics.

### **Rationale**

The rationale of the programme is based on the assumption that teacher quality with regard to level of qualification is most often used as a predictor of the quality of educational offering. On this account, the faculty is concerned about the general level of educational attainment of the teaching staff in Basic Education which is currently limited to the Teacher's Grade 1 Certificate. The faculty is also aware of the potentially serious consequences for educational quality arising from a tendency to recruit an increasing higher percentage of untrained and poorly qualified teachers often dictated by fiscal constraints.

In addition, most of the teachers in nursery and primary schools have not, since their initial training, had access to in-service training for academic and professional growth. There are new demands on the

school system which require teachers to increase their pedagogic and academic training to enable them handle the new curriculum content knowledge (New Pedagogic Approach, the Competency bases approach, teaching through the use of information and communication technologies, human rights and citizenship education) and above all quality and equality issues in education.

Offering distance education facilities will permit teachers in nursery and primary education work towards obtaining a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree in Nursery and Primary Education. This is likely to improve the quality of teaching, education and support they offer their pupils. Besides, the faculty believes that the distance education programme is a way of providing access, and consequently reducing the high attrition of teachers from Basic Education to other walks of life. This consequence is a high retention of teachers in rural schools with increased morale and professionalism.

Proposing a distance education Degree programme for Nursery and Primary school teachers necessitates reflections on legal and financial implications. Accordingly, we strongly hold that teachers make a difference, and that no effort should be spared in improving the lot of teachers in Basic Education, especially as it is compulsory for all Cameroonian children.

In conclusion, faculty revisits the thoughts of the international community expressed in the eight Millennium Development Goals in which education in both its formal and non-formal perspectives has a primary role where education is seen as central. Consequently, the teacher factor becomes a critical element in the attainment of the goals set. The argument is extended to the domains of the new curriculum for HIV/AIDS, the UNESCO peace education initiative, ethno-theories and their implications for education in Africa. Seen in the light above, this project is not only urgent but vitally important.

The duration of studies is Four Years (8 semesters) and on completion graduates can engage in teaching, counseling, managing schools and carrying consultancy on various educational issues in the area of nursery and primary education. Candidates admitted into the programme must fulfill the following conditions: hold a teacher's Grade I certificate or CAPIEM from a recognized teacher training institution, pass at least one subject in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level excluding religious knowledge or Baccalaureate or its equivalent, pass at least 4 GCE Ordinary level subjects including English Language but excluding religious knowledge or its equivalent, an English language proficiency certificate obtained from a recognized examining institution for Baccalaureate candidates and candidates who obtained the BEPC and then moved to the GCE system at Advanced level, candidates with technical or commercial advanced level certificate must pass English Language at the Ordinary level, candidates with Teacher's Grade 11 certificate must pass at least 2 subjects at the Advanced level including the Ordinary level requirement stipulated above or its equivalent, a certificate of effective presence at work and a hand written application addressed to the Vice-Chancellor.. Students need to score 180 credits to qualify for graduation from the programme.

#### Course composition of the programme

Professional Courses in Education (138 Credits)		
COURSE CODE	COURSE TITLE	CREDIT VALUE
DED 201	Foundations of Early Childhood and Primary Education	6
DED 202	Psychology of Learning	6
DED 203	Child Development	6
DED 204	General Pedagogy	6
DED 205	Introduction to Curriculum Development and Teaching	6
DED 206	Educational Technology	6
DED 207	The Curriculum of Nursery and Primary Education	6
DED 208	Curriculum Development and Evaluation	6
DED 301	Assessment and Evaluation of Learning in Nursery and Primary	6

	Education	
DED 303	Special Teaching Methods (Language Arts, Social Studies, and Mathematics)	6
DED 308	Health and Physical Education	6
DED 402	Professional Ethics in Teaching/Civics/Moral Education	6
DED 403	Educational Psychology	6
DED 405	Sociology of Education	6
DED 407	Introduction to Research and Statistical Methods in Education	6
DED 408	Characteristics and Needs of Children with Learning Disabilities	6
DED 501	Moral Education	6
DED 502	Design of Effective Learning Environments for Early Childhood and Primary Education / Library	6
DED 503	Guidance and Counseling	6
DED 504	Introduction to Educational Administration & Planning	6
DED 505	Contemporary Issues in Nursery and Primary Education	6
DED 507	Citizenship Education	6
DED 598	Long Essay (Research Project)	6
	Academic Content Courses (48 Credits)	
DED 302	Language Subject Matter for Nursery and Primary Education	6
DED 304	General Science Subject Matter for Nursery and Primary Education	6
DED 305	Mathematics Subject Matter for Nursery and Primary Education	6
DED 306	Social Studies Subject Matter for Nursery and Primary Education I	6
DED 307	Introduction to Agricultural Science	6
DED 401	Art in Nursery and Primary Education	6
DED 404	Introduction to Music in Nursery and Primary Education	6
DED 406	Social Studies Subject Matter for Nursery and Primary Education II	6
	University compulsory courses (8 credits)	
ENG 101	Use of English 1	2
ENG 102	Use of English 2	2
FRE 101	Functional French 1	2
FRE 102	Functional French 2	2

### Course Writing

At the inception of the programme all the courses were written from scratch using a house style that was adopted by the Faculty of Education in the University of Buea. According to the adopted house style, all courses were written in twenty units. Each unit was to consist of a unit title, a table of contents, an "introduction" followed by "a statement of objectives", "the main content, containing "self-assessment exercises", a "conclusion", "tutor marked assignments", "reference materials" for further reading and a glossary where necessary. Each course was to begin with a "student guide" containing all the information students will need in studying the course.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Training Workshop for Course writing

All lecturers were expected to write the distance education version of the course they were teaching on campus. Since the writing of these self-learning courses was radically different from other kinds of writing that the academics were used to, it became necessary to provide all faculty staff as well as shortlisted course writers adequate training to provide them the vision of open and distance education and to enable them write the courses for the distance mode of delivery.

In keeping with the findings of the needs assessment with regard to the most suitable delivery method it was decided that the programme will be primarily print based and that technology will be

progressively introduced as the means and know-how became available. Therefore course writing was focused on creating self-learning materials in print form.

Education on open and distance learning systems and their modes of operation were integrated with training on course writing for open and distance learning and was carried out through two workshops organized by the University of Buea in collaboration with the Regional Training and Research Institute for Open and Distance Learning (RETRIDAL) and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in 2005 and 2006. The first workshop entitled: "Workshop on Course Writing and Logistics for Distance Education" took place from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, 2005 and was facilitated by resource people from the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and (RETRIDAL) in collaboration with COL. The workshop was attended by all Faculty of Education staff, representatives of the then other four faculties in the university and the school of Translation and Interpretation (ASTI) and representatives from the universities of Yaounde 1, Douala, and Dschang. The workshop programme covered the following areas: "Principles and strategies of course writing", "Course delivery and monitoring," and "Supporting and assessing distance learners".

**The objectives of the Workshop were to:**

- Enable participants to become familiar with basic principles for organizing distance learning within the dual mode;
- Enable participants to grasp the model for writing a distance education course; and
- Enable participants to produce their first draft of the courses to be offered by distance for the pilot distance education programme.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Workshop on Course writing**

Shortly after this workshop, the faculty observed that the process of course writing was not evolving as planned due principally to the workload of lecturers and a perception that the process had not yet been mastered. To overcome these obstacles and move the course writing process forward, the faculty in collaboration with the Vice-Chancellor and the Academic office decided to organize another training workshop on course writing. In this second course writing workshop therefore, potential course writers were invited from without the university (mainly postgraduate and research students of the Faculty of Education). The Workshop entitled: "Workshop on Course Writing for Open and Distance learning" took place at the University of Buea from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 2006. The workshop was facilitated by RETRIDAL and supported by COL. It covered the following areas:

- Curricular Foundations and Learning and Teaching Transactions.
- ODL basic concepts and Instructional design.

**Major Characteristics of Self Learning Materials;**

- Developing a Self Learning Unit;
- Pedagogic introduction and Behavioural objectives.
- Content Analysis and Concept mapping.
- Building pedagogic interaction (Learner Activities and Access Devices)
- Electronic media and instructional design 1; and
- Electronic media and instructional design 2.

The training was integrated with practice. At the beginning of the workshop, and in conformity with the decision of the faculty, course writers were divided into teams according to their areas of specialty to facilitate the process and ensure quality. Each team was attached to the subject specialist for assistance, supervision and follow-up. During the workshop, the subject specialist with the team mapped out the course content from the available course descriptions and sequenced the units as required by the house style. They then developed statements of objectives for the twenty units, divided the units among the writers and each set to work. By the time the Workshop came to an end course writing was in full gear.

### **Launching of the Pilot Distance Education**

After the workshop the course writing process was monitored through regular meetings between the course writers and Faculty officials, especially the Dean of faculty. The successful completion of a significant number of courses led to the official launching of the Pilot Distance Education programme on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2007. The official launching was preceded by a workshop on the management of distance education, facilitated by the University of Cape Coast, and the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana and RETRIDAL, Lagos, Nigeria.

Following the launching of the pilot distance education, there was a call for applications and 48 candidates were retained to participate in the pilot project. The pilot programme started on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2008. There was an evaluation of the pilot programme one year after in 2009 by COL and the results were very good. This led the university to decide to continue the programme and hence to become a dual mode university in Cameroon.

### **Admissions**

Applications from suitably qualified candidates to study in the programme are received when the Vice-Chancellor calls for applications sometime between April and June. Application Forms are available at the various Regional Delegations of Basic Education nationwide and the University of Buea. The application form costs 20,000 FRS. All completed application forms are equally deposited at the various collection points. The list of selected candidates is published in October.

### **Organisation of Teaching and Learning**

Teaching is carried out through face-to-face tutorials in five study centres across the country. There are four tutorials in a year, two tutorials in each semester preceded by orientation seminars.

### **Orientation Seminars**

At the beginning of each academic year in August, all the students admitted into the programme converge on the university campus to participate in an orientation seminar which lasts four days. Attendance at the seminar is compulsory for all admitted students. During this period, students fulfill their registration requirements into the university and receive a general orientation to the university and how it functions. They are provided with the annual calendar of activities and a detailed activity guide as well as other relevant pieces of information related to their studies. They are equally provided the necessary support materials and orientation towards study skills. The course content of each course they will study during the first semester is presented to them. They buy their course materials and take their first assignment on each course and return to their various institutions to continue their studies while working and keep in touch with their tutors and the administration by email and telephone.

The second semester also begins with an orientation seminar during which similar activities are carried out in relation to the courses they will be studying that semester. This session lasts 2 to 3 days and is carried out at the various study centres after the writing of the first semester examinations.

### **Tutorials**

There are two tutorial sessions per semester each lasting 2 to 3 days. These are typically held during weekends and school holidays to minimize interference with the performance of students' official duties in their practicing schools. The first tutorial session takes place approximately six weeks after the beginning of the semester and is focused on a review of the content of the first half of students' study materials and also serves to prepare them for continuous assessment.

The second tutorial session takes place a week before the semester examinations and while it places greater emphasis on the second half of the contents of the course materials, it also serves for general revision of the course in readiness for the semester examinations.

The courses are print based and teaching and learning takes place through face-to-face tutorials. These tutorial sessions are held in study centres established (for the present) around areas of student concentrations. Presently there are five study centres located in four region as; Kumba and, Buea, (Southwest region) Bamenda (Northwest region), Yaounde (Centre region) and Maroua (Far North region). The programme uses the facilities of the Ministry of Basic Education in this regard. Out of the tutorial sessions students are in contact with their tutors through telephone and email.

However, a review of the structure of the programme during the 2010/2011 academic year brought some changes to the programme. The orientation sessions were removed and two tutorial sessions per semester maintained. General orientation and registration is now given once a year, at the start of the academic year which takes place during the Christmas break in December. Two tutorial sessions take place during the Easter break and the last tutorial session is held in August.

### **Assessment**

The method of assessment is parallel to that of the campus programmes. That is, students present three continuous assessment activities which count for 30% of the semester assessment. Two of these assessments are in the form of take home assignments and the third is a test which is written at the study centres under supervision. The first tutor marked assignment is based on the first quarter of students' course contents and is submitted at the end of the first four weeks of study. The second, the supervised test, is based on the first half of the students' course contents and is written approximately two weeks after the first tutorial session. The third tutor marked assignment is based on the first half of the second part of the students' course contents and is submitted approximately 4 weeks before the second tutorial session. The end of semester examinations account for 70% of the assessment marks. The examinations are written under supervision at the various study centres following the calendar of activities.

Following the review in 2010/2011, continuous assessment was reduced to two take home assignments per semester. During the first tutorial session for each semester, students receive two assignments per course. They prepare and submit the assignments which are graded before the second tutorial session.

### **Recruitment of Tutors**

Tutors are employed on a part-time basis following the university staff recruitment procedure and are responsible for tutoring and counseling students. The tutorial staff has increased from 20 in 2007/2008 to 60 in the 2013/2014 academic year.

### **Funding**

The programme is financed through government subventions and students' fees. Students pay an annual fee of 250,000CFA. The fees are paid in two installments. The first installment must be paid before registration and the second installment at the beginning of the second semester. In addition, students are responsible for purchasing their course materials. They equally shoulder the costs of travel and lodging during orientation, tutorial and examination sessions.

### **Enrolment**

Student enrolment has been on the increase since the beginning of the programme as indicated on the following table.

Academic year	Number of students admitted	Number registered	Number of tutors	Number of students graduating
2008/2009	50	50	20	
2009/2010	104	101	40	
2010/2011	122	104	50	

2011/2012	124	106	60	45
2012/2013	NIL	NIL	60	78
2013/2014	128	84	60	93
TOTAL	646	445	60	211

### **Administration**

The programme is lodged in the Department of Curriculum Studies and Teaching, one of three departments of the Faculty of Education. The programme is managed by a Coordinator under the supervision of the Head of Department and the Dean of the Faculty. Following the review of the programme in 2011, the Vice-Chancellor appointed some officers to assume specific duties in the management of the distance education programme under the direction of the Dean of the Faculty. Since then the committee works with the coordinator in the management of the programme under the supervision of the Dean of the Faculty.

### **Challenges**

There are a number of difficulties hampering the smooth functioning of the programme. Prominent among these are the problems of staffing, technology, training, and management of student assignments.

Since the beginning of the programme the only permanent staff is the coordinator. There is no secretariat, administrative, or support staff. Consequently, the entire secretariat, administrative and clerical duties including communication devolve on the coordinator. This causes delays in the management and execution of tasks and creates lapses in the system. There is an urgent need to adequately provide staff for the better functioning of the unit.

The integration and use of technology in course delivery and management was planned to be done gradually over time. However, difficulties related to costs, training of students and staff and maintenance of technology have prevented the implementation of this aspect of the programme. Therefore, the programme is completely based on face-to-face interactions between tutors and students at study centres and through assignments. Unofficially, telephone counseling and tutorials are highly used by tutors and students in between the face-to-face sessions, but the cost of these tutorials is mostly borne by students and tutors as there is no official arrangement for this activity.

Training is a vital aspect of any distance education endeavour especially as the staff employed to cater for the various tasks usually receive their education and training from the traditional face-to-face system. Since the initial training sessions that took place before the launching of the pilot programme only one other in-service-training took place in 2011. There is need to provide tutors continuous training to enable them increase their understanding of the workings of the system and their tutorial tasks which include tutoring, counseling setting and grading of tests and examinations, providing information to the public and interacting with the administration of the university.

The management of student's assignments is a very important activity in distance education. It one of the avenues by which tutors and students interact through the feedback students' receive from tutors. Consequently, the timely submission, grading and provision of feedback on assignments highly influence the quality of the distance education delivery. The proper handling of assignments has increasingly become problematic with the increase in number of students enrolling in the programme. Students are increasingly submitting their assignments weeks after the official deadline. The repercussions are that tutors are constrained to mark the assignments and provide feedback very late. Students therefore, do not receive the maximum benefits from this feedback. The administration needs to find a solution to this problem so that sanity can be restored to this vital activity.

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