Evaluation Report of the REPSSI Certificate Programme

Working with Children, Families and Communities affected by HIV & AIDS, Conflict, Poverty and Displacement in Africa

30 March 2010

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Executive Summary

The evaluation of the REPSSI Certificate Programme, *Working with Children, Families and Communities affected by HIV & Aids, Conflict, Poverty and Displacement in Africa*, was undertaken by The South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) between 1 April 2009 and 31 March 2010. The evaluation was requested by UNICEF and REPSSI and funded by AusAID

The evaluation is based on quality guidelines developed by South Africa's National Association for Distance Education and Open-learning of South Africa (Nadeosa). Two central questions guided the evaluation:

- How successful was the certificate programme in developing relevant competence for carers of vulnerable children in the eight countries that participated in the pilot project?

- What critical success factors have to be in place to deliver the certificate programme as a high quality learning opportunity for future target groups?

A combination of methods was used to gain a comprehensive and critical insight into how the programme was delivered and to establish what the key challenges are of making this programme work in diverse contexts. This is of paramount importance for the long term expansion of the programme. Visits to several participating countries enabled the evaluator to engage with students, mentors and country teams. This has been invaluable in forming a realistic picture of the demands on the ground and how people are responding.

Impact of the programme

495 of the 553 students who started have completed the programme and will be awarded a certificate. A 89.5% completion rate is impressive by any education standards and extraordinary for a distance education programme. The performance across countries is equally remarkable. Swaziland has the highest completion and student retention rate of 98%, namely 118 students, which is the highest student enrolment. Four countries, i.e. Swaziland, Zambia, Malawi, and Zimbabwe have completion rates above 90%. Three countries, i.e. Lesotho, Uganda and Tanzania have completion rates above 80%, and Namibia has a completion rate of 70%. This is still higher than the initial projected goal of 60%. Overall the programme was very successful at retaining students as the student drop out rate is only 10.5%.

There is now a sizeable group of caregivers in the region that has been deemed competent to respond to the many challenges of working with vulnerable children. An impression gained from the students' comments, learning service project reports, and the project presentations observed by the evaluator leads to the conclusion that the programme has had a profound positive influence on the students and the majority have shown a growing awareness of what is involved in a human rights-based approach to care for vulnerable children in their own contexts.

Main findings

The pilot phase has shown that it is possible to use distance education methods for an access programme with students who are practising caregivers in diverse Southern African contexts. The Certificate Programme offers an innovative model of learning and teaching that combines the use of learning materials, support by trained mentors in regular and well organized group sessions, and continuous assessment. The integrated design is premised on a learning strategy deemed most appropriate for developing applied competence in people who are actively involved in working in the field. The understanding of applied competence within this context is the strengthening of knowledge, skills and values that are particularly relevant for caregivers who work with vulnerable children in developing contexts. Thus adult education, experiential and applied learning principles informed the design of the three central curriculum components: the learning materials, the mentor led group sessions, and the assessment. The academic and delivery components of the Certificate Programme meet the key Nadeosa Quality criteria and it is an exemplary example of a well designed and implemented distance education access programme.

Critical success factors

The elements and factors that contributed to the successful implementation of the Certificate programme are the following:

Strong collaboration between the main partners, REPSSI, University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) academic team, the African Centre for Childhood (ACC) team, and the country teams in the eight participating countries have collaborated to implement the programme and create a stimulating learning environment for students. An environment that is particularly favourable for the delivery of the programme in country comprises a combination of elements: a high intersection of need for training caregivers of vulnerable children in the country; high commitment and support from government and strong leadership in the area of OVC care; strong support from UNICEF and REPSSI, and high interest and commitment from the local care organizations from which students and mentors are drawn. These elements are present in varying degrees in all countries and have influenced the ability of country teams to achieve success.

Well designed learning materials. The litmus test of any set of learning materials in a distance education programme is how the students use them to achieve the stated learning outcomes. There is sufficient evidence that the materials were used by students to learn and complete their assessment tasks. The high throughput rate would indicate that the learning materials were adequate, relevant and useful.

A well designed decentralized student support model. Students attend regular and well organized mentor-led group sessions. Allocating 20 hours per module, which is 16% of the total number of notional hours, to participation in group sessions is considered quite high contact time in a programme that uses distance education methods. It is usually recommended that programmes factor in 10% of the total notional hours of contact sessions with trained mentors and peers. The rationale for expecting students to participate in four 5-hour group sessions for each module is the importance given to collaborative learning. At the same time it is recognized that the students need

ongoing support as the majority are unused to learning independently from learning materials. There is consensus among students and mentors that without the group sessions they would not have been able to participate successfully in the programme.

*Appropriate assessment. A*ll elements of the assessment strategy, i.e. assessment methods, marking process, the assignment management system, and progression process reveal a strong commitment to values such as: transparency, reliability, commitment to quality learning and teaching, innovation. The central elements that contributed to making the assessment work are:

- Appropriate assessment design for an access programme. The continuous format of assessment facilitated a paced learning pathway through the programme.

- Well managed assignment turnaround process coordinated by ACC. The assignments were marked and returned to students with feedback from the UKZN marking team within two weeks. Rapid feedback on assignments is vital as it creates a positive momentum, helps to build confidence and contributes to maintaining a high level of motivation. In SAIDE's evaluation work of programmes delivered in South and Southern Africa this consistent assignment turnaround is one of the most impressive.

- Central standardized marking process. In all modules the UKZN module coordinator and a team of 8 – 12 markers met at the same venue and the marking happened at the same time. A marking process and procedures were implemented that promote consistency, reliability and fairness of marking the assignments.

- Progression process. A number of students were able to complete the programme because of the provision and management of the supplementary process.

Proactive and responsive central coordination. In a distance education programme there is a strong interrelationship between the academic and administrative components. The administrative system is the engine that keeps all the processes working together and links the participants in the learning and teaching cycle. The dynamic and responsive coordination provided by ACC played a significant part in facilitating an environment that made it possible for students to progress through the programme. Among the outstanding features are: a well coordinated assignment turnaround process; a well designed information system that generates up to date information on key indicators, e.g. student results, student throughput and drop out; good communication flow between all parties through a simple reporting process and informal communication methods.

Well managed decentralized support to students in country. Coordination at group and country level is critical and adequate training and support was provided to equip these key role players to carry out their responsibilities. The country teams must be congratulated on creating an infra-structure of collaboration with selected sector organizations that made it possible to organize the decentralized system of group sessions. Reports from the field have shown the remarkable commitment and motivation of students and mentors as well as mentor supervisors. The mentor supervisor's coordination and mentor support role is crucial to the successful delivery of the programme in the country. There is a positive correlation between well performing mentors who were proactive and responsive to the needs of their

students and who managed the academic and administrative components satisfactorily, and the level of student performance. There seems to be link between well performing country teams and the support received from organizations that are committed to the programme such as UNICEF, REPSSI and mentor employer organizations.

Aspects for attention

Revision of the learning materials. An in-depth evaluation report of the learning materials was submitted by SAIDE at the end of August 2009 which made recommendations for improving the materials. An area that needs strengthening in all module guides is the learning process. More guidance is needed on application given the contextual challenges that exist, and sufficient activities must be included to strengthen cognitive understanding concepts and issues. The evaluation report is currently being used by module coordinators to inform the revision of the materials.

Participation mark. The principle of awarding a sizeable participation mark is sound because it signals to students the importance of active participation in the group sessions, but the way it was implemented is problematic. Mentors will have to be trained and guided to be more judicious in awarding the participation mark. Steps have already been taken to standardize the assessment of the students' level of participation in group sessions by mentors.

Portfolio method. An opportunity was missed in the programme to use the portfolio method optimally. If the students are expected to maintain a portfolio in future then a good orientation to the portfolio method and the practical task of compiling a portfolio must be given at the outset.

Mentor supervisor role is critical. Mentor supervisors who had too many other work commitments were unable to keep their finger on the pulse of what was happening on the ground and the monitoring of and support to mentors was compromised.

Up-scaling the programme

Expansion of the certificate programme was part of its original vision and from the outset the expectation was that the pilot project would provide ideas based on experienced practice of how this might happen. The success achieved in the pilot project was largely due to a team of enthusiastic and committed people who collaborated well, a well designed access programme developed specifically for caregivers working with vulnerable children in developing contexts, sound infra-structure and processes, and substantial funding from Ausaid. This funding made it possible to deliver the programme through a decentralized model of support to students based on sound adult education, experiential and applied learning principles and practice.

Moving forward, the most demanding aspects are to find viable ways of funding the programme to replicate the decentralized model of support to students and to build the internal capacity of in country institutions to coordinate the assessment process. Negotiations with countries are currently underway to plan for the way forward. From preliminary interactions it has become evident that a number of critical issues have to be dealt with, such as: the selection of suitable host institutions, funding,

assuring that the high standard of academic excellence is maintained when countries take responsibility for the delivery of the programme, investigation of the accreditation options. In the immediate transition phase most countries will still be using the UKZN accredited short course certificate. At the same time efforts will be made to work towards accrediting the programme by relevant education institutions and bodies in the participating countries.

Concluding comments

The programme has generated high interest, excitement and enthusiasm amongst the students who have repeatedly commented on the value of what they are learning for their personal life and for their work with vulnerable children. The groups have been micro communities of learning where people share their experiences and deepen their understanding of their own context and what it means to care for children within a human rights-based framework. The impressive success achieved is attributed largely to these vibrant groups that have enabled students to keep moving forward on their learning journey.

The lessons learned through what worked and what did not have been captured in this evaluation report. The evaluation team hopes that the report will be used as a resource to inform the delivery of the programme in many countries in Africa and that the lives of thousands of children will be enriched.