

NetACT Office Report on its 28 August 2020 Zoom meeting with members

Topic of discussion: the 50 reports received commenting on OTE re the 27-19 July 2020 workshop.

- This report is a commentary on and summary of the 50 reports received from our 50 members.
- The 50 reports are in the document called NETACT MEMBERS' ANSWERS TO ONLINE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION (OTE) QUESTIONS (NetACT answers to OTE questions 002 doc). A recording of the 2 hour meeting is available at https://youtu.be/6s_TlUg-ddo

1 NETACT SHORT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The network was founded in 2000 with the purpose of developing church and academic Christian leadership in Africa in order not to have a brain-drain, losing our best people to other continents. The original group were leaders from theological schools & churches started by die South African Dutch Reformed Church mission in eight African countries. The emphasis was on “Congregational Theology” that emphasized that we need to train pastors and leaders to develop leadership on congregational level so that people can make the right ethical choices re all aspects of life. As such our theology was “missional” from the start fighting the secular-sacred divide in order to address issues like the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the dire situation of corruption and bad leadership in all aspects of life.

We never canvassed theological schools to join us. When schools asked to join the network the only requirement was to accept the first three articles (mission, vision, values and ethos) outlined in our constitution (and to pay membership fees). Thus we have members from quite a spectrum of churches / denominations!

Everything about the network is on its website. All the minutes of all its meetings, all the Annual reports too. <https://netact.org.za/wordpress/>

2 MEMBERSHIP STATISTICS (2020)

The 2020 statistics of the network (Source NetACT Annual Report 2020, page 33):

INSTITUTIONS BY COUNTRY	Teaching Staff (P)	Admin Staff	Librarians	Total Students	Certificate students	Diploma Students	Bachelors Students	Post Graduate	30% theology
Angola-1	74	43	7	394	155	82	136	21	
Democratic Rep of Congo-1	16	21	8	129	32		48	49	
Ethiopia-2	17	60	6	467	0	0	203	264	
Kenya-11	88	77	63	5091	566	1048	663	317	2500 ¹
Lesotho 1	4	0	1	29	12	17	0	0	
Malawi 5	38	59	15	901	0	71	804	26	
Mozambique 1	8	4	3	51	0	36	15	0	
Namibia 1	3	6	1	29	3	19	7	0	
Nigeria 13	298	405	68	5411	280	415	3052	1664	
South Africa 5	100	47	4	3016	429	80	1393	1073	
South Sudan 2	14	14	4	124	0	65	59	0	
Zambia 1	7	27	7	95	39	0	56	0	
Zimbabwe 3	21	13	7	166	10	39	117	0	
TOTAL 50 schools	688	776	194	15903	1526	1872	6553	3414	

¹ All programs at Daystar has a 30% theology component.

Add the Daystar students and the grand total of theology students in the network is 18,400

3 WHY THE NETWORK-SPECIFIC MEETING

NetACT insisted on first listening to its members before continuing with the discussion on OTE and the result of 27-29 July 2020 workshop organized by the OCRPL, BF, GILD and others. The reason is a logical one: The NetACT Office do not want to speak on behalf of its members without first consulting with them. Any future planning re OTE in Africa needs to be in touch with the realities of those who want to make use of OTE.

The process we followed was emailing everybody the seven questions and requesting them to answer by 21 August. It says something of the commitment of both the NetACT Office and all its members that we eventually got 100% cooperation: 50 reports from the 50 member institutions.

The subsequent two hour meeting on the 28th August was our first Zoomed network meeting with 60 people attending either the English or the Portuguese discussion. It was a wonderful meeting with enthusiastic participation coupled with a sense of achievement, gratitude for the process set in motion, and very valuable feedback and suggestions. Those members who are in areas too remote to partake in Zoom because of internet & connectivity problems somehow got the YouTube recording and emailed or WhatsApp messages to the office. To us in the NetACT Offices it was quite an emotional time to experience the love and gratitude of a community spread over a continent where its members are living through very difficult and trying times. A meeting like this, we realized, was an encouragement to our members and filled them with hope to continue fulfilling the mission.

4 REPORT ON THE ANSWERS TO THE SEVEN OTE QUESTIONS

- 1 Numbers attending the 27-29 OTE workshop. 43 of the 50 members attended – a total of 220 people (according to reports received). This is remarkable if one take in mind that five of the schools is either out of internet range / have a very bad signal that is only occasionally available.
- 2 Evaluation: As positive as one could only wish for. It was the right thing on the right time and convinced all our institutions that making use of IT and blended learning is no longer an option.
- 3 OTE: Two universities were specialized in OTE (Daystar, Kenya & NWU in SA) and quite a number (about 10) had no problem to switch gears, train staff and continue with OTE. The remainder, about 38, had to consciously refocus and start so-to-speak from scratch. It is interesting to see to which extent this was done and also to see how many odds these institutions faced.
- 4 Internet and electricity: At five of our schools the internet is very bad – even cell phone receptions is periodical. Rusito may have some internet in the dead of night. Good half of the schools has the combined problem of bad internet signal and completely undependable electricity (typical in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Sudan etc.). The one absolute outstanding need is to have reliable solar systems in place. “Reliable” is important because there is little knowledge or expertise available in this regard. Getting good advice on solar power is absolutely crucial at most of our schools.
- 5 Covid-19: All our schools had to shut down in March and very few are to open soon. Some of the larger schools (Universities) has international students that were stuck on campus and could not return to their home countries which led to severe financial problems for students and institutions. At quite a number of Nigerian institutions Fulani (Muslim) herdsman caused considerable problems on the farms of our schools, in other centres like Kagoro and Jos attacks and tension caused huge problems. The important thing to realize is that at more than 43 of our schools the implication of no students on campus means the main source of income is shut down leading to severe financial problems.
- 6 Finances: As explained in 5 the main income stream of almost all our schools is student fees and with no students on campus the teaching staff of more than half our schools dropped to either no salaries paid or otherwise only a percentage of a salary being paid. Temporary or adjunct staff were laid off. In

many cases this led to problems in paying electricity of IT fees. The only exceptions are the six state funded universities, four in SA, one in Malawi and Kenya. Several schools are basically bankrupt or without money ... but somehow they stay and carry on finding a way to survive against all odds. This is quite remarkable.

- 7 In the light of the 50 reports the following points were raised in the reports and the discussions of the 28th of August.
- 7.1 If one thing stood out, it was the **emphatic request from lecturers for laptops**. You can't do OTE without a laptop and given their financial woes a large number of our lecturers need good laptops. If we can help them with funding laptops it will serve two purposes: More effective OTE and training and, secondly, it will be a huge physiological boost to people who are working in difficult circumstances with very little income.
 - 7.2 **The financial help from BF** to about half of our members was a lifesaver for them both financially but also emotionally.
 - 7.3 The NetACT office, in the opening remarks to the meeting me mentioned the reality of a world financially in recession and the importance that our **schools need to become financially sustainable** by whatever means. This led to a very good discussion where we learned a lot by just listening to our members. Some schools have agricultural projects, others in cities have a variety of income-generating projects. The long and short is that everybody realized that in some ways OTE can make theological training more affordable and that the maintenance and development of infrastructure could be much less. This discussion is an important ongoing one.
 - 7.4 **Blended learning**: the groups were well aware that on the one hand a lot of knowledge can be "transferred" via OTE but on the other hand one has to incorporate discipleship principles and the spiritual development of students. It led to a good discussion and positive suggestions. Guidance for students doing practical work and developing skills is important and OTE cannot deal with everything. So let us think about how we should handle blended learning.
 - 7.5 The **financial woes** of a majority of our schools are severe. Most institutions had to let go of adjunct lecturers, temporary staff and other personnel. At other schools good lecturers left to go back to parish ministry where their salaries are more and where there is more security of basic stuff like food etc.
 - 7.6 Working and helping schools with **expertise to get the most efficient and right IT stuff** and to get internet connectivity to some of the schools are really important. Upgrading existing infrastructure is a very real need. Schools need specialized help in this regard and we need to find ways of getting it to them.
 - 7.7 There are many **students that need good cell phone / smartphones**.
 - 7.8 The **problem of students staying in rural areas** where there is no internet signal was discussed. We need to deal with this challenge and several very good / interesting suggestions surfaced.
 - 7.9 The need for **continuing workshops like the 27-29 July one** that if necessary repeat some of the topics but also focus on some other needs, was a unanimous request. The appreciation for what OCRPL-BF-Gild and others are doing was unanimous. Webinars to help lecturers acquire the necessary skills for OTE please.
 - 7.10 **Lecturer exchange was discussed in detail**. With OTE we can get well-qualified people to teach classes where a specific school does not have a lecturer. NetACT has a system of lecturer exchange, but we should develop this. There is a need for lecturers that can help with Hebrew and Greek and Church History. NetACT can help schools and put them in touch with well qualified, often retired, professors who can teach online.
 - 7.11 **NetACT schools have well qualified lecturers** and experts on issues in Africa that can help lecturing in schools in the West or where-ever making use of OTE.
 - 7.12 We should develop a system where we can **exchange good OTE developed course outlines**, class notes and OTE lecturing models.
 - 7.13 We need to help the pastors of existing churches how to minister in a lockdown situation where you cannot have church services and where pastoral visits are difficult.