

# Off-campus Education as a We-ness: A case for Ubuntu as a Theoretical Framework

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**Abstract:** “Education-for-me” which could, epistemologically considered, probably be classified as typical Western concept where the individual within off-campus education focuses on individualised “education-for-me”, thus making the individual the most important ordering principle. Off-campus education must not be looked upon as a solitary activity or individualised “education-for-me”. Du Toit (2011) classified off-campus education rather a **WE-ness** in which off-campus education students experience the existential yearning to live and observe the anthropological epistemological principle of communality, collectivity and sociability, also in matters related to their academic lives. In the ideologically based anthropological epistemological view of “communality”, man is regarded primarily as a social being, focused socially essentially on the reality surrounding him/her, and growing into a *belonghesion* (cohesion of belonging) towards a communal unity within a particular off-campus community as aim. “Just-for-me education” is, anthropologically regarded, thus a typically Western epistemological concept where the individual, within off-campus education, focuses on individualised education, the individual being the most important basis for physical planning. This theoretical paper attempts to determine the extent to which African students prefer to adhere to the anthropological epistemological principle of communality, collectivity and congeniality, thus not individualised education or “just-for-me” education, in off-campus education.

**Key words:** distance education, distance learning, e-learning, flexi-learning, face-to-face education, contact education, teacher training, social contact, and social communication.

## INTRODUCTION

Off-campus education is regarded as teaching which is most likely better than nothing, but not as efficient as personal face-to-face education. It refers to an adaptable teaching structure based on the argued ground motive of providing such education and training to individuals as they yearn for, *anywhere* and *when* they desire it. Off-campus education is also considered as a form of providing education in order to empower the individual to decide on the study field, the mode of delivery, the study time, the study place and thus the extent of learning. It is also known as decentralised education which usually put into practice in order to present more scholars with the prospect to further their qualifications and develop their proficiencies – mainly those students who are, for a variety of reasons, unable to make use of full-time education. (Moore, 2002; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009:103-116; Du Toit, 2011). The use of the concept 'off-campus education' can best be theoretically and conceptually substantiated from the fact that it stands for a didactical form of delivery in distance teaching. Off-campus education can thus assist to provide in the contradictory requests and needs of indigent, underprivileged, geographically remote communities in areas excluded from access. It can also contribute to the acquirement of novel skills and awareness regarding the assimilation of up to date technological improvements (Moore & Tait, 2002: 8; Blignaut, 2009; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009: 103-116). Through off-campus education, teaching is in fact taken to the scholars in a variety of ways, like by means of contact facilitation classes. It is thus a

didactical form of deliverance based on essentially taking teaching to the students<sup>12</sup>. Since off-campus education is a component of the Department of Education's **Tirisano** venture, it is intended at enhancing accessibility to formal education and thus contributing to the democratisation of education.

#### **“WE-NESS”: THE CHARACTER OF OFF-CAMPUS EDUCATION IN AN AFRICAN FRAMEWORK**

The idea of *ubuntu* (humanism) is regarded as indispensable to the African socio-ethical reflection and it elucidates the joint rootedness and interdependence of persons. The expression of “a human being depends on others just as much as others depend on him/her” is focussing on the “communal embeddedness” of an individual to other individuals. *Ubuntu* inspires us to render ourselves to others and is profoundly concerned by communality and *ubuntu*. It provides a theoretical elucidation and scrutiny of the two as defining aspects of conventional African existence. Off campus education should, therefore, endorse *ubuntu*, with interpersonal skills and human growth. Teacher training and development through off-campus education can only succeed when the principle of *botho* or *ubuntu* forms part of the basis and guiding principle of the same programme (Du Toit, 2011). “Just-for-me education” is, anthropologically regarded, a classically western epistemological notion where the individual, within off-campus education, focuses on individualised teaching, the human being, being the most significant source for substantial planning (Du Toit, 2011). In the western way of knowing (just for me education) objectivity is highly prized. This according to Reason (ibid) means standing outside the phenomenon being studied; separating the knower from what is known, refusing to ‘contaminate’ the data, resisting ‘going native’. A rational inference is that the African student experiences off-campus education as a collective interaction with relations with the off-campus lecturer as well as with fellow students (Du Toit, 2011). Social orientation as a point of reference, as well as collective relations with peers, is decisively imperative to the African. The focus is therefore mainly on the spoken tradition. An intrinsic need exists for communal interaction and relations and coherence in a conventional African communal and thus a shared off-campus education community. The focal point should also be on the just-for-me education for the communally inclined off-campus education student; changing this to *just-for-us* education, comprising communality and collectivity (Du Toit, 2011). Communication, contact, benevolence, coherence, devotion and communal cohesion are in fact indispensable within the social environment, with shared norms and shared principles within a precise off-campus education community.

“Education-for-me” is, anthropologically considered, a typically western epistemological notion where the individual, inside *off-campus education*, focuses on individualised “education-for-me”. Contrary to this common and dominant practice, we want to confirm that African students prefer to hold on to the anthropological epistemological principle of communality and collectivity and thus not individualised education (Du Toit, 2011). Du Toit constitute that the Western epistemological idea “education-for-me” is in difference with the philosophically grounded, anthropological epistemological perspective of “communality” of the off-campus students (Van Niekerk, 1992; 1996; 2004).

The African philosophy of Ubuntu is therefore proper to be utilized as a lens through which the yearning for a “perfect-fit-education community for us” for the communally disposed off-campus students (“education-for-us”) which include communality and collectivity is

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<sup>12</sup> Off-campus education currently is an integral part of the South African Department of Education's Tirisano project (Setswana: working together).

proposed. Here the student has a need for dialogue where ideas can be shared, social interaction, social dedication and the time spatial presence of a lecturer and fellow students during scheduled contact opportunities. These matters such as social communication, social devotion, and social presence lead to communal cohesion and common coalition (Du Toit, 2011) in an off-campus community.

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

Our approach can be regarded as fundamentally interpretative, although we did utilize a mixture of quantitative as well as qualitative research methods. Our investigation as such was designed from the hermeneutic phenomenology. But because of the epistemological crisis of our time in South African education we decided to couch the whole investigation under the African philosophy of Ubuntu as our theoretical framework. This study (Du Toit, 2011), being an interpretative investigation into a lived, day by day experience among individuals (students) with their own intentions, principles and philosophy, Ubuntu offers itself as a critical and relevant lens through which all issues perused herein are looked into (Valle, King & Halling, 1989: 3-16; Hongwane, 2007).

Under the theory of Ubuntu in this perspective, we attempt therefore to establish the extent to which African students have a preference to adhere to the anthropological epistemological theory of communality, collectivity and congeniality and not individualised teaching or “just-for-me” education. I also intend to understand and elucidate why the off-campus education programmes of the SCTE is not experienced as an isolated and a once-off event by students, but relatively a case of individual human behaviours which should be positioned inside the *lived* cultural framework (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007: 612-638). Additional personal information, deduced from that obtained in the qualitative data (Du Toit, 2011) was used to establish descriptive grounds to which African students have a preference to adhere to the anthropological epistemological theory of communality, collectivity and congeniality. Consequently I confer the following themes as elucidating basis and validation for the exceeding.

#### **“Perfect-fit-education (community) for us”: The nature of Belonghesion in off-campus Education as Imperative for Ubuntu**

Du Toit (2011) verifies that the cohesion of belonging (consistency) plays an indispensable part in the establishment commune among participants. Scheduled contact opportunities mean a great deal more to the students than merely the communal need and call for belonging and unity. It means even more than simply experiencing, through their off-campus education studies, ordinary reciprocated belonging with their off-campus education lecturers from the North-West University. Ever since these off-campus students relatively favour a sort of communal and collective education-for-us, it is obvious from analysing the information (Du Toit, 2011), the necessity to belong and to fit into a particular scholarship community or society. In this article and in the work of Du Toit (2011), it is a communal and shared off-campus education scholarship community underpinning the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and it is for the off-campus students a cohesively indispensable belonging to belong and to be part of a meticulous off-campus community in a constantly deepening, heartfelt, cohesive and equally trusting foundation of magnetism (therefore the utilization of the

deverbative cohesion and not the linguistically unipolar and psychologically rather essentialistic deverbative combination)<sup>13</sup>.

The off-campus student should experience an extraordinarily profound and interhuman niveau that he/she belongs to a particular off-campus community which must be seen as a communal society. Within this communal society (particular off-campus community) the off-campus students experience that they belong to that particular community where there is the prospect for inter-commitment, interdependence, mutual development, consistency and social integrity. Just then he/she will feel exempted from all pressure, ethical burdening and social guilt and then they will be free to be him/herself. In view of the fact that in such an off-campus community an intimate, interactive space will be provided to off-campus students within and throughout which they can exist and experience their communal longing for the cohesion of belonging, Ubuntu can contribute to their eventual learning accomplishment. Subsequently the second theme, presenting the second ground and argument for the exceeding: the essentiality of existence (survival), here called “existence essentiality” (Du Toit, 2011).

**“Perfect-fit-education Community for Us”: The Nature of the Essentiality of Existence “I exist, because we exist ...” In off-campus education as Imperative for Ubuntu**

Since the needs of students should be catered for during scheduled off-campus contact opportunities, it is vital that each student should be accepted completely and by accommodating him/her completely, the desires of the individual and his/her contextualised desires as off-campus education student are catered for. African communalism and collectivism, provides an encouraging and commendable of emulation outcomes such as genuineness, understanding, compassion, togetherness, communal relations, patience, actual reciprocity, companionship, brotherhood and unity-in-fairness; this is to mention only a few. All the above emulation outcomes should be there throughout contact opportunities for this off-campus community. I therefore declare that the off-campus student will therefore be able to follow and experience his/her “right to existence” inside such a off-campus community/society of students: “I exist because we exist.”

The off-campus education student does not just experience educational protection, but in fact existence, safety and protection in the off-campus community with contact sessions with the social presence of fellow students and a lecturer that guides hi/her in their journey (Du Toit, 2011). As it emerged from interviews (Du Toit, 2011), the reality is that at present a model of disparity “in being” exists in off-campus education, where the off-campus lecturer leads and the off-campus student follows, specifically *You lead, I follow*. We were capable to deduce from all interviews that the off-campus student experiences an intensely rooted need and longing for a lecturer as *fellow (member) human being* to guide him/her during their off-campus journey (thus a member of UBUNTU). The profoundly rooted necessity is for having a sense of community throughout scheduled contact opportunities. In this off-campus commune, the off-campus lecturers must be time spatially present as fellow human beings-neighbours in this off-campus community- where academic and scientific guidance and leadership to the student is being provided for, with in no way proceeding along a model of inequality and unfairness of individuals. The prominence is equally on the need of both the support of fellow-students and the time spatial “real-time” presence of a lecturer during scheduled contact opportunities (Du Toit, 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> This almost transcendental semantic depth should have compelled Du Toit (2011) to construct the novel Afrikaans term *toebehorendheidsverhegting*, (translated at this time into *belonging cohesion*) which in English we have called *belonghesion* –a neologism as well.

Therefore, off-campus student must be seen first and foremost as a communal human being, and where the scholar (student) is fundamentally communally engaged to his/her instantaneous reality and also as a member of Ubuntu. Off-campus education is for this reason a communal learning community which also assumes a communal union in which African communalism and its constructive principles and standards are represented, where *I exist, because we exist*. Subsequently the third theme, viz. *collectivity* (as communal unity).

#### **“Perfect-fit-education Community for Us”: The nature of Collectivity as Communal Unit in Off-campus Education as Imperative for Ubuntu**

The off-campus student seeks to exist and experience security and refuge as supplementary components of collectivity in scheduled contact opportunities. Moreover, it explains why off-campus education students have a need for togetherness, an ever deepened level of cohesion of *belonghesion* within this particular off-campus community. The sheltered *person-in-community* proves to be one of the essences of collectivity as communal unity (Du Toit, 2011). It is fundamental that collectivity as communal unity has to be effectively measured within off-campus education and it has to continually attempt to construct a communal and joint unity for the off-campus students. To belong to a group in a communal education community, students in off-campus obtain an unambiguous identity and distinctiveness inside the off-campus community where the students regards the group as imperative because (Van Der Walt, 1994):

The group is eminent above the individual- which appear to be in direct disparity to the individualised “education-for-me”; she/he follows and lives an existence philosophy and viewpoint of communality; inside the group, a sensitivity of safety of an individual exists which is complicated to comprehend as an individual; Africans regularly exist and experience the interdependence of others entirely; the crucial point is on strong individual relationships by means of the group; communal collaboration is considered as tremendously significant, and the African society is a first and foremost person-centred culture, believing in “being available for others”.

Thus, an off-campus community refers to a situation of constant belonging, a “we-ness” – an initiative of *ubuntu*, where fellow group members are embedded to one another. Like previously mentioned, the principle of *ubuntu* can only succeed when teacher training forms part of a constituent of any community also in off-campus education. Within this off-campus community that represents a particular learning community, an experience of survival sanctuary have to triumph which will lead to students not only considering themselves to be protected, but also cared. We purposely refer to “existence care” as such here, since existence refuge, existence security and existence care should, as we have attempted to argue, be regarded officially as didactical and psycho-pedagogical beacons in off-campus communities and dealt by means of that. If the student is being accepted unreservedly in an off-campus learning community, she/he will experience a much more reflective refuge, which will also lead to communal approval which includes existence refuge, existence security and existence care. We are of the opinion that collectivity is of existential significance to off-campus education programmes of the NWU. Communal orientation, collective relationships with other off-campus education community members is determinedly vital to the African and it can create a sense of communal cohesion which can leads to a sense of collectivity within a particular off-campus community (Du Toit, 2011).

#### **“Perfect-fit-education Community for Us”: The nature of Communal Acceptance in Off-campus Education as Imperative for Ubuntu**

Off-campus students would like to experience communal acceptance as a communal unity. Attending scheduled contact opportunities, there must be no pressure, a sense of

interdependence, neighbourliness, kindness, brotherhood, compassion, endurance and goodwill should triumph throughout all scheduled contact opportunities, as indicated above. Only then will such a scheduled contact opportunity turn into an interactive space intended for the training and development of educators. *Mutual acceptance*, void of any hidden intention, must be an invariable aspiration of any off-campus community (Du Toit, 2011).

As a result, as of the analysed data and information of Du Toit's investigation, we have concluded that the unremitting implementation of individualised off-campus education (especially as it has been understood in developed, Western countries) has, in developing countries such as South Africa, in all likelihood reached the closing stages of its shelf existence. This proclamation is substantiated by the realities that off-campus education, particularly the approach in which the learning content is packaged for curriculum purposes—ought to integrate the communal initiative of communal security, collectivity and interdependence, particularly as it is enclosed in the existing anthropological epistemological teaching of contemplation concerning the meta-theory of collectivism and communalism, more explicitly, honestly and ingeniously.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS: UBUNTU AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR OFF-CAMPUS EDUCATION**

“Education-for-me” which could, epistemologically considered, probably be classified as a typically western concept where the individual within off-campus education focuses on individualised “education-for-me”, making the individual the most important ordering principle, the off-campus student at the NWU does not regard off-campus education as a solitary activity or individualised “education-for-me”. It appears that, off-campus education is rather a **WE-NESS** in which they experience the existential yearning to live and observe the anthropological epistemological principle of communality and collectivity, also in matters related to their academic lives. In the ideologically based anthropological epistemological view of “communality”, man is regarded primarily as a social being, focused socially essentially on the reality surrounding him/her, and growing into a *belonghession* (cohesion of belonging) towards a communal unity within a particular off-campus community as aim.

Based on the above, it could be logically concluded that the *Ubuntu*-theme currently being regarded highly and studied seriously in certain South African academic circles is essentially nothing other than this type of African communality and its positive outcomes worthy to pursue. The off-campus student at the NWU, strives to experience a communal identity within an off-campus community, characterised by transactional sincerity, commitment and closeness. Consequently we regard it as of crucial importance to consider the educational needs of the individual in off-campus education, and as far as we are concerned, off-campus education should focus without hesitation on “Fit-for-us Education” for the off-campus education student, in other words on “education-for-us” in which communality, collectivity and sociability manifest as indispensable key features.

Since we argue that the focus should be on “Fit-for-us- education”, we also consider the essential characteristic of *belonging* to a particular off-campus community to be of paramount importance. In order to *belong* within social cohesion, the student should be provided with contact opportunities during which he/she can experience transactional closeness, sincerity and commitment. The off-campus student should experience that he/she is part of and belongs to a particular off-campus community where the student would feel relieved from moral burdening and social guilt and be free merely to be him/herself.

Thus we make the statement that the off-campus student at the NWU within this off-campus community should be able to pursue his/her “right of existence” confidently: “*I am because we are.*” The off-campus student can experiences safety of existence in the off-campus community where the lecturer guides him/her because of his/her right to exist. In this matter the previously unequal model of the human being, viz. “*You lead, I follow*” is shaped into a mutually acceptable model, viz. “*I for your sake and only then you for my sake.*” The first model could then in practice be re-written as “*You may lead and I may follow – not because I am forced to do so, but because I want to be, without ulterior motives, both for my sake and for yours.*” Consequently the off-campus student at the NWU, regards off-campus education as a “*we-ness*” and deals with it accordingly.

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