NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The DEASA/SADC-CDE international Journal of Open and Distance Learning (IJODL) is a refereed journal. The IJODL welcomes original articles which report on empirical and theoretical distance education and also accepts papers in other related areas as well as book reviews. All articles published by the IJODL are peer-reviewed anonymously by at least two referees.

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DEASA-SADC CDE

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International Journal of Open and Distance Learning

Volume 5, Number 1, September 2012

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Editorial

This is a landmark issue, which marks the fifth anniversary of the *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning* (IJODL), a Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) official platform for scholarly engagement of regional and international open and distance education scholars and practitioners. Since its humble beginnings in 2007 when the first issue came out that September, IJODL has remained steadfast with its primary focus of promoting a regional research agenda and developing a new cadre of young researchers committed to high quality empirical research. This commitment is now paying dividends.

Over the last five years the quality of articles has steadily improved due to the calibre of contributors and the editorial policy’s insistence on quality research articles. At the same time, IJODL has experienced significant growth in readership. Its reputation as a credible journal committed to the promotion and dissemination of research-based articles of high quality has also become widely acknowledged. The general quality of articles contained in the current issue attests to IJDOL’s commitment to quality empirical research.

**Overview of this Issue’s Articles**

The current issue contains articles which explore the provision of ODL programmes for deaf learners, learner support, research methodological issues and policy development. The diversity and focus of these articles make interesting and enjoyable reading for scholars, practitioners, administrators, policymakers and learners alike. It is my hope that the reader will learn from the findings, insights, and recommendations of these research articles.

One of the articles by Rebecca Lekoko explores distance learning opportunities for deaf learners in Botswana. The study suggests that the use of distance learning technologies, such as teleconferencing and online video systems, which are based on multimodal fusion and relevant feedback that combine textual, visual, and aural relevance, appeal to deaf learners. However, this potential remains largely unexplored in Botswana, because the mandate of current ODL providers lacks strategy, expertise, and infrastructure (e.g. buildings, equipment, etc.) to address needs of deaf distance learners.

A study by Stanslaus Modesto uses 205 case study papers presented at the 45th DEASA and 6th Pan Commonwealth Forum conferences to investigate the commonly preferred distance education research methodology, the case study, to determine the level of researcher awareness of the principles and procedures of this methodology. The study did not only establish that the level of awareness and evidence of scholarship in the 205 papers presented at the two conferences was low, it also developed a framework for determining the quality of case study research in distance education.
A third study by Leonorah Tendayi Nyaruwata used the Zimbabwe Open University as a case study to examine various models for establishing sustained collaborations and partnerships in open and distance learning. The study revealed that sustained collaborations require the establishment of a dedicated office responsible for documenting policies, managing collaborations database, and regularly monitoring and evaluating collaborations.

Finally, Peles Biswalo explores the use of Personal Responsibility Model (PRO) as a learner support tool for distance learners. The study established that most distance learners at the University of Swaziland were unknowingly practicing the model. For that reason, model form a package for learners involved in DE programmes as a learner support tool.

T.J. Nhundu PhD
Editor-in-Chief
That’s life, wanting what you don’t have: ODL for the deaf in Botswana

Rebecca N. Lekoko
University of Botswana

Abstract

This paper explores distance learning opportunities in Botswana for learners who are deaf. While participants in this study (learners who are deaf) viewed distance learning as a potential mode for providing learning that is responsive to their life circumstances, they also acknowledged that DE does not take place in a vacuum; it needs a conducive or facilitating environment. To this end, a wide range of strategies has been proposed, including the need to train instructors and interpreters, as well as providing assistive technology and infrastructure commensurate with the needs of deaf learners. These aspects are considered pre-requisite for sustained access, progress and retention. Furthermore, to make a convincing claim about the potentials of DE, participants presented distance learning as (i) a mode which can take learning to the doorsteps of those whose mobility is restricted, (ii) a mode which currently uses technologies, such as teleconferencing, whose visual nature appeals to learners who are deaf, (iii) a mode which respects the self-pacing and self-directedness of learners and (iv) a mode which respects the geographical spread, not as a barrier to learning, but as part of the peculiarities and social realities that should be accommodated by any apt education system. The Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), seen as a potential bridge for learners who are deaf to cross from junior certificate to higher qualifications, has been described by participants as lacking in its mandate, focus and present form (e.g. buildings, expertise and strategies) to accommodate learners who are deaf. This College can and should be restructured to be accessible to learners who are deaf.

Overview

The education landscape in Botswana today is significantly different from the one which existed two or more decades ago when the need for learning had not reached its current height. Almost everyone seems to have jumped the bandwagon towards an informed and educated nation as stipulated in Botswana’s Vision 2016. Many Batswana yearn for access to education that is unrestricted, lifelong and which respects the learning needs and styles of the country’s diverse population. However, some people are still left out of school for a number of reasons. Some learners find schools unfriendly to their learning needs. Others drop out and come back only to find the schooling environment not warm enough for them to succeed when they re-enter it. There are those who have
never known the doors of schooling; they are at home, waving a flag of desperation, hoping someone will discover them and facilitate their entry to school; but help is not coming their way.

People with disabilities make up a large segment of the population just described. The World Health Organization (WHO) (http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en) views disabilities as an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. According to WHO, an impairment is a problem in body function or structure, whereas an activity limitation is some difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action. On the other hand, participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual wanting to deal with life challenges. Such impairments may include physical, sensory, cognitive or developmental disabilities and mental disorders (also known as psychiatric or psychosocial disabilities). Like everybody else, people with disabilities need education for their survival and involvement in community and national development.

Botswana has demonstrated commitment to embracing the sentiments of the ‘Right to Education’ (Education for All), including children with disability. This commitment is encapsulated in the pillars of Vision 2016, especially those that address the principles of ‘Universal, Continuing and Quality Education’ and a ‘Discrimination-Free Society’ in which the country commits to ‘greater tolerance and acceptance of differences between people – their religion, language and ethnic background’. This commits Botswana to the sentiments of Education as a Right for all, as captured in international conventions such as the 1990 Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All and the 2000 Dakar education framework. Botswana is a signatory to these international declarations. The country has, therefore, committed itself to improving its education system to ensure that basic learning needs for all are met by 2016 and that there should be no discrimination in its educational systems. It, thus, becomes necessary that people with disabilities be catered for in Botswana’s education systems; hence, the establishment of the Division of Special Education in the Ministry of Education and Skills Development.

In Botswana, the word special education is used to refer to educational access for special groups, in particular people with disabilities. Within the Ministry of Education and Skills Development, there is a Division of Special Education which was conceived of and set up during National Development Plan (NDP) 8, with a mandate to increase access to education and training for learners with special educational needs. The current access in terms of government’s provision is as indicated below.
Vision Impairment

Learners with vision impairment include those who are totally blind and those with low vision. They are placed in the following schools designated for learners with visual impairment, depending on their educational level:

- Linchwe Primary School
- Phatlhogo Primary School
- Linchwe Junior Secondary School
- Molefi Senior Secondary School


Hearing Impairment

This category of learners with hearing impairment includes learners with some degree of hearing loss and some level of functioning hearing. These are placed in one of the following special residential schools scattered throughout the country:

- Francistown Centre for Deaf Education
- Ramotswa Centre for Deaf Education
- Boyei Primary School
- Makolojwane Primary School
- Ramotswa Junior Secondary School
- Tashatha Junior Secondary School
- Maun Senior Secondary School

These also follow the same curricula as the hearing learners, except that communication for those who are deaf is through Sign Language. Those who are hard of hearing are educated in mainstream schools, where they are provided specialized support, including note-taking services (http://www.moe.gov.bw/fileadmin/templates/docs/IMPAIRMENT_CATEGORIES.pdf).

Speech and Language

Except for those with other conditions such as mental retardation, learners in this group are placed in regular schools. In case the learner is placed in a mainstream school, the learner accesses the same curriculum followed by regular learners, with provision for individualized education programme that addresses the learner’s unique educational and developmental needs. (http://www.moe.gov.bw/fileadmin/templates/docs/IMPAIRMENT_CATEGORIES.pdf)
Intellectual Disabilities

Learners with intellectual disabilities may have difficulties in communication, self-care and academic and other skills. These learners are assessed to determine their functional levels in cognitive, social and emotional development, speech and language, perception, and motor development.

Learners with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities are integrated in mainstream classes and follow mainstream curricula, with assistance from specialized personnel, while those with severe intellectual disabilities are placed in special units. The later follow customized curriculum, which puts more emphasis on basic academic skills such as reading, writing and numeracy. In regions that do not have special units designated for learners with severe intellectual disabilities, these learners receive specialised supported within the mainstream schools (http://www.moe.gov.bw/fileadmin/templates/docs/IMPAIRMENT_CATEGORIES.pdf).

Learning Difficulties

Learners with learning difficulties are learners who find it difficult to succeed academically. Assessment for them is concentrated more on reading, writing and numeracy, since they serve as the basic foundation of literacy. After assessment, learners are offered specialized support in their respective schools with all the recommended intervention strategies administered by the School Intervention Team (SIT), Senior Teacher Advisor for Learning Difficulties (STALD) and ordinary class teachers. As a result of these interventions, these learners follow the same curriculum and sit for the same examinations as regular school learners (http://www.moe.gov.bw/fileadmin/templates/docs/IMPAIRMENT_CATEGORIES.pdf).

Physical Disabilities

Learners with physical disabilities are assessed by physiotherapists and occupational therapists to determine the level of physical disability. Learners with physical disabilities are expected to attend school within their respective catchment area and follow the standard curriculum (http://www.moe.gov.bw/fileadmin/templates/docs/IMPAIRMENT_CATEGORIES.pdf).

Institutions and organizations dealing with people with disabilities

Currently, a number of organizations and institutions are interested in addressing the need and welfare of people who are disabled. A recent study by BOTA (2012) identified several organisations that are interested and cater for people with disabilities. The study identified over a dozen small to large organisations country-wide, which include non-governmental organisations, public institutions and community-based organisations.
Table 1: Disability Related Organizations/Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pudulongong Rehabilitation &amp; Development Centre</td>
<td>Mochudi</td>
<td>A charitable non-profit making organization founded in 1982 by the Botswana Dutch Reformed Church. Established to cater for visually impaired people, Pudulongong Rehabilitation and Development Centre is affiliated to the Botswana Council for the Disabled (BCD), which is the mother body of all organizations dealing with disability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tlamelong Rehabilitation Centre</td>
<td>Tlokweng, Gaborone</td>
<td>Tlamelong, which means “caring for people” in Setswana, is a non-profit making organization by the Botswana Red Cross Society in 1974 to improve the quality of lives of people living with disabilities. Through a two-year programme in Vocational Instruction in Textile, Cookery and Horticulture, the Centre empowers learners to become independent in activities of daily living and increased physical and motivational capacities. The Centre also offers literacy classes and short educational classes that help open new opportunities for learners with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rankoromane/ Camphill Community Trust</td>
<td>Otse</td>
<td>This is a non-profit community-based organization that was established to serve children with severe learning difficulties. The Trust runs three community-based projects; namely, (a) Camphill School Rankoromane – a Standard 1 to 7 school for children with disabilities, (b) Camphill Legodimo, which gives life skills training and support to teenagers with disabilities, and (c) Motse Wa Badiri Camphill - offers training, working environment, social, and community support to adults with disabilities, and also provides vocational training, employment opportunities and community and rehabilitation support for the disabled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m Special Education Society</td>
<td>Tlokweng, Gaborone</td>
<td>Based on Christian values, the Society was established to cater for all Batswana children with conditions such as Down’s Syndrome, Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Dyslexia, ADD and other Developmental Delays. The Society’s outreach programmes use sport to develop young people’s physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities so that they may reach their full potential in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molefi Secondary School</td>
<td>Mochudi</td>
<td>This is a mainstream senior secondary school for children with and without disabilities in the area of vision impairment, including those who are totally blind and those with low vision. Specialised support is given to vision impaired children to assist them follow the same curriculum with sighted children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrenuj</td>
<td>Gaborone</td>
<td>Shrenuj Botswana, a business enterprise established in 2010 for the manufacture of rough diamonds into premium polished diamonds and subsequent distribution through value added downstream channels, has a Corporate Social Responsibility programme that support disadvantaged individuals, specifically the hearing impaired. Shrenuj has a long history of corporate citizenship, including social, educational and cultural programmes. In keeping with the societal commitment of Shrenuj Group, over 30% of Shrenuj Botswana staff is speech and hearing impaired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choppies</td>
<td>Gaborone</td>
<td>A leading retailer group with over 30% share of the FMCG industry in Botswana and accounting for more than 70% uptake of the local farm produce, Choppies has a ‘Giving-Back-to-the Community’ social responsibility programme through which it supports and employs people with disabilities. Choppies has over 70 employees with various disabilities on its employ nationwide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Resource Centre (CRC)</td>
<td>Tlokweng, Gaborone</td>
<td>An assessment and resource centre of the Division of Special Education, Ministry of Education and Skills Development. The Centre assesses children to determine school placement educational needs. It is equipped to diagnose disabilities that include developmental disabilities, cognitive disorder, multiple disabilities, sensory impairment and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Division</td>
<td>Gaborone</td>
<td>A division of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoE &amp; SD) that is responsible for ensuring access and equity to quality education and training to all learners with special education needs through comprehensive special education programmes and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the President Disability Unit</td>
<td>Gaborone</td>
<td>This is a Unit established in the Office of the President in 2009 to cater for people with disabilities. The Office was established in August 2009. The Unit is responsible for coordinating the (i) development of national policies, strategies and programmes for people with disabilities, (ii) implementation of national policies, strategies and programmes aimed at empowerment and wellbeing of people with disabilities, (iii) monitoring and evaluation of national policies, strategies and programmes for empowerment and wellbeing of people with disabilities, (iv) mainstreaming disability issues into sectoral policies and programmes and ensuring their implementation, (v) involvement and participation of people with disabilities in policy formulation, implementation, review, monitoring and evaluation and, finally, (vi) ensuring the effectiveness of national structures dealing with disability issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLANGINT</td>
<td>Gaborone</td>
<td>SLANGINT is a consultancy firm which has committed itself to developing the resourcefulness of deaf people through education, training, research and outreach. The Company runs several programmes for empowering deaf through the provision of lifelong learning opportunities and life skills and empowers them to learn throughout their lives (lifelong). SLANGINT also trains and produces interpreters to bridge the gap between the deaf and hearing people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist Church for the Deaf</td>
<td>Gaborone</td>
<td>This part of the Gaborone Baptist Church, which offers services in sign language and some voice interpreters, as necessary. Its disabilities mission is to (a) promote systematic Bible study and teach soul winning, discipleship and Christian service; to bring deaf people together to promote Christian friendship and fellowship, (b) encourage development of deaf Christian leaders, and (c) ensure that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached to every deaf person in Botswana.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Centre contributes to the welfare of low vision people by identifying them by screening and liaising with the eye specialists (ophthalmologists) and optometrists and assessing their residual vision and designing appropriate programmes to meet these needs. The Centre researches and disseminates information to empower teachers, learners, parents and industry, communities and the entire society on the implications of visual impairment. It also offers (i) awareness education on prevention of blindness and low vision services, (ii) functional vision assessment, (iii) referral services to eye clinics and ophthalmologists and optometrists, (iv) low vision rehabilitation, (v) orientation and mobility and others.

The Council has the mandate to coordinate activities of all non-governmental organizations involved in the rehabilitation of people with disabilities. One of the major goals of the Council is to assess projects for people with disabilities and assist in establishing NGOs addressing the needs of people with disabilities recommend Government assistance.

UB has a Disability Support Services Unit which coordinates support services and academic adjustments for students with disabilities enrolled at the University.

The Study: Background

At times, it is common error to generalize and treat people with disabilities as the same when discussing ways of opening access to education for them. These people are different in many respects, including types of disabilities, social backgrounds, educational backgrounds, economic backgrounds, aspirations, interests, etc. The Human Right-based Approach to Education for All is a framework that prompts nations to acknowledge the differences in children’s rights to education and rights within the education systems. This policy document is used world-wide as a resource by government officials, civil society organizations, United Nations and bilateral agencies, and other development partners strategically involved in the development of education policies and programmes (UNESCO, 2007). It helps nations to concretize and accelerate interventions at policy and programme levels for attaining the EFA goals and the Millennium Development Goals, to which Botswana has acceded. Above all, Education for All emphasizes the need to provide access to education for traditionally marginalized groups, including girls and women, indigenous populations and remote rural groups, street children, migrants and nomadic populations, people with disabilities, and linguistic and cultural minorities (Vernor Muñoz, cited in UNESCO, 2007). The Human Right-based Approach to Education for All was adopted through the 2004 UN General Assembly Resolution and its initial implementation focused on primary and secondary education.
Within the framework of EFA, in general, and Botswana’s Vision 2016, in particular, it is imperative that educators and policymakers undertake exercises to study and understand the peculiarities of groups that are currently disadvantaged. To address this need, a study was done to explore the perceptions of people who are deaf regarding their present access to education and what they believed could be done to open access and expand options for their learning. Actually, the original study (Bolaane, Chebane, Lekoko & Hiri, 2012) was three folds (i) addressing people with disabilities, (ii) addressing the remote-area dwellers and (iii) addressing minority groups. However, this paper focuses only on deaf people.

**Specific objectives and participants of this study**

Specific to learners who are deaf, this study explored the perceptions of deaf people concerning their access to education, in order to take a fresh look at how education policies could be reformed to benefit them. This study collected information that can lead to the provision of equitable and quality education for this group so that they do not lag behind as other Batswana move towards an educated and informed nation by 2016. The Government of Botswana has made it clear that education in this country should value the peculiarity and social realities of all groups, clearly stated as “no one should be disadvantaged in the education system as a result of the circumstances of his or her birth” (Republic of Botswana, 1997).

Consent to participate in this study was obtained from deaf people aged 12-35 years (youth). Deaf people within this age range were subsequently classified into the following categories, based on common attributes:

- Current deaf learners in junior, senior secondary, and tertiary education
- Deaf people who dropped out of secondary school for reasons other than failing
- Deaf people who did not proceed to junior or senior secondary because they failed in school

Availability of participants at the time of study in locations and organizations which were selected to be surveyed determined the number of all who participated. This means that all deaf people who were available in predetermined locations and organisations at the time of conducted the study were included in the interviews. It was made very clear to participants that participation was voluntary and that they could pull out at any time during data collection process.

**Data capture and analysis**

Using different data collection tools, including in-depth interviews, questionnaires and journaling, researchers collected evidence on the following variables:
a) Demographic factors of participants.
   b) Current status of access to tertiary education of people who are deaf.
   c) Challenges of access to tertiary education confronting people who are deaf.
   d) Ways in which the targeted group could be assisted to access tertiary education.

Sources of evidence that was documented in this study included tape-recorded interviews, journaling and direct observation by researchers. The data were collected from a single and group type interview. Single means an individual interview, whilst a group-type refers to interviewing a group of people with common characteristics, for example, people who dropped out of school, people who obtained a junior certificate and are current students, all these were interviewed together. The perceptions of these various people were analysed to determine discernible data patterns based on the main variables of the study. Based on these data patterns, several conclusions were drawn.

Using the coding system, the researchers went through five phases of analysis as indicated in Table 2 below and emerged with findings as presented in this paper.

Since most of the data were qualitative, the analytic tools used were commensurate with the nature of these data as indicated below.

**Table 2: Analysis phases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Description of Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>During data collection phase, researchers met on weekly basis to share experiences and discuss emerging themes, challenges and problems of the field and devised strategies to address these challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>Came at the end of the fieldwork and actually entailed labelling the transcripts and listening to the taped interviews just to get a feel of what was being said and to be assured that relevant and useful data had been collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>Most of the interview data was converted into text data, verbatim, in preparation for the coding process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>Coding – searching for main categories and sub-categories – data were coded exhaustively capturing the main variables of the study, which were access to education, barriers, potentials and prospects for education for deaf learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 5</td>
<td>Looking for superordinate categories that helped to come up with graphs and tables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 6</td>
<td>Presentation of findings – a narrative account was constructed around the main themes/variables of the study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographics of participants of this study

The following pie chart indicates the years of the respondents.

Figure 1: Pie chart of respondents grouped by age

In all, a total of 19 people of diverse ages, (17-24 years (10), 25-30 years (5) and 35+ (4) old) who were deaf participated in this study as the pie chart indicates. Concerning their educational backgrounds, the majority did not have a junior certificate (17) with 5 having dropped out, 6 being current Junior Certificate (JC) learners and 6 having failed JC. Only 2 of them have gone beyond JC – 1 had passed JC and attempted Form V and the other one had successfully completed his first degree (Bachelor degree).

The researchers’ strategy was to get a significant number of deaf people on a Sunday, during church service at the Baptist Church for the Deaf. Thus, most of the respondents for this study were surveyed during one Sunday. Other participants were met in institutions such as Shrenuj, a diamonds manufacturing business in Gaborone which has a significant number of deaf people on its establishment. Part of the sample comprised deaf people who worked for the Choppies chain of supermarkets, which have over 70 employees with disabilities nationwide. Choppies is committed to initiatives which would help eliminate social problems and add value to the community.

Finally, a significant number of the participants were obtained from the University of Botswana’s Disability Support Services Unit, which coordinates support services and academic adjustments for students with disabilities enrolled at the University.
Findings and Experiences and Perceptions

a. Current status of access

There was widespread evidence from the experiences of people who were deaf that, unlike their non-disabled counterparts, they did not have substantial or equal access to adequate services like education. This inadequate access was expressed by a number of respondents. Some of the sentiments are captured below:

- Everyone needs education, but us without hearing we are left behind while others are taught. During lessons, communication is impossible.
- It’s my dream to further my education because I’m equally talented but government is not helping, no one is helping.
- Nobody really makes a follow-up of our education as most of us end at JC and we work odd jobs.
- One cannot realize one’s dreams to access tertiary education given the limitation of resources for us who are deaf.

In general, respondents concurred that access to education and support services of people who are deaf is restricted when compared to non-disabled people.

b. Challenges of access

Participants’ perceptions were sought about what they believed to be factors impeding their access to education. Respondents cited a number of barriers, including physical, societal, economical (financial), institutional, attitudinal, educational (skill-based), legislative or policy-based, infrastructural and others. Some of their views are presented below under the following sub-headings.

(i) Lack of or insufficient trained personnel and teachers for special education

The need for trained manpower responsible for the educational needs of people with disabilities was among the issues prioritized for promoting access to education for people who are deaf. Participants in this study said that so much talk had been going on about their access but very little was being done. Some of their comments include:

- The government is not doing enough because there are no teachers in sign language. This makes us watch and not participate in education.
- Teachers are to be sent abroad to come back with full experiences and acquisition of sign languages.
- There is lack of sign language interpreters in public schools.
- Some teachers come to our schools with a sign language we do not use, making us struggle in understanding them.
In a nutshell, participants explained that access for them could not be separated from issues of professional training of special teachers, facilitators, interpreters and researchers. They said they needed specialized personnel in all fields. They believed that having qualified teachers could help eliminate the stigma attached to them, which includes being viewed as people who were unable to learn and who failed to take care of their survival needs. Specialized teachers, for example, could (i) advocate for their access (ii) serve as interpreters, or (iii) researchers uniquely trained to explore and determine current and future skills gaps in the area of sign languages/deaf education that are peculiar to the Botswana environment.

(ii) Standardized and restrictive curricula
Concern was expressed over the standardization of the curriculum, especially the assessment and testing exercises. They were described as too academic and not catering for the non-academic oriented persons with disabilities. Participants’ views could be summed up by comments from one of them who said, “recognition of success for the disabled should be critically assessed; some are good at sporting, not education. Education cannot help all of us; this leaves us frustrated and angry”.

Many participants viewed the ‘one-size-fit-all’ national standardized curriculum for all public schools as unsuited for some people with disabilities. Generally, “all children must take standardized tests, mostly written in English, regardless of their mode of communication and, worse still, regardless of their disabilities”. Thus, “most of people with disabilities end up not making it through lower levels of education that are expected to lead them to tertiary education“, said one participant. It has been said, for example, that there were learners who were bright in non-academic courses like knitting, drawing and should be recommended for a different path of learning, rather than all being expected to take the same route of entering academic institutions.

(iii) Institutional barriers
A number of participants raised concerns about institution-based situations that bar people with disabilities from accessing schools. Examples of these included the following:

- Communication barriers – Participants observed that the demand for trained people, like interpreters for deaf learners, was high but they lamented that, despite this need, very few people were trained or encouraged to develop themselves alongside the demand of people with disabilities. One deaf person said “there is lack of skilled manpower in sign language. This makes us watch and not participate like the normal children”. This participant was supported by another one who believed that “the government is not doing enough” because there are no teachers for children with disabilities. Another one said “Government should get its own long-term interpreters”.


Many of the respondents felt that people should be sent for training to acquire skills and come back with full experience and acquisition of sign language. “Even if we try to enrol at BOCODOL (Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning), we will not make it because of interpreters”. Actually, participants said they needed specialized teachers in a number of fields, counselling, interpretation and psychology. For example, one of the deaf people said having specialists could help eliminate stigma amongst teachers and students with disabilities, especially by the general public.

- **Inaccessible environment** – People with disabilities were said to face a lot of challenges related to their mobility or moving about in schools.

- **Classroom environment** – People with disabilities were said to face challenges and problems that inhibit their learning in regular classrooms. The example of mainstreaming was cited, where one learner recounted her experiences with a teacher who would write on the board and erase without taking into consideration her slow learning pace as a person with a disability. In one focus group, participants talked about the challenges of modern literacy, which they referred to as the “ABC World of Learning”. One of them who said “the written material does not interest me” was supported by another who said “some people who are deaf do not understand written words; they have lack of interest in written material”.

- **Language of instruction** - Another related concern mentioned by a number of the participants was that of the languages used to teach them. One of the deaf people said “teachers do not love deaf people; they do not explain the meaning of the words fully; the deaf do not understand and this, hence, irritates the teachers and they lose their temper”.

One employee who was deaf said that “after Form 5 we do not access tertiary education due to lack of knowledge in English language”. She was supported by others who explained that “priority is given to those speaking/hearing. If we were given preference we would pass as we would concentrate”.

In a focus-group interview with the deaf, the participants actually explained that (i) sign language is different from culture to culture, e.g. Botswana is different from other countries; therefore, (ii) a Botswana sign language would be very helpful. Setswana should be taught all round, not English only, people find us funny as we don’t know Setswana because there is no Tswana Sign language”; (iii) “sign language should be taught in schools, everywhere or else give us special preferences”. These views were summed up by one deaf person who said that since the performance of people with disabilities is not monitored, they are left to automatic promotions without addressing their learning needs.
Many more challenges were cited, including the legislative environment that was said to be lacking, and not helping much to make the situations of people with disabilities better than it was at the time. Also the issues of the lack of or inadequate support and other interventions in schools, homes, and communities were said to further decrease the chances of these people succeeding in schools. For example, some people require support to remain in their homes and still get education; others needed to go for meetings but were unable because they did not have assistive technology to help them cope with their environments. Still others said there were no alternative forms of education for people with disabilities. For example, they needed opportunities for re-entry and re-directing talents as they felt conventional education did not address all of their needs. Institutions like BOCODOL were cited as inaccessible, as they had not been tailored to address the needs of people with disabilities.

**Reflections and recommendations**

Among the main recommendations proposed by the participants were the following:

(i) Participants felt that the government of Botswana should support efforts geared at opening access to education for them, especially in junior secondary schools (Form 1-3). To ensure diversity of learning choices, open and distance learning and non-formal education should be reformed for this task. Thus, BOCODOL programmes should be tailored to be accessed by people who are deaf, as well as be made to reach the geographically distant areas where some people with disabilities who have restricted access to the conventional modes reside.

(ii) The principle of inclusive education should be the pillar of education. Inclusive education is “primarily about restructuring school cultures, policies, and practices so that they respond to the diversity of students in their locality” (Leonard Cheshire Disability, n.d, p. 4). It sees individual differences not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for diversifying learning choices. It is about rethinking how differences and diversity can be accommodated and respected by the education system.

(iii) There should be provision of appropriate measures to ensure that deaf people receive learning in a manner conducive to achieving the fullest possible integration for them in all levels of education.

(iv) Trained and motivated teachers are seen as a pre-requisite for ensuring quality learning of people who are deaf. As for people with disabilities, participants observed that there are few and inadequate trained teachers and interpreters.
Participants called for policies targeting imbalances in teacher deployment. They complained of lack of commitment and interest in working with people who are deaf. Thus, for BOCODOL to effectively cater for people who are deaf, policies that target their educational needs, support services and welfare should be reviewed. Generally, it was thought that most of the existing policies needed to be reviewed. For example, the re-entry or alternative schooling – while the pregnancy policy is said to exist, few of these disadvantaged groups knew about it, thus, making it necessary that policies should be disseminated to all to be known and used by everyone.

Information sharing and dissemination - Adequate dissemination, distribution, and sharing of information to meet the information needs of clients such as information on tertiary institutions and programmes they offer. For instance, BOCODOL programmes to reach the inaccessible and geographically distant areas and open more opportunities for the youth in these areas to access education.

Relevance of ODL as an alternative mode for learners who are deaf

Open and distance learning has been considered as an effective way to help open access to education for people who are deaf. In Botswana, participants of the study actually look upon BOCODOL as an alternative means of bridging the existing gap of access between learners who are deaf and their ‘hearing’ counterparts. The majority of deaf people who participated in this study did not go beyond the junior certificate. However, they see ODL as a ‘boat’ to use to cross the bridge from their present junior certificate to senior secondary and, ultimately, tertiary education, which most of the participants feel they could reach should their potential be directed accordingly.

It is natural and reasonable for people who are deaf to assume that ODL is there for them. However, Erath and Larkin (2004) warn that, without careful consideration, distance education could become learning anytime, anywhere, but not for anybody, particularly not for those with hearing impairment because of their uniqueness. They advise that each medium of transmission in distance education poses unique access barriers to different groups; thus, it becomes necessary that specific technologies and software for use in ODL should be carefully examined in relation to how they will benefit the target learners. Specifically, this observation has been made to direct attention to the fact that educators should always take into consideration the specific characteristics of learners when ODL is considered as an apt approach. The literature presents convincing evidence of the successful use of ODL where care has been taken to customize the learning activities. Parton (2007), for example, maintains that distance learning can be used for deaf students, instructors, and interpreters to advance their learning agendas when carefully planned.
ODL is seen as a suitable means of providing education for learners who are deaf particularly because it is a mode which currently uses technologies whose visual nature appeals to learners who are deaf. Yang, Mei, Hua, Yang and Li (2007), for example, present convincing narration of the Internet delivery of video content which has become a very popular online service. They see the advantage of this online service as alleviating the problem of irrelevant contents, since these could be customized according to learners’ preferences. This type of online video system based on multimodal fusion and relevant feedback is able to combine textual, visual and aural relevance. Learners who are deaf will benefit from the textual and visual characteristics. Erath and Larkin (2004) present a case of videoconferencing designed especially for deaf elementary and high school learners targeted at facilitating visual communication. This videoconferencing system has been mentioned by a number of researchers as suitable for use in distance learning for people who are deaf. Eilers-Crandall (2000) actually views it as one method whose visual nature appeals to learners who are deaf.

Web-based instruction, in all its variations, including WEBCT, Blackboard, HTML, etc., is another approach that is gaining popularity for offering online programmes for learners who are deaf. The familiarity of the Internet to most learners makes it a comfortable medium which integrates captions and signed videotaped lectures. In addition, Mallory (2001) described the use of video-streamed instruction delivered via the web. Video-streaming is defined as the progressive download of a video file that is either live or pre-recorded, for use for the deaf and hard of hearing audience. Mallory explains that video-streaming is becoming more viable due to its friendlier editing software, inexpensive digital camcorders, and high-speed Internet connection.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that, despite this expanded use of technologies, the literature reports that learners who are deaf can equally benefit from ODL that uses live tutoring. Long, Mallory and David’s (2003) study actually indicated that live tutoring is a service that learners who are deaf value more than their hearing classmates.

In conclusion, one would like to reiterate Hubbard’s (1999) statement that “education of the deaf can benefit from distance learning fully as much, if not more, as education of the hearing” (p.6). It is, thus, important that BOCODOL, the only distance and open learning college in Botswana, should be reformed to cater for people who are deaf.
References


The Case Study and Practitioner Research in Distance Education: Beyond telling a good story

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Abstract
This study investigated the Case Study as a research methodology commonly preferred in distance education. The aim was to establish the level of awareness researchers have about principles and procedures of the methodology, and how quality case study research can be measured. A total of 205 case study papers presented at the 45th DEASA and 6th Pan Commonwealth Forum conferences constituted the database for analysis. Three methods were employed, namely, observation using an analytical framework, questionnaire, and analysis of papers. Descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation were used. One of the major findings was that the level of awareness and evidence of scholarship in the papers is low. On the other hand, an original contribution of the study is the creation and application of a framework designed to determine the quality of research papers. A number of recommendations arose from the study, one of them being that the level of practitioner awareness should be raised through staff development initiatives.

Introduction
The two sequential open and distance learning (ODL) conferences held in 2010 will still be fresh in the memories of those who witnessed them and those who read the conference papers on the internet. The conferences were the 45th Distance Education Association for Southern Africa (DEASA) conference, held in Lilongwe (Malawi) in September, and the 6th Pan Commonwealth Forum (PCF6) held in Kochi (India) in November. The greater percentage of research papers at both conferences fell in the research domain of case studies, one of the five methodologies identified by distance education scholars as major types of studies in the field. The five are: descriptive study, case study, experimental study, correlation study, and evaluation study (cf. Phipps and Merisotis, 1999; Naidu, 2004; Tichapondwa, 2010). It is noted that the distinctions are very blurred, for you can also have descriptive case studies.

What I shall call the case for...papers essentially examines how an issue or problem of distance education (DE) is handled within a given institution or educational context. This practice has been referred to by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) as the in-depth investigation of a single instance of some social phenomenon or some institutional project. Somebody functioning in the field of DE as an academic, a manager, or a tutor is referred to as a ‘practitioner’. The presenters of papers at the said conferences
necessarily engage in what has come to be known as *practitioner research*, because they engage in research arising from problems identifiable in their DE practice.

Practitioner research has its roots in the work of Stenhouse (1975) who advocated what he called teacher professional autonomy, which could be achieved by “autonomous professional development through systematic self-study, and through questioning and testing of ideas by classroom research procedures” (Stenhouse, 1975:144). The present study was also partly stimulated by the desire to establish why there is a predominance of case studies at ODL practitioner research conferences when there are five or more categories of research to choose from.

The Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Case_study:1) and Yin (1984) concur that a case study is a research methodology common in social science, and is based on an in-depth investigation of a single entity. Therefore, a case study provides a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analysing information, and reporting results. As a result the researcher may gain sharpened understanding of why the instance happened as it did, and what might become important to look at more extensively in future research. Case studies lend themselves to both generating and testing hypotheses (Flyvbjerg, 2006:224)

From this citation we glean that, typically, a case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. It, however, goes beyond mere celebration or telling a story of how well a given institution solves problems posed by the case being studied, and can generate hypotheses that are generalizable. On this premise, the present study was motivated by the purpose to establish whether the many case study presentations were the sort of research that matched practitioner research expectations at DE conferences.

**The Background**

The entities focused on are two conferences, one held annually (Distance Education Association for Southern Africa Conference), and the other held once every two years (Pan Commonwealth Forum). The former is for the Southern African Development Community countries, while the latter is held for member countries of the Commonwealth. Both conferences are pre-occupied with furthering the interest of practitioners in distance education.

In either case, conference organisers send a call for papers and request for abstracts. The organisers will then contact those whose abstracts have met the minimum requirements to submit full papers by a given date. Papers are classified under sub themes for presentation purposes. A programme is sent well in advance to those who will be expected to present, and typically presentations take place in parallel sessions following keynote addresses. The time allowed for presentation of each paper varies from fifteen
minutes in the PCF Conference, to thirty minutes in the DEASA Conference. The time allocated also includes scope for questions, comments, and discussion.

Experience has, however, revealed some challenges regarding presentation, because time tends to be rather short for two or more reasons. Firstly, there is the problem of a presenter starting late for a number of unavoidable reasons such as movement from one venue to the next, and the overlap of time between one presenter and the next. Secondly, technology failure has been observed to have a delaying effect on the presentations. This could be in the form of power failure or memory sticks that fail to open.

The net effect has been a rushed job by presenters who often go beyond the allocated time. The anxiety caused by the limited time on both the presenter and the one presenting next has been observed to be considerable. This is especially true of case study papers because of their anecdotal nature. The presenter will be anxious to cover as much of the planned information as possible, while the next presenter will be wondering whether he/she will be able to cover what has been prepared. What, then, is the significance of this climate, relative to the motivations of the present study? Two things; First, hurrying through arguments interferes with the comprehensibility of basic concepts of scholarship on the part of listeners, especially when there will be no time to seek clarification. Second, there is also limited time for reflection, and the presenter may be compelled to skip some important parts.

The Problem

Two cases provided focus for the study. Out of the 46 presentations at the 45th DEASA Conference, 34 or 74% were case studies, while 171 (65%) of the 262 PCF6 presentations fell in the category of case studies. In the former, presentation takes place in two days, and in the latter, in six days. However, nearly all the 205 (67%) papers presented in the two conferences made reference to some contextual issue, indicating that the papers derived from practice. Such a high preponderance of case studies made the researcher wonder why there was such a high preference for case studies. From a close examination of the papers presented a general pattern was observed, in which the presentations exhibited the following four common features:-

a. A workplace related problem is identified
b. The way the problem was resolved is provided
c. The solution is presented as an example of best practice
d. Lessons learnt from the study are presented

After looking at the presentations the researcher was faced with two challenges. First, there was lack of assurance regarding the extent to which presenters were aware of principles governing case study research in practitioner research. Second was the absence of criteria that could be used to measure the extent to which presentations meet
scholarship expectations. As a result, the following research questions were formulated in order to focus the problem more clearly:

a. What level of awareness do practitioners have about principles and procedures of conducting case study research?
b. What criteria can be used to measure the extent to which case study papers meet scholarship expectations?
c. What evidence of scholarship is available from the PCF6 and DEASA conference papers?

Two aims of the study were formulated from the three questions above; namely, to establish the knowledge possessed by researchers about the case study methodology and, secondly, to measure the extent to which criteria governing case studies in practitioner research are evident in the presentations of the two conferences.

Although it was clear from observation that many of the presentations did not go beyond lessons learnt from a given investigation, the researcher did not have any pre-conceived notions about why presenters stopped at that point. In actual fact, the researcher embarked on the study guided by this hypothesis:

Researchers who present research papers at conferences are aware of the basic principles and procedures of using case studies in the conduct of practitioner research.

In testing this hypothesis and establish whether presenters are aware of basic principles and procedures of the case study as a research methodology for practitioner research, reference will be made in this paper to the research questions identified earlier.

**Theoretical views**

The research questions directing the present study seek to establish the level of awareness which conference presenters have about practitioner research and the principles governing its procedures. Secondly, the researcher seeks to establish the extent to which practitioners who use the case study methodology meet scholarship expectations. A gap has been noted in the literature regarding the link between practitioner research and the case study as a methodology in distance education. There does not seem to be any body of literature that purports to demonstrate the connection.

Practitioner research in education, also known as action research (Waters-Adams, 2006; Ferrance, 2000) has its origins in the teacher researcher movement of the early 1970s. It focused on curriculum research and development (cf. Stenhouse, 1975 for the detailed discussion). According to Faulkner et al. (1991:7), “a key feature of action
research then and now is that it requires commitment by teachers to reflect on their own practice”.

In line with this now commonly accepted view, the practitioner reflects on practice by developing interest in a problem experienced in the educational context and how it can be solved. The practitioner also establishes how, after locating it in a narrower context (e.g. the distance education organization), the same problem and researched solutions can be located in a wider social discourse, and address it such that opportunities for participative engagement and further dialogue are enhanced. This perception is further articulated by Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2005:2) in their widely acknowledged argument that:

…practitioner research, with its focus on local enquiries designed to ameliorate local problems, necessarily should be concerned not only with solutions, but with conditions that produced the problem in the first place.

The two notions that can be singled out from the citation are focus on local enquiries and local problems. These imply research based on given situations would seek to make causal conclusions for evaluation of educational innovations. Thus, the study of local problems, in given DE situations, points to what practitioner researchers have termed the Case Study research methodology. There is, arguably, a close connection between practitioner research and the case study methodology. From this perspective, Yin (1984:23) has defined case study research as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” This is further echoed by Flyvbjerg (2006:220) who specifies that “a case study is a detailed examination of a single example providing reliable information about the broader class of a phenomenon”.

Accordingly, case study research excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue or object in order to extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research. However, this does not at all mean that the case study research methodology, interlinked with practitioner research, is without critics. Two criticisms by Diamond (1996) are of immediate import to the present study. First is the view that one cannot generalize from a single case, hence, a single case study cannot contribute towards scientific development. The second one is that the case study contains a bias towards verification, that is, it has the tendency to confirm the researcher’s pre-conceived notions so that the study becomes of doubtful scientific value.

Nevertheless, Flyvbjerg (2006) has provided strong counter arguments that have legitimised the case study as a scientific research methodology. Two of these, which are of interest to the present study, are discussed. This is largely because they have had significant influence on contemporary thinking. He argues that there is a role for the
case study in human learning. Firstly, because the methodology produces the type of context-dependent knowledge not readily collected through the quantitative approach that involves randomized sampling. In the second instance, case knowledge is central to human learning, hence, research operates on the basis of intimate knowledge of concrete areas.

Regarding the criticism of generalizability, Flyvbjerg (2006:226) observes that “the strategic choice of a case may greatly add to the generalizability of a case study.” In concurrence, one can argue that more discoveries have arisen from intense observation than from statistics applied to large groups as happens in the quantitative approach. The choice of a critical case can actually have strategic importance relative to the general problem. As Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/case_study) puts it: “If it is valid for this case, it is valid for all cases”. Hence, the case study can help in either confirming or falsifying an hypothesis.

The response to the criticism of bias is that the possibility of stamping the researcher’s pre-existing interpretation of data or that of the researcher knowing the outcome beforehand cannot be ruled out. Flyvbjerg (2006:237) theorises that “on the contrary, there is indication that the case study contains an even greater bias towards falsification of pre-conceived notions”. This theoretical perspective gives prominence to the scientific construct of falsification, which means that a systematically conducted case study reports that the pre-conceived views, assumptions, or hypotheses were either wrong or right. In the case of the former, the findings will compel the researcher to revise the hypothesis on essential points.

Popper (cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/case_study) propounded the theory of falsification. The theory states that if one observation does not fit with the proposition, it is considered not valid generally, and must be either revised or rejected. Popper used the now famous example of, “All swans are white” and proposed that just one observation of a single black swan would falsify this proposition. In this way, the study will have general significance to stimulate further investigations and theory-building. In a similar manner, Galileo Galilei rejected Aristotle’s law of gravity on the basis of a case study selected by information-oriented sampling.

Scholars (Naidu, 2004; Tichapondwa, 2010) have explained features that would lift a case study from being a mere narration of a story to one that is scientific. Tichapondwa (2010:43) observes that the negative features of an unsystematic case study are that it does not go “beyond dry description…and has no evidence of critical analysis”. Positive features of a systematically conducted case study are that “it has a character, and a clear boundary, and reflects patterns and regularities in the phenomenon under investigation”. Such patterns and regularities, it can be argued, account for the possibility to falsify.
Having argued in defence of the case study, it remains critical to answer the question: How does the scholar identify a rigorous case study from a mere story? Two perspectives that are relevant to this question are singled out for discussion in this paper.

Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (1993) (cited in Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2005:5) propose four criteria for evaluating the quality of practitioner research in conjunction with the use of case study methodology. The first has to do with considering alternative practice. This refers to the extent to which the case study takes into account views of other scholars in the area under investigation. The second has to do with testing through practical action. This means whether the understandings shared by the researcher arise from practical action. The third is ethical justification, that is, whether research methods used in conducting the case study are compatible with educational aims. The fourth, and final criterion, is practicality, meaning whether the research design and data collection methods are compatible with the demands of teaching. These criteria are also confirmed by Yates (2004).

On the other hand, Anderson and Herr (1999) suggest five validity criteria that associated with rigorous case study research. The first of these criteria, which also resonate with those by Altrichter et al (1993), is outcome validity, which refers to the impact that the case study has on practice and the extent to which the enquiry has led to a resolution of the problem. The second is process validity, which refers to the appropriateness of methods used to the question being investigated. Third is called democratic validity, which is the extent to which all key stakeholders are consulted and engaged in the enquiry. Fourth, is catalytic validity, which refers to the transformative potential of the findings of a research study. Finally, is dialogic validity, which refers to whether there is trustworthiness, that is, the extent to which the study stimulates on-going discourse among participants and interested stakeholders.

From the foregoing, the interconnectedness of practitioner/action research and the case study methodology is best summarized by Carr and Kemmis (1986) who identified three characteristics; namely, that action research is about the improvement of practice, the improvement of the understanding of practice, and the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place (a case).

The views considered thus far, argue in favour of a framework for thinking about the case study as a methodology for reflecting on recurrent debates in distance education. The conscious observation of these research values (explained as quality criteria) bears some significance relative to the research problem serving as the key motivator of the present study. As the research questions direct, the issue about the level of awareness of quality case studies held by researchers for the two conferences, and the evidence of scholarship in the research papers, can be objectively adjudicated through the use of the criteria.
Methodology

The design adopted, the procedures followed, the data collection instruments employed, and how data were analysed, constitute the focus of the methodology.

The design

The design for the study was based on the presumed prior knowledge about case study approach. The presumption was that researchers who prepared and presented papers at the two conferences possessed basic knowledge in the conduct of research (treatment), an aspect that could be regarded as the independent variable. Observation was then be made on presentations to assess the effects of the presumed treatment (cf. Tuckman, 1972). The observed performance at the conferences constituted the dependent variable, which was measured through content analysis and observation. The design is represented in this notation:

\[ X \quad O \]

Where X stands for treatment and O for the observation and listening to presentations. Papers were selected using convenience sampling, described as “a matter of taking what you can get…” (http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/sommerb). In the current study, convenience sampling was based on case study papers, as well as convenient times when presentations were made.

The acknowledged limitations of this design are that there was lack of a control group, as well as the lack of information about researchers’ backgrounds. However, these limitations were mitigated by the use of multiple research methods (discussed below) to collect information from insiders in some depth.

Data collection methods

Given that more and more researchers seem to have come to the conclusion that “it is better to select a variety of research methods when approaching a problem, rather than rely on any one single method” (Creed et al., 2004:60), the two cases (the two conferences) were investigated using three methods of data collection. The use of multiple methods is normally associated with rigour, the quality of being thorough and careful. The term triangulation, also known as methodological pluralism (Carter & New, 2003), has been used to refer to this notion. It involves the mixing of data sourced through different methods so that diverse viewpoints can cast light upon a topic (cf. Sayer, 2000). Essentially, therefore, it is a move towards integrated research. That means it is a method that enables the researcher to use different techniques to get access to different facets of the same social phenomenon. This is particularly significant in the
present study dealing with the problem of awareness and scholarship in the use of the case study as a methodology.

Only conference papers falling in the category of case studies were sampled for study from the total number of papers for each conference. These were subjected to content analysis, following pre-specified criteria of quality case studies. The researcher then listened to a number of presentations from the sampled papers as explained in the table below.

**Table 1:** Sampled presentations attended by the researcher (N=38)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference</th>
<th>Total no. of papers</th>
<th>Total no of case studies</th>
<th>% of case studies</th>
<th>Presentations listened to</th>
<th>% of presentations listened to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEASA</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>74.00</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCF6</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>65.00</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>67.00</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A minimum of 10% was considered to be adequate for listening purposes, yet in either case the presentations listened to were more than 10%.

Three methods were used to gather data. The first one was content analysis, which involved reading the sampled papers guided by pre-specified analytical categories formulated on the basis of criteria explained above. The second involved listening to a presentation and noting the presence or absence of the pre-specified analytical categories. The categories were validated through discussion with two colleagues who had attended the conferences. Data collected using these methods would help in addressing the first and third research questions on level of awareness and evidence of scholarship. The researcher also established the extent to which analytical categories used to analyse data were evident in the research output. The responses were tallied, and percentages used to describe the emerging pattern. Seven criteria were pre-specified, namely: consideration of alternative research perspectives; evidence of theoretical ideas to guide investigation; evidence of five types of validity; namely, outcome, process, democratic, catalytic and dialogic.

The third method was the written questionnaire targeted at all the 10 presenters at the DEASA Conference, and the 28 at the PCF6. This instrument was also validated through discussion with two presenters at either conference. The instrument aimed at establishing the level of awareness possessed by practitioners about basic research issues such as procedures to be followed when conducting practitioner research and basic research; what distinguishes case study research from other types of research; case study methodology and its link with quantitative and qualitative approaches; whether case study research can be combined with evaluation and correlation research; and the issue of falsification.
Procedure

After validating the research instruments and having established the convenience samples at the DEASA and the PCF6 conferences, two colleagues at either conference volunteered to sit in the sampled presentations and use the schedule of pre-specified criteria. They then handed back to the researcher the completed evaluation. To ensure internal validity, the evaluations by colleagues were compared with those done by the researcher.

Regarding the questionnaire, this was issued to the convenience sample and analysed accordingly. As for the third method (analysing the papers), all 10 (DEASA) papers and 28 (PCF6) papers were read by the researcher and analysed according to the criteria used to evaluate oral presentations.

Findings

The findings are presented bearing in mind the three research questions, and the hypothesis, which was stated thus:

*Researchers who present research papers at conferences are aware of the basic principles and procedures of using case studies in the conduct of practitioner research.*

Findings from observed presentations

These are summarized in the Table 2 below. Evidence of criteria in the paper would be construed as exemplification of quality, while absence of criteria would be interpreted to mean the opposite. The meaning and significance of each criterion has been explained above.

Table 2: Case Study evaluation criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Some evidence</th>
<th>No evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DEASA %</td>
<td>PCF6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consideration of alternative research perspectives</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical ideas to guide investigation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome validity</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process validity</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic validity</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalytic validity</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogic validity</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A pattern emerged, which the investigator was not aware of, prior to the investigation. The summary of percentages illustrates shortcomings in the presentations. As an example, high percentages of 75% (DEASA) and 70% (PCF6) did not refer to views held by scholars on the problem. Only 25% and 30%, respectively, showed any evidence of that. From the DEASA presenters, only 20% showed some evidence of having used theoretical ideas used to guide investigation, while 34% of the PCF6 presenters showed some evidence. The remainder, in either case (80% and 66%), did not.

Concerning outcome validity, i.e. the extent to which the enquiry led to the resolution of the problem, findings showed 70% and 89% of DEASA and PCF6 cases, respectively, had some evidence. Similarly, 64% and 75%, respectively showed evidence that the instruments used were appropriate regarding process validity. Democratic validity had a 100% score, showing evidence from either conference that stakeholders had been consulted. In as far as catalytic validity was concerned, 60% of DEASA Conference presenters showed no evidence of the potential of the study to transform thinking about the problem. This is compared to 54% of the PCF6 presenters who did not show any evidence. Finally, regarding dialogic validity, only 30% of DEASA versus 42% of PCF6 presenters showed any evidence.

Evidence of theoretical grounding is considered critical in driving any study, including the case study. Below is a graphic representation of its evidence or lack of it in the conference papers, starting with DEASA (80% and 20%), then PCF6 (66% and 34%).

Below is the table that reflects responses to items in the questionnaire in terms of percentages.

**Table 3: Findings from the questionnaire**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notions</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Do not agree %</th>
<th>Not certain %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The procedures to be followed when conducting practitioner research and basic research are the same.</td>
<td>DEASA 20</td>
<td>PCF6 18</td>
<td>DEASA 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A case study research methodology can be distinguished from experimental research.</td>
<td>DEASA 10</td>
<td>PCF6 11</td>
<td>DEASA 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study research is more inclined towards the quantitative rather than the qualitative approach.</td>
<td>DEASA 20</td>
<td>PCF6 18</td>
<td>DEASA 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The main boundaries of a quality case study are an explanation of an educational problem in context and how best it can be solved.</td>
<td>DEASA 40</td>
<td>PCF6 36</td>
<td>DEASA 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The main objective of case study research is to generate new knowledge rather than finding solutions to educational problems.

| The main difference between experimental research and case study research is that experimental research is more concerned with patterns and regularities evident in the information supplied by participants. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 4 | 10 | 21 | 90 | 75 |

There is no need for statistics when conducting research through the case study methodology.

| Case study research cannot be combined with evaluation and correlation methodologies while using a case. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20 | 18 | 10 | 7 | 70 | 75 |

Findings from a research done using a case study cannot be generalized because of the subjective nature of the investigation.

| Falsification involves confirming that assumptions held at the outset by the researcher are correct. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 0 | 10 | 11 | 90 | 89 |

The majority of respondents seemed either uncertain about or agreed in the wrong with some of the research notions. For example, that procedures for practitioner research are the same as those of basic research (DEASA, 70%; PCF6, 86%); that case study research is quantitative rather than qualitative (91% and 89%, respectively); that case study research is primarily concerned with the explanation of educational problems (80% and 65%); that the main purpose of case study research is to generate new knowledge (90% and 89%); that experimental research, and not case study research is the one concerned with identifying patterns (90% and 79%); that there is no need of using statistics when conducting case study research methodologies (60% and 78%); that findings from a case study cannot be generalised (90% and 79%); and that falsification involves confirming assumptions held at the beginning of the study (90% and 89%).

In sum, the uncertainty or wrong perception reflected in the statistics addresses the primary research question showing a limited level of awareness possessed by presenters regarding use of the case study approach.

**Findings from analysis of written papers**

The papers were read through were analysed using the same evaluation criteria used to adjudicate papers listened to. The findings, to a large extent, confirmed what was established through the foregoing two methodologies. The few examples of papers, which confirmed the hypothesis, e.g. *Innovation practices of training science and mathematics teachers: A case for Domasi College of Education* (DEASA paper),
Engaging ODL learners through mobile learning at the Open University of Malaysia (PCF6), confirmed a conscious awareness of the principles and procedures of practitioner research while using the case study methodology. The latter paper, for example, consciously referred to what other researchers say about the issue of mobile learning, and supported that with theoretical ideas before emerging with resolutions for addressing the identified problem. It was also clear from the analysis that the methods used had been carefully chosen, pilot tested and applied systematically in consultation with key stakeholders. The paper went on to point out the issue that the audience could adopt in order to influence own situations (catalytic validity). Finally, the paper showed evidence that there were recommendations on what other institutions could do to further research into this commonly experienced phenomenon (dialogic validity).

Unfortunately, there were rather too few presentations reflecting the pre-specified criteria. The other papers, which were in the majority, simply identified problems; explained how the problem was solved in the context and detailed the lessons learnt. Such studies did not go beyond stating that the institution in question was handling the problem very well.

**Conclusions**

Presently, an attempt is made to answer the question: What do the multiple methods inform us about the phenomenon? Starting with findings from the method in which the researcher listened to the presentations, some patterns were noted. Failure by the majority of presenters to make reference to the views of other scholars on a given problem, and the equally high percentages of presenters who had no evidence of theories behind their investigation, reflected a similar trend from both conferences. This led to the conclusion that there is limited awareness among many practitioners about principles and procedures followed in the case study methodology; hence, there is a limitation in the level of scholarship.

The three aspects in which presenters showed a high level of awareness of what a case study should achieve were outcome validity, process validity, and democratic validity. Together, these point to a high level of awareness. However, as far as catalytic validity and dialogic validity go, the key criteria for trustworthiness and ability to generalize findings, the percentages are low. The failure to show evidence leads to the conclusion that there is both a low level of awareness and somewhat limited scholarship in the majority of presentations by both regional (DEASA) and international researchers (PCF6).

As far as findings from data obtained through the questionnaire are concerned, three conclusions can be drawn. Given that the highest percentage of practitioners agrees with incorrect research notions or that they are uncertain about meanings of such notions, points to a low level of awareness. This directly answers the first research question.
The second conclusion relates to the knowledge of research notions (the discourse of research) as an indicator of scholarship. Practitioners seem to have limited knowledge about some key research notions such as falsification, basic research, quantitative versus qualitative approaches, experimental versus case study research, etc. This, probably, points to limited scholarship. Thirdly, in view of the fact that the pre-specified criteria were able to yield findings from case participants, insiders of the problem under investigation, it can be concluded that the criteria used to measure quality were both reliable and credible.

A fourth regularity, which was not aimed at by the study, is that although performance of presenters at the regional conference (DEASA) and the international conference (PCF6) is comparable, percentages show a relatively higher awareness by presenters at the international conference. This leads to the conclusion that researchers at the PCF6 reveal a higher level of awareness.

The third method, namely, analysis of written papers, confirms the findings from the other two methods, leading to the self-same conclusion that all swans are not white because there are some black swans. To that extent, the findings falsify the hypothesis that conference presenters will be aware of the basic rules and procedures of using case studies in the conduct of practitioner research.

Discussion

The study was guided by the hypothesis that researchers will be aware of the basic rules and procedures of using case studies in the conduct of practitioner research. It was also guided by three questions to do with the level of awareness that practitioners have about principles and procedures of case studies in practitioner research, criteria that can be used to measure the extent to which case study presentations meet scholarship expectations, and the evidence of scholarship available from the conference papers.

The general conclusion that the case study, as a research methodology, should be more than telling a good story was arrived at. Four conclusions were arrived at, and the first was that there is limited awareness among distance education researchers about principles and procedures of case study methodology; hence, there is a corresponding limitation in scholarship. This is one of the contributions of the study towards reflecting on practice. The two types of conference have become a regular feature in the academic calendars of both DEASA and the Commonwealth of Learning. There is need, therefore, to take stock of the quality of presentations and articulate how best to improve the standards of research. The case study has proved to be a preferred methodology in the two forums and it is only proper that it be handled more scientifically.

The second conclusion has been that practitioners seem to have a limited knowledge of research notions, the discourse of research. From observation, despite experienced
researchers having been engaged in research for decades, clear definition of key terms used in research remains elusive. For example, the distinction between a method and methodology, the distinction between a method and a research instrument, the distinction between a research technique and a research tool, where to draw the line between practitioner and action research, the meaning of a research variable, the distinction between a limitation and a delimitation, to mention but a few, continue to be elusive. If that be the case for experienced researchers, then it is bound to be even more so for initiates. The lack of clarity about this discourse inevitably interferes with methodical procedure in any given study.

With these findings, that came as a wake-up call, conference organisers and practitioner researchers who mean to present credible papers do well to undertake personal staff development by re-visiting the areas they may presume to be familiar with, if only to contribute more meaningfully to the scholarly agenda of future conferences.

The third conclusion is that the case study can be investigated using pre-specified criteria to measure the quality of research. As noted in the literature review section, there is a gap in the literature on how the case study and practitioner research interrelate. This conclusion is an original and major contribution from the point of research methodology. It has been demonstrated in the study that carefully thought-out analytical categories can be applied to measure quality in case study research. Combining views from theories by scholars such as Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (1993) (cited in Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2005:5), Yates (2004) and Anderson and Herr (1999), the study has shown that the quality of case study research can be measured objectively. Thus, at theoretical level, the study has made a contribution to principles of research that are trustworthy and generalizable. At the very least, the study motivates scholars to engage in creative debate with the view to confirming or disconfirming the application value of the framework in their respective distance education problems, what has been referred to as dialogic validity (cf. Anderson and Herr, 1999).

The fourth and final conclusion has been that researchers at the international conference (PCF6) seem to have a higher level of awareness of principles and procedures of case study methodology than researchers at the regional (DEASA) conference. Although generally, as demonstrated through the findings above, performance at the two conferences is comparable, it is interesting to note the difference. The possible pointer is that the calibre of an international conference, hence, that of researchers, is decidedly higher than that of the regional ones. While the international conference researchers need to raise their level of awareness by striving for higher standards, it can be argued that practitioners in the regional conferences should make even more effort to do so. Possibly, for participants in both conferences, it becomes necessary to firstly acknowledge the researchers’ shortcomings exposed in the present study, then take the necessary steps to elevate practice through conscious revival of research skills and a reappraisal of fundamental knowledge of notions they may already be aware of.
A major recommendation is that both DEASA and the Commonwealth of Learning should create opportunities for staff development in which skills and competencies in research are targeted. Such opportunities should be in the form of seminars, workshops or sustained certificate awarding programmes such as the Practitioner Research and Evaluation Skills Training in Open and Distance Learning (PREST), currently offered to SADC distance practitioners through the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning-based SADC Centre for Distance Education. However, although the impact on systematic research of the PREST programme has been considerable, the number of beneficiaries has remained limited due to funding constraints. The provision of funds to accommodate more practitioners and coming up with similar programmes would go a long way in promoting the research agenda, especially for young researchers. There is need to develop and expand the provision of similar research programmes to young researchers at regional and international levels.

**Conclusion**

A preponderance of case studies has been noted as a typical characteristic of papers presented at distance education conferences. While one would expect to see a variety of papers using a range of methodologies such as correlation or evaluation, the prevalence of case studies is not a weakness per se. What is of concern is the way case studies are handled as mere narration of institutional stories. ODL practitioner researchers should raise their awareness about principles and procedures of the case study methodology by mastering notions associated with the discourse of research. Additionally, researchers should familiarize themselves with criteria of what accounts for a good case study research. A conscious effort through workshops, compulsive reading of relevant literature, and undertaking certificate awarding programmes should raise the potential of preparing quality conference papers.

To sum up, the systematic conduct of practitioner research, investigating a case as the basis for study can be used to understand one’s own practice; understand how to make one’s practice better; understand how to accommodate outside change in one’s practice; and understand how to change the outside in order to make one’s practice better.
References


http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/sommerb (Retrieved 17/01/2010)
The development of open and distance learning mainstreaming policy in a dual mode university: A case study of the University of Botswana

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Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning

Abstract

The unparalleled capacity of open and distance learning (ODL) to increase access to higher education in more cost-efficient ways and extend educational opportunities to new learners, especially under-served groups and those previously excluded by conventional education systems account for its wide acceptance as an integral part of traditional higher education in many developing countries. Further attractiveness of ODL derives from the flexibility and technological changes that now make its quality as good as traditional higher education. With these and other benefits, ODL is increasingly becoming commonplace in developing countries, used alone or in combination with conventional contact instruction. The growing importance of ODL has significant policy implications for countries and higher education institutions that want to introduce it as a part of higher education provision.

The experience of a dual mode institution shows that the challenges of developing, delivering, and managing high quality distance learning become more complex due to difficulties associated with developing and managing collaborative relationships that derive from two dissimilar functional settings. This paper uses a qualitative case study design and document analyses and draws from recent experiences of initiatives to mainstream the provision of ODL in a conventional university. In this regard, the paper examines the genesis and factors that influenced the introduction of ODL and the role that distance education policy plays in leveraging the provision of ODL in a dual mode higher education institution. In particular, the paper examines and discusses strategic issues and challenges that were considered in developing a policy framework for mainstreaming ODL as an integral part of the instructional process. The paper presents policy development from the perspectives of a developing country where the case for tertiary level distance education is greatest due to successes of pre-tertiary policies that had resulted in unprecedented demographic pressure for very limited places in the single national university. The paper concludes by identifying several important issues that are essential for successful ODL mainstreaming policy development in a dual mode higher education institution.
Introduction

The landscape of tertiary distance education has undergone significant changes over the last three decades; from its initial image as purely correspondence education, to being viewed as an important component of continuing education, then to a separate entity consigned to operate on the periphery of the academic enterprise, to its current status where it has claimed for itself a strong niche in mainstream higher education. The emergence of distance education as an integral part of traditional higher education partly derives from the promise that it holds in extending university education to new audiences and increase access to education in more cost-efficient ways and, more importantly, to technological changes which now make the quality of distance education as good as traditional higher education. Rapid changes in the technology of distance education, including better instructional design approaches, use of CD ROMs, online computing, compressed video, Internet and other critical learner support services that enhance the quality of distance learning and teaching, have persuaded even the most conservative university administrators to change their perception of distance education.

These rapid developments in the provision of distance education have significant policy implications for countries and universities that want to introduce distance learning as a part of higher education. This paper draws from recent experiences of initiatives to mainstream distance education in a developing country university to examine the role of distance education policy and policy development in dual mode higher education institutions. The further discusses strategic issues and challenges that should be considered in developing a policy framework that seeks to mainstream distance learning as an integral part of the instructional process in dual mode institutions. The paper presents policy development from the perspectives of a developing country where the case for tertiary level distance education is greatest due to the successes of pre-tertiary policies, which resulted in unprecedented demographic pressure for very limited places in the only public national residential university.

Context of the Study

At independence in 1966 Botswana was not only one of the 25 poorest countries in the world; to match it, it also had one of the most underdeveloped education systems. There were no postsecondary education facilities and the country could boast of only eight secondary schools, while half of all children of primary school-going age attended school. Botswana has since made enormous strides, especially following the economic boom of the 1980s when plentiful resources were available to develop and support educational services for a rapidly growing population, which has since trebled from about 543 000 in 1966 to today’s 1.68 million.

Students are now guaranteed ten years of basic education which leads to a junior secondary school certificate from where about 50% proceed to senior secondary school.
Senior secondary school graduates now have access to tertiary education to over than a dozen technical and vocational training institutions, while the best students compete for limited places in the nation’s sole university, the University of Botswana, a modern well-resourced residential institution which has almost reached projected fulltime students enrolment capacity of 15 000.

Unfortunately, the number of prospective students seeking university education continues to grow at a time the national university is able to offer places to all who qualify for admission. For example, statistics for 2000 and 2001 show that the University of Botswana received 8 082 and 17 194 applications from qualified high school leavers who were competing with working and non-working adult learners for 3 500 and 3 800 places, respectively. The growing demand for greater access to university education is not only driven by population growth, adult learners and highly successful pre-tertiary education expansion policies, it is also compounded by unrelenting government pressure on the nation’s only university to expand access.

Regrettably, public and private tertiary institutions lack both capacity and resources to absorb large numbers of high school graduates, which are expected to increase to 53062 by 2016 (Tertiary Education Council, 2010). It is, therefore, within this broader context that integrating distance education was considered a key strategic choice with which significant enrolment growth could be achieved to enhance access to university education under conditions of diminishing resources.

The unprecedented demand for higher education is not confined to Botswana. It is both a SADC and Sub-Saharan Africa phenomenon, where is actively driven by a combination of factors, including population growth, successful pre-tertiary education expansion policies and adult learners wishing to enter or re-enter higher education. For Sub Saharan Africa, the average tertiary gross enrolment ratio is not only the lowest in the world (UNESCO, 1988), African higher education institutions turn away large numbers of qualified students because they have no capacity to expand access and absorb those seeking entry to higher education. For example, 78% of prospective students who wanted to enter UB in 2001 did not get places. Similarly, in 1996 73% of applicants failed to get places in Ghanaian universities, while about 80% of the 475 923 Nigerian candidates for university admission did not get places in 1996/97 academic year alone (Saint, 2000).

In the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region, tertiary enrolment is equally low. The average SADC tertiary enrolment per 100 000 of the population is less than one, while the average tertiary gross enrolment ratio of 4% is far below the world average of 30% (Sarua, 2009), the range of 0.4-15.3% shows great disparity across the region (Kotecha, 2012). Therefore, a current tertiary enrolment trajectory SADC would have to wait until 2100 to achieve a TGER of 35%, which is the threshold required for entrance and effective competition in the global knowledge economy.
Role of Policy in Distance Education

In most developing countries policy implications in the provision of distance education should be considered from both national and institutional perspectives. This means that countries that are interested in tapping the potential of distance education in the provision of higher education should first develop appropriate macro-level national policies that guide developments in higher education. According to Saint (2000), national policies on higher education must clearly define public goals for this sector and stipulate the shape that higher education should take by articulating government priorities and commitments for higher distance education and how it will marshal national resources in support of initiatives in this sub-sector. A formally articulated policy statement that spells out the national vision and course of action for tertiary distance education and commits appropriate government resources signals the seriousness of top political leaders and has a catalytic effect at the institutional level.

The broad parameters of national policies are essential for informing institutional policy development processes on distance education because institutional policies, by nature, should cascade from and articulate with national policies on higher education. At the institutional level, therefore, an appropriate institutional policy should explicitly identify open and distance learning as a strategic choice and integral part of the overall strategy for attaining institutional goals.

It could be argued that distance education is currently enjoying a renaissance and attracting unparalleled interest in tertiary education. In developing countries governments are under unprecedented demographic pressure for increasing access to tertiary education because of successful past pre-tertiary education policies. In turn, universities are under pressure from governments that want to see them participate more in distance learning initiatives, which they consider as the most cost-effective way of increasing access to higher education. However, there is real danger that, in an attempt to respond quickly to demographic and government pressure, both governments and higher education leaders may easily overlook the need for detailed planning that will mitigate future problems and obstacles that may undermine the sustainability of distance learning. A key planning activity that may not receive due attention in the haste to implement distance learning is the need to develop a national policy or vision for distance education that, in turn, helps to direct institutional vision and policymaking in support of distance learning.

A National Vision for Distance Education in Botswana

The legal framework that guides current distance education initiatives in Botswana derives from the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE), which was informed by recommendations of the Report of the National Commission on Education 1993. The report identified a national vision for distance education which regards
distance education as an “integral part of the national education system” (Report of the National Commission on Education 1993, p303). At tertiary level the Revised National Policy on Education (1994, p38), identified “the Centre for Continuing Education of the University of Botswana [to] be the lead agency for [public] distance education programmes”. The Government then transferred the onus of policy implementation to the University of Botswana, but undertook to provide appropriate resources to develop, expand and diversify distance education through the Centre for Continuing Education.

Institutional Vision for Distance Education

At the institutional level it is difficult to resolve major policy issues without first of all achieving consensus on the perceived role, place, and contribution of distance education to the institution’s overall vision and mission statement. Accordingly, institutions must initially identify and then agree on a sound guiding vision for distance education and the modalities of integrating it into the institution’s vision and mission statement. Similarly, unless the University of Botswana developed an institution-wide common understanding of the guiding vision for distance, it will be difficult to identify and resolve policy issues, drive the policy development process, and manage change towards the integration and institutionalisation of distance education.

Therefore, in seeking to articulate an institutional vision for distance education with the national vision set out in the Revised National Policy on Education (1994, p38), the University of Botswana set the vision and mission of distance education within an embracive principle of “extending access to higher education through the utilisation of information and communication technologies within the framework of lifelong and open learning” (Shaping Our Future: Strategic Plan to 2009 and Beyond, 2003, p4).

The main purpose of the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) was to redefine the goals, role, and place of distance education within the higher education sector. On the other hand, higher education institutions, like the University of Botswana, had the responsibility to chart a course for goal attainment through the development of appropriate policies that guide and leverage institutional behaviours. The University of Botswana took this initiative in 1999 when it redefined its vision and mission statement and, for the first time, made explicit reference to distance learning (University of Botswana Vision, Mission and Values Statement, 1999).

In 2001 the University of Botswana, through a key planning document, UB Beyond 10 000: A Strategy for Growth, spelt out for the first time the role of the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) in contributing to student growth through distance education programmes. This position has since been strengthened by the Indicative Plan for National Development Plan 9 (2003-2009) and subsequently approved by both the University Senate and Council in 2002. The Indicative Plan for National Development Plan 9 (2003-2009) identified access and participation as a strategic
priority for the plan period. This document further stressed the role of open and distance learning programmes in expanding access and increasing educational opportunities at the University of Botswana.

**Provision of Distance Education at the University of Botswana**

The University of Botswana first introduced distance education in 1982 when it launched, through the Institute of Adult Education, a Certificate in Adult Education with the collaboration of the Department of Non-Formal Education of the Ministry of Education. The programme trained frontline workers who were managing or teaching literacy workers in the rural areas. By the time this programme was phased out in 2002, to give way to the Diploma in Adult Education, it had trained 200 people.

In 1999 the Centre for Continuing Education (established from the phasing out of the Institute of Education) introduced a second distance education programme, the Diploma in Primary Education (DPE), which upgrades academic and professional qualifications of Primary Teacher Certificate (PTCs) holders to the Diploma level. At the time of launching there were about 8 000 PTC holders who could not be released to attend courses in conventional institutions without undermining the education system. Meanwhile, the primary teacher training sector, comprising four residential teacher training colleges, had no capacity to cope with such large numbers of fulltime students. At the rate of ten in-service teachers per college, it would have taken about 200 years to upgrade all in-service teachers through these four institutions! In contrast, the distance education programme has registered 2 400 learners since its inception four years ago.

This programme is offered as a collaborative venture between the Ministry of Education and the University of Botswana. Through the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), the University manages course development, production and distribution, recruitment and training of part time writers, editors and tutors. The CCE is also responsible for organizing logistics for residential sessions that are held at colleges of education during school vacations, while the Ministry of Education provides funding for the programme. Apart from the Diploma in Primary Education, the Centre for Continuing Education also offers other distance education programmes, including the Commonwealth Diploma in Youth in Development Work, which is collaboratively offered with the Zimbabwe Open University (the accrediting institution) and the Commonwealth Secretariat that provided seed funds for the pilot project.

In 2003 the provision of distance education at the University of Botswana took a quantum leap with the introduction of five new programmes. The Diploma in Adult Education took its first 50 students, while a Bachelor of Finance, Bachelor of Business Administration (Management), Bachelor of Accountancy, and Bachelor of Business Administration (Marketing) have a combined enrolment of 230 students. At the same time, there are several other initiatives in course development for a Diploma
in Accounting and Business Studies (DABS) and a MEd (Administration and Management).

While the predominant mode of delivery of instruction for these programmes is mainly printed modules supported by audiocassette tapes and face-to-face sessions during school vacations, the introduction of limited interactive videoconferencing linking three centres, has positioned distance education to enter an exciting phase at the University of Botswana. Several online courses are currently under development, following the recent introduction of e-learning. Finally, the recently completed audio/video production and editing suite will increase the range of media available for delivery of distance education programmes. The provision and delivery of distance education programmes using several multimedia platforms enriches the learning experience. In addition, it also promotes and standardises the quality of content and instruction by providing and exposing geographically diverse learners with the same quality materials and instruction.

It is clear that distance education is entering a new and exciting phase at the University of Botswana. However, the growth currently being experienced in the adoption of technology and in the number of distance education programmes has implications for institutional policies, resource allocation, faculty and institutional commitment to an environment that promotes the development of distance education. It is within the context of rapid growth in distance education that the University of Botswana undertook the initiative to develop a policy on mainstreaming distance education.

It is critical for university administrators to come up with appropriate policy pronouncements and corresponding institutional resource commitment which signal a resolve to incorporate open and distance learning as an integral part of the instructional process of the University of Botswana. Policies developed at the institutional level should act as tools which help in guiding and leveraging behaviours that facilitate the integration and mainstreaming of distance education through appropriate clear guidelines and incentives. The development of institutional policies should be guided by a set of principles which helps define institutional values and priorities for distance education.

**Guiding Principles for Developing DE Mainstreaming Policy**

To achieve the general vision for distance education, several guiding principles were identified and provided the foundation for developing a policy framework for mainstreaming of distance education:

1. Adoption of distance education practices which promote educational quality to a level consistent with prevailing high academic standards of the University of Botswana.
2. Utilise affordable and readily available proven and effective distance education technologies and promote their integration into the instructional processes of the institution.

3. Fulltime academics will be engaged as part-time lecturers and course writers and receive appropriate training in the design, development, delivery and assessment of distance education. Through their participation on distance education programmes academics will promote the integration of distance education approaches into the University’s teaching and learning processes.

4. Total institutional support and commitment is essential to the development and promotion of sound distance education processes and systems, including learner support services and establishment of regional infrastructure.

5. Availability of adequate financial resources is critical to support and sustain high quality distance education programmes across all key operating activities, including course development, production, learner support services and student assessment.

6. Traditional policies and formulae for determining tuition and fees for on-campus students will be reviewed to address the need for financially viability of distance education programmes.

7. The quality of the educational experiences of distance learners will be promoted through the use of student-interaction enhancement approaches, including face-to-face tutorials, synchronous tele- and video-conferencing and delayed tutor-student interaction.

8. Distance education will be used to improve relevance and expand access to educational programmes, resources, and intellectual wealth of the University and serve to complement rather than compete with fulltime programmes.

9. Preference will be given to affordable distance education delivery technologies that overcome barriers to educational access and present the learner with greater flexibility and control over time, distance, and/or place of instruction.

10. The institutional governing structure will facilitate mainstreaming of distance education by determining and providing appropriate resources, incentives, disincentives, rules, procedures and reporting and accountability standards.
Policy Areas and Issues in Mainstreaming ODL

In seeking to mainstream distance education it is important to determine existing policies and practices that hinder and/or influence the integration of distance education. There is, therefore, the need to change and formulate new policies and guidelines which leverage institutional behaviour, organisational realignment, resource reallocation and promote an environment conducive to integration of distance education. A total of seven policy areas were identified and include organisational structure, intra-institutional collaboration, incentives and compensation, educational quality, financial formula for distance education, staff support and student support services.

1. Organisational Structure

The University of Botswana adopted a centralised approach to the provision of distance education, through the establishment of an administrative unit, the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), in order to avoid duplication of efforts, expertise, and inefficient use of resources often associated with decentralised models. The Centre is responsible for the development and delivery of distance education courses, coordination of distance education, provides leadership in developing institutional policies for mainstreaming distance learning and provides non-traditional education through part-time evening classes, non-credit short courses, public education and other university extension activities. However, it is the relative organisational position, resource allocation and status that is accorded the Centre because it often signals the seriousness of university leadership and has a major catalytic influence in generating greater faculty willingness to embrace and integrate distance learning.

2. Intra-institutional Collaboration

The successful provision of distance education in a dual mode university depends primarily on the efficacy of intra-institutional collaboration arrangements and coordination of many partners who are involved in processes and activities, including programme initiation, course development, course conversion and adaptation, instructional delivery, assessment and programme review. Therefore, there is need for explicitness in the responsibilities, relationships and guidelines governing the involvement of partners in the processes and activities involved in the provision of distance education.

In this connection, the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) is the designated administrative “home” that is accountable for logistics and pedagogics of all distance education courses and programmes, while a teaching department is the academic “home” that is answerable for the content of distance education courses. The main reason for paying close attention to collaboration issues between the administrative and academic homes of distance education programmes is to minimise conflict, promote
cooperation and enhance accountability. Other areas that require policy guidelines and regulations include generation and management of student records and student assessment (item setting, moderation, administration, and marking of assignments, tests, and examinations).

3. **Incentives and Compensation**

In a dual mode university incentives for students and teaching staff to participate in distance education are an important policy consideration. For students the greatest incentives are learner convenience and the perceptions that the quality of distance education programmes is the comparable to that of on-campus programmes.

If teaching distance education courses is considered part of the normal responsibility, academic staff is willing to teach at a reduced FTE that takes into account their commitment to distance teaching. Where teaching distance education programmes is considered “extra” work, as is the case at the University of Botswana, academics are often willing to teach provided they get appropriate incentives and compensation.

Distance education activities, including the provision of tutorial support to learners, module writing, script writing, editing, weekend tutorials and student assessment (i.e. item setting, marking tests, assignments and examinations, moderation, etc.) have been included in the University of Botswana standard reward system. Accordingly, staff that participates on these activities does not only find that doing so contributes to their careers, they are also remunerated for work done.

4. **Educational Quality**

To assuage fears by many academics over possible dilution of high academic standards if their programmes were offered through distance learning, several measures and processes were developed to ensure that the quality of the educational experiences of distance learners was comparable to that for regular students. Academic departments assume full responsibility for the quality of course content and student assessment (item setting, marking and moderation) and that, as much as possible, distance learners took the same examinations with fulltime students. In addition, distance education programmes are subject to common course and lecturer evaluation procedures and mechanisms established by the Academic Programme Review Unit, a watchdog of academic standards and quality of University programmes.

5. **Staff Support**

Implementing a learner-centred, self-directed and highly interactive approach requires new technologies and instructional tools; hence, staff participating in distance education will have to be prepared for the new roles that they will play in both course development
and distance teaching. It is a requirement for academics who participate in distance education to be inducted into their new roles before they assume their responsibilities. The Centre ensures that academics are inducted into current and emerging distance teaching methodologies and receive training in course development and assignment marking, through online instruction and regular seminars and workshops.

6. Student Support Services

The Centre for Continuing Education, as the administrative home for all distance education programmes will establish a comprehensive learner support system and provides leadership in the development of policies on library support, student advisement, self-support study groups, admissions and registration, payment of tuition fees, materials distribution, counselling, tutoring and records management.

7. Financing Formula for Distance Education

The success of distance education programmes of the University of Botswana depends on financial viability, given that distance learners are self-sponsored because current government policy does not provide financial support to distance learners as it does to all fulltime students. Since distance learners are expected to meet the full cost of their education, their tuition fees are assessed on cost-recovery basis. However, the cost excludes capital investment (buildings and technological infrastructure) and some on campus facilities, such as sports, access to clinic, etc. Otherwise, all costs associated with course development, instruction delivery, assessment, etc. should be met by distance learners on full cost-recovery basis.

Conclusion

Several important issues are crucial to successful policy development at the University of Botswana. First, a formally stated policy statement which spells out a national vision and course of action for tertiary distance education and expresses a willingness to commit appropriate resources did not only signal the seriousness of top political leaders, it also had the effect of leveraging institutional level policy initiatives.

Second, there is need for developing institutional policies defining modalities for administrative and management structures for provision of ODL. Centralising to a specialised management and administrative unit that has university-wide responsibility over provision of distance education appears more efficient, provided the administrative unit has enhanced status. Since these policies act as levers which guide the behaviour of staff, they should clearly define the role of faculties and departments concerning various distance education activities and processes such as programme initiation, course development, adapting learning materials, instruction delivery, assessment, programme and material review.
Third, embracing mainstreaming can be enhanced if academic staff in teaching departments is the primary resource for developing, revising and adapting content of distance learning materials. Ideally, all course writers should come from teaching departments, while recruitment of external writers should be done with active participation of teaching departments so that they retain ownership and control over content.

Fourth, there is the need to provide appropriate incentives for staff and students that participate in distance education. Staff often finds their participation in distance learning worthwhile if they receive adequate support and if they feel that doing so enhances their professions. There is therefore need to come up with appropriate incentives, including recognition and compensation measures that are integrated into the standard reward system of the institution. The greatest incentive for students is the perception that the quality of distance education programmes is comparable to fulltime programmes offered through conventional delivery modes.

Finally, there is need to continue reviewing distance education policies and practices to ensure that they remain consistent with university vision, mission and values. Such review must prepare staff for further changes as the distinction between distance education and on-campus instruction is increasingly becoming blurred.
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Effectiveness of comments on Tutor Marked Assignments: a case of Domasi College of Education

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of tutor marked assignments (TMAs) feedback comments on learner performance and make recommendations to improve the quality of assignment feedback in ODL. The general framework for investigating the effectiveness of comments on TMAs was guided by two research questions which sought to assess feedback comments on TMAs and determine their effect on learner performance at Domasi College of Education (DCE). The study used a case study genre of qualitative research involving 50 distance learners at DCE. Semi-structured focus group interviews and documentary analysis of 100 marked assignments were used as methods for collecting data, while the inductive method was used for data analysis. The general picture based on the research findings shows that the comments that tutors write on assignment scripts have an impact on the performance of the learners. Comments on TMAs can be effective either positively or negatively. For instance, the study found that some learners were encouraged and others were discouraged, depending on the nature of comments made to their assignments. Finally, the study concluded that comments on assignments could form a basis of instruction for the learners to learn in distance education. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations were made concerning strategies that ODL institutions and tutors could adopt in order to provide appropriate feedback on learners’ assignment so that TMAs should serve their intended purposes to a distance learner.

Introduction

Distance education at Domasi College of Education (DCE) was introduced in 2000 to reduce the critical shortage of teachers at secondary school level (Learners’ Handbook, 2005). The primary focus of the programme is to upgrade T2 teachers currently teaching in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) throughout the country. The mode of delivery for the programme is distance learning, supported by limited face to face residential sessions conducted on College campus. Given the nature of the programme, the College introduced a learner support system, called Learner Support Services, to support learners while pursuing their studies through distance mode.

Learner support services is defined in this study as a wide range of services provided through activities such as guidance/counselling support, administrative support and
tutorial support (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001). These services are vital because learners in distance education have uncertainties about getting to their destination (Modesto and Tau, 2009). The focus of the study, therefore, is on tutorial support services with an emphasis on interaction with learners through tutor marked assignments (TMAs).

In distance learning, face-to-face contact sessions are relatively minimal and, hence, do not promote genuine and concrete academic contact or interaction between the tutor and learners. This infrequent face to face interaction between tutors and learners characterizes distance education as involving the separation of the tutor from the learner and the learner from the learning group. As a result, in distance learning the face-to-face contact of conventional education is replaced by individualised mode of communication mediated by technology. On account of this, teaching in distance learning is also carried out by means of pedagogical comments made on assignments. This is necessitated by the fact that, unlike a learner at a conventional institution, it is usually difficult for distance learners to meet the tutor just whenever they want (Graham, 2000). Therefore, most of the academic support that distance learners get from tutors comes in form of tutor comments on learners’ assignments.

However, for the marked assignments to be helpful to distance learners it is important to provide quality and comprehensive feedback on assignments (Learners’ Handbook, 2005). If the tutor is unable to provide appropriate didactic comments, the comments are bound to fail to serve any meaningful instructional purpose. The problem could be made worse when comments lack clarity and easily yield to misinterpretation and confusion on the part of the learner. Therefore, feedback on marked assignments must be helpful and should guide the learners into doing specific things if they are to perform well in their academic work (Spronk, 2004). It is against this background that this study was interested in investigating the impact TMAs comments on the performance of distance learners at Domasi College of Education and identify research-supported strategies that could be used to enhance the quality of comments made by tutors.

To this end, an attempt was made to answer the following questions:

1. Is there evidence that tutors at Domasi College of Education make feedback comments to TMAs? This question seeks to establish whether tutors make comments on learners’ assignments or not.
2. What is the effect of the comments on learners’ performance? The question aims at finding out the implications of the comments on assignments on learners’ attitudes towards learning.
3. How effective are comments on TMAs as a medium of instruction? The question aimed at finding out the role of comments on TMAs in promoting learning.

This study was motivated by learners who complained that, in most of their assignments, they only received a mark without comprehensive feedback or any other information
supporting the assignment mark they had been given. Where comments were made, learners had complained that these were either not comprehensive or were discouraging to the learner. Examples of some of the comments include: ‘that is why you are studying through distance; you are not fit to be a teacher and at times zeros with ears and sobbing eyes’. It is against this background that this study intended to find out the effectiveness of comments on TMA on learner performance. The investigation sought to achieve the following three objectives, namely:

- identify various types of tutor comments on assignments.
- establish the effect of tutor comments on learners’ attitudes towards learning.
- explain the value of comments on assignments as a tool for instructions to the learner.

The motivation for this research study came from the need to address a real distance education problem to do with pedagogy. Unlike the classroom-based instruction where teachers provide lively learning situations, ODL learners study on their own. There is no direct teaching-learning interaction; ODL materials play the role of a teacher (Learners’ Handbook, 2005). Therefore, the tutors’ comments on assignments play a vital role in distance teaching and learning.

The study was an in-depth case study because the investigation centred only on DCE as an example of institutions offering distance education with a focus on TMAs. According to Merriam (1991) a case study is defined as an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a programme, event, person, process, institution, or social group. The research takes the form of a qualitative case study because it is particularistic (contextual). This means that it concentrates on a particular situation; in this case, how feedback on TAMs affected learners’ attitudes towards learning at DCE. As a result, the case study approach was appropriate for this research because it gave detailed accounts and deeper understanding of events and processes of how DCE uses assignments as an instructional tool in distance education.

There was one main limitation that might affect the results of this study. The limitation was on how to come up with a representative sample of the participants who would provide information on behalf of the whole population of DCE distance learners. However, the goal of the research questions was to overcome the stated potential limitation. For example, the questions were aimed at getting detailed data from various sources for examining the effectiveness of comments on TMAs on learners’ performance.

The following sections of the study provide a discussion of the literature review, methodology and research findings. The study then presents a discussion of the findings and ends with conclusions and recommendations that are drawn from the results of the study.
Literature Review

This section provides an insight into the current research and general understanding of the concept of TMAs in order to establish what is already known about them and to locate the research question within the context of published knowledge that already exists.

A tutor in distance learning is any person who offers assistance to distance learners through academic support during the course of study (Kumwenda, 2003). Assistance provided may involve individual and group tutoring, study and examination skills, feedback concerning assessment and progress and language support. Modesto and Tau (2009) support this by stating that a tutor adds human voice to TMAs and course materials. Thus, tutors help the learners to develop their knowledge of the course by supporting their progress through the materials (Graham, 2000).

In order to teach and provide comprehensive feedback on assignment, the tutor must understand each learner. Unlike the classroom teacher who addresses a collective mass of learners, the distance education tutor has to address every learner individually through comments the assignments. This makes the tutor’s task much more difficult and challenging than a classroom teacher. So, what is the role of the tutor when marking assignments for distance learners? According to Graham (2000), some of the tasks that the tutor does on assignment include:

- correct the learners and offer guidance where the learner may have gone wrong.
- elaborate on what the learner may have attempted summarily.
- point out and confirm the acceptable aspects of the learner’s responses.
- assess the level of learners’ achievement and explain the basis of that assessment so as to ensure better learner performance in the future.

Just as a classroom teacher helps learners to communicate with study materials orally, a distance education tutor does the same through written comments on assignments. As such, the tutor should not only scribble a grade on an assignment script, but should find ways to use assignment marking as opportunity to teach by providing informative comments. When pedagogical comments are not provided, it is not helpful to the learner because failure to provide comments could have been caused by one or more of several reasons reported by Koul (2000), including the following:

- The tutor might have disliked the work or is working under some kind of compulsion,
- A grade might be assigned as some form of overt evidence that the tutor has done his duty,
- The tutor might have read the assignment but did not have enough time to write comments that would be helpful to the learner,
• The tutor might have failed to realise the significance of the comments to the learner, from a pedagogical perspective.
• The tutor did not know what comments to make and how to put them across.

For TMA to be of value to the learner, some of the most important factors to consider include the quality of feedback and type of comments that the tutor provides. According to Kumwenda (2003), there are two broad categories of comments that a tutor can provide on assignments; these include teaching and non-teaching comments. Teaching comments, on one hand, are comments that provide academic guidance and instructions to the learner in the course of study (Spronk, 2004). Examples of such comments include positive comments, constructive comments and global comments. See appendix I for a brief description of each of the comments. On the other hand, non-teaching comments, also called harmful comments, are comments that may discourage learners to the extent that the comments may persuade them to drop out of the course (Spronk, 2004). The comments are damaging, counter-productive and are sometimes not justifiable. See appendix II for more details about each comments.

It should also be noted that comments on assignments can be a powerful tool in helping learners to succeed in their studies. Comments on assignments serve a range of functions, helping learners to measure their learning against objectives, provide reinforcement of their success, develop tutor-learner link and facilitate the learners’ learning process (Spronk, 2004). In addition, comments on assignments provide an opportunity for remedial help to the learner, incentive mechanism for progressive improvement in the studies and suggest where learners should focus for further studies. Finally, the comments form the basis for regular dialogue between learners and the tutor, providing feedback to learners on their performance, and identifying learners’ strong and weak points and enable diagnosis of weak and strong points.

The theoretical background underpinning this study is the Constructivist Theory (CT) of learning. CT is an epistemological theory, which offers an explanation of the nature of knowledge and how human beings learn (Kemmis, 1993). It maintains that individuals create or construct new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already know and believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they come in contact with (Cannella & Reiff, 1994; Richardson, 1997). Knowledge is acquired through involvement with content instead of imitation or repetition (Kroll & LaBoskey, 1996). Learning activities in constructivist settings are characterized by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving, and collaboration with others. The theory also promotes that learners should be able to learn in non-classroom situations, the so-called inspirer should, in most cases, be more of a facilitator than anything else and, finally, word of mouth need not be the only means of help (Spronk, 2004).

The truisms mentioned above provide the theoretical framework that forms the basis of TMA. Just as the theory promotes interactivity and participation with learners
during the process of learning, TMAs act as a vehicle through which a tutor facilitates learning and interacts with the learners through comments on assignments. Baath (1980) concurs with this by stating that there is need to promote other forms of two-way communication with simultaneous contact between tutors/teachers and learners through telephone tutoring, face to face tutoring and using comments on assignments. Using the base of TMAs, a tutor is able to motivate learners, ensure that learners are working hard and help those that are struggling through teaching comments on TMAs which are some of the aims of the Constructivist Theory in a classroom.

However, the main bone of contention against the theory is that constructivism presents to the tutors a formidable task of translating a learning theory into a theory of teaching (Borg & Gall, 1989), which in turn raises questions about what tutors need to know and be able to do. For the tutors, among other tasks, this involves balancing the need to acknowledge the different discipline-specific requirements of teaching with the need to model constructivist methods in the courses and practicum. If not appropriately applied, constructivist approaches may lead to the “abandonment” style of teaching and create a problem of devising culturally relevant and socially just pedagogies and practice.

From the discussions in this section, it is clear that reviewing of the literature on the distance education tutor and their role on TMAs was vital because it shared with research the studies that were related to the study in general and the research questions. In addition, it also helped to relate the study to the larger on-going dialogue in literature about the topic. It finally provided the framework for establishing the importance of the study as well as benchmarking for comparing the results of the study with other findings. The following section is a discussion of the methodology that was used for data collection.

**Methodology**

Based on the research questions and the aim of the study outlined in the introduction, it was clear that the study was non-experimental and lent itself towards qualitative research. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), qualitative approach to research is an approach that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value. Qualitative research sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality. Data was, therefore, collected from written and oral interactions through document analysis, interviews and focus group discussion.

On document analysis, a sample of one hundred (100) 2010 first semester marked assignments drawn from all faculties (40 from Faculties of Education, 30 each from Science and Humanities) were analysed immediately after they had been marked and before they were returned to the learners. Document analysis is a method for generating data from secondary sources (Borg and Gall, 1989). This provided the basis
for generating secondary data unobtrusively, which complemented the primary data sourced from interviews. This method was used to determine the type of feedback that tutors write on assignments.

Oral interactions were conducted with a random sample of 50 distance education learners drawn from the study sample. Purposive random sampling was used to identify interviewees (including focus group discussions) that would be representative of the target population. The target population comprised distance learners from all three faculties of Science, Humanities and Education that offer distance learning programmes. Data was collected from learners during the time of their first semester examinations when they came to the campus for examinations.

Given the difficulty of interviewing the participants individually, semi-structured focus group interviews were utilized to interview 5 groups of 10 learners per group. The interviews were manually recorded during the process of interviewing the participants. However, this method used in data collection had some shortfalls. For instance, the effectiveness of interviewing depended on researcher’s interpersonal skills as initiator of interview topics. According to Plant (2005), care should be taken to ensure that interviewers do not express their opinion or suggest answers so that the participants’ true views could be captured uncontaminated. Nevertheless, the presence of the research could be a limitation, since the learners, knowledge of the researcher as a senior member on the College could incline them to provide biased responses.

Mix methods were used for collection of data to promote triangulation of data collection. Woodly (2004) argues that mixed methods have risen as an important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to control bias and establish valid propositions, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research findings, because the researcher sees the same phenomenon from different perspectives. However, the challenge of using this approach was that each method had its own assumptions which were problematic to harmonize.

On data analysis, the study employed inductive data analysis techniques, reflecting the research design. Data analysis was approached from the perspective of Cohen et al (2007) who see it as a process from the organization of data under headings to conclusive analysis of the ways in which the data contributes to answering the research question. Based on this, the data was coded to come up with constituent categories and themes to organise the research findings. The next section, therefore, is a presentation of the findings of the data that were obtained through document analysis and the interviews.

**Findings**

The overall goal of this study was to establish the effectiveness of assignment feedback comments on learners’ performance and, accordingly, make with appropriate
recommendations to improve the quality and nature of assignment feedback used by distance education tutors at Domasi College of Education. The research findings, which are presented in the sections below, are organized into three sections based on the three main research questions.

Nature of comments made on Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs)

Data on comments made on TMAs were collected using document analysis and interviews with learners. The findings from these two sources and presented in the following sections, show corroboration.

Findings of the nature of comments on TMAs obtained through document analysis

A number of inferences can be made from table 1 on comments that tutors make on TMAs. For instance, 75% of sampled assignments contained comments that could be classified as uninformative and misleading (Appendix II), such as “you missed the question” or “improve in the next assignment”, without providing the learner with proper direction. Such comments, which do not point at the specific mistakes committed by learners have no pedagogical value, instead, they may put learners off track. In addition, this proportion of assignments did not have overall comments summarizing the tutor’s observations concerning the learner’s performance on various aspects of the assignment. According to Kumwenda (2003), global comments serve an important purpose of explaining to the learner how the tutor arrived at the overall grade.

Another finding on the nature of comments made by tutors was that 15% of the marked assignments contained hollow comments, which are comments that may not make sense to learners. For example, comments like “learn to write a good essay” do not convey anything purposeful to learners. Only 5% of assignments had constructive comments, which offer suggestions as to how the answer could have been improved. A comment like “your introduction was relevant to the question but you could have done better if you also included the scope of the essay” illustrate constructive. Such informative comments are helpful in effecting purposeful didactic communication (Kumwenda, 2003) because they inform learners of their strengths and weaknesses and point out the specific areas that needed improvement in the assignments.
Table 1: Distribution by type of tutor comments on assignments (N=100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of comments on TMAs</th>
<th>Number of assignments</th>
<th>Number of assignments in %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Misleading comments</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollow comments</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive comments</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null comments</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 also shows that the remaining 5% of sampled assignments had null comments. These are comments that are full of symbols, including question marks, underlined words, exclamation marks, circled words, phrases or even paragraphs. Such symbols have no accompanying explanations that would help learners to make sense of the message behind the symbols. According to Kumwenda (2003), such comments are vague because they do not confirm or question, illustrate or explain, refute or approve anything on the assignments.

Finally, document analysis also revealed many learners that sat semester examinations in several subjects without having received assignment feedback. This was corroborated by interviewees who reported that they did not receive feedback on some assignments prior to sitting end-of-semester examinations, thereby annulling the pedagogical value of marked assignments. This situation was further confirmed by heaps of marked assignments that were only released by central administration office when learners had already left campus after finishing writing end-of-semester examinations.

Findings of the nature of tutor comments on TMAs obtained through interviews

Interview data show that respondents provided mixed responses concerning the type of comments that tutors write on assignments. Table 2 below provides a summary of interview findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of comments on TMAs</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>% of number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Null comments (only marks)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmful comments</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive comments</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to table 2 above, interviewees expressed mixed reactions concerning the nature of comments on TMAs. For instance, 30% of interviewees reported hardly seeing comments on marked assignments apart from a mark, which did not make much sense to them. These interviewees explained that the assignments they received tutors were without comments, except for a mark that the tutor writes on the assignment. For example, two members of one focus group received support from the rest of group
members when one stated “I fail to make sense of the mark that I get on my marked assignments because it is not accompanied by any comment to explain it,” while the other said that “tutors should guide us on how to write good essays. They should do some corrections on areas that we fail rather than just writing marks without a comment”.

According to Kumwenda (2003), such comments on TMAs are null and do not confirm or question, illustrate or explain, refute or approve of anything. As a result, the learner does not benefit much from receiving a mark only unless the tutor explains how the mark was arrived at.

Table 2 further shows that 40% of the interviewees reported that their assignments had harmful comments. Interviewees also reported that they get discouraging and unconstructive comments, which often do not make sense. For example, one participant reported:

The comments are not good because in some assignments tutors just give common marks to all learners with the same comments. Does it mean that all the learners wrote the same things?

Another interviewee had this to say,

The feedback is not comprehensive and does not specify what the learner is supposed to do in the next assignment. As such, in most cases you do not know what to do next. I am not a failure. I know I can do better but a request of having encouraging comments from tutors who fail to do so. In some cases the comments that I have on my marked assignments are just symbols full of underlining, question marks and exclamation marks.

According to Kumwenda (2003), such comments discourage learners to the extent that they may be persuaded to drop from the programme or develop a negative attitude towards the programme and the tutor. This is also in agreement with Spronk (2002) who reported that harmful comments are damaging and counter-productive and often unjustifiable. The implication of such comments to learning is that they serve as hindrance to communication between the learner and tutor.

Negative comments notwithstanding, 30% of interviewees reported that they had received positive feedback on their marked assignments. For instance, two interviewees reported that,

The feedback that I get on my marked assignments is comprehensive and encouraging. It points out my strong and weak points … [while the other said] the comments are good and point out where one went wrong. For example, the comment may indicate that you have good points but you failed to unify them in writing.
Such comments encourage learners to repeat and better their performance because of the realisation that they are on the same wave length with the tutor (Koul, 2000). These comments actually result in further mutual advantageous communication between the tutor and learners.

**Perceived effects of TMAs comments on learners’ performance**

This study also sought to determine the effect of comments made on tutor marked assignments on the performance of learners. The interviewees reported that comments on assignments had produced several mixed effects on their performance. Table 3 below presents a summary of the findings concerning the perceptions of interviewees concerning the effect TMAs comments on learner performance.

**Table 3:** Perceptions of respondents on the effects of TMAs comments on learner performance (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence of comments on performance</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive effects</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effects</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of inferences can be drawn from table 3. For instance, 42% of the respondents indicated that the comments had positive effects on their performance. A typical response that represents the perceptions of most learners was when one interviewee reported that “The comments help me to improve in the next assignment because I avoid repeating the mistakes that I made in the previous assignments” … while another interviewee reported that “positive comments are good because they encourage one to forge ahead regardless of many shortfalls in the previous assignments”.

These remarks indicate the positive influence that TMAs comments have on the performance of the research sample. This shows that tutors assist learners in acquiring pedagogical skills related to the course. According to Graham (2000), these skills may be specific to the subject being studied, such as essay/report writing, designing/executing experiments, undertaking literature surveys and lesson planning.

On the other hand, 30% of the participants reported that the comments had negative and demoralising effects on their performance, while 28% indicated that the comments had no effect on their performance. Concerning those who were negatively affected by the TMAs comments, one interviewee indicated that “Since the comments made on the assignment are not elaborate, I continue making the same mistakes and there is fear that I can make the same mistake due to contradictions of advice from different tutors”, while other interviewee suggested that “there is need
to change the mode of marking so that future assignments can encourage us rather than what we are getting now”.

All these comments reflect a negative impact of comments on TMAs on the performance of the learners. As argued by Kumwenda (2003), the implication of such comments to learners is that they form a blocked between the learner and the tutor and learners may develop resentment towards the course which negatively affecting their performance.

Learners’ perceptions of the instructional value of TMAs comments

The findings show that the comments made on TMAs are crucial to distance learners as an instructional that aides learning. For instance, 41 of the 50 participants, representing 82% said that the comments on the assignment provide a basis for them to learn new things in their studies and some of the responses were;

Through the comments on my assignments, I have changed to be a hard worker and learn how to research for more information in my studies. I am motivated and encouraged to work hard in the other assignments and show the desired techniques as required by the tutor while the other one said, the comments have a positive impact on my learning because they help me improve my study and writing skills.

On the other hand, some respondents indicated that TMAs comments had taught them how to read with a critical mind in order to come up with relevant information for future work. Others reported that comments had helped them to learn how to make quotations, citations, and write references in the assignments.

However, there are some respondents who felt that TMAs comments had no instructional. For example, 9 (18%) respondents indicated that assignment feedback comments did not help them to learn because they found them discouraging. One of the interviewees indicated that “the comments that I get on assignments can make someone stop studying hard because they are discouraging” … while another one said “the comments should be able to direct to the point otherwise, the learning process may not be effective since learners may lose interest. As such, comments from TMAs do not motivate me to study”.

These findings show that, while comments on TMAs could be a powerful tool for helping learners to succeed in their studies, they also have the potential to demotivate learners to a point where they may drop out of a distance learning programme. According to Spronk (2002), comments on assignments serve a range of functions, from promoting to hindering the learning process. A similar perspective comes from Modesto and Tau (2009), who argue that tutors add human voice to distance learning through TMAs and course materials. Therefore, in distance learning, the role of tutors is to help learners
develop subject matter knowledge and supporting learner progress through pedagogical comments to TMAs.

Discussion of the Findings

Generally, observation from both document analysis and responses from interviews indicate that there is a mixture of types of comments that tutors provide on TMAs for distance learners. The TMAs comments reported in the literature review, which range from teaching to non-teaching comments, also featured in sampled TMAs comments and interviews. The results of this study also showed that only a small fraction of tutors provide positive feedback on TMAs, while most provided non-teaching comments that had negative implications on the overall performance of distance learners at Domasi College of Education (DCE). Unfortunately, non-teaching comments, such as non-verbal remarks like question marks, underlining and side brackets are not helpful to the learner (Spronk, 2002) because learners do not decode non-teaching comments and, in fact, cannot do so. Therefore, distance education tutors cannot effectively communicate with learners using symbols. Besides, non-teaching comments on TMAs are destructive and discourage learners, to the extent that learners may lose hope of improving their performance. Such comments are damaging and counter-productive to the progress of a distance learner’s progress during the course of study.

The findings of this study also show that the perceptions of distance learners on the effects of comments on TMAs on their learning experience were diverse. Some learners cherish the value of comments on the TMAs because they provide opportunity for improving the next assignments, while others found that comments had a detrimental effect on future performance. Either way, this shows that comments on TMAs have a considerable effect on learners’ performance. For example, interview data show that some respondents felt that pedagogical comments on assignments encourage learners to do well and work hard in subsequent assignments. On the other hand, learners also viewed non-teaching comments as destructive and had negative effect on their performance.

Meanwhile, feedback on TMAs emerged as a medium through which tutors can support learners by providing them with instructional comments. The tutor can use TMAs comments to help learners measure their learning against objectives, reinforce their success, develop tutor-learner linkages and facilitate the learning process. Through feedback comments on TMAs, the tutor is also able to establish regular dialogue with learners and provide learners with feedback on their performance. This is attested by a large proportion of the learners who cherished the contributions that comments on TMAs make towards learning. Furthermore, the findings of this study also validate the effectiveness of positive comments on TMAs as medium of instruction, which helps improve performance. Finally, positive comments augment the minimal interaction between the tutor and learners.
Therefore, in view of the foregoing discourse, it is important for tutors in distance education to write comprehensive and positive feedback comments to assignments because of the significance of comments in contributing enhanced performance of distance learners. Pedagogical comments on assignments serve as instructional medium and a means for communicating learners.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

Based on the evidence from the findings, it could be concluded that the study adequately answered the main research questions, which sought to determine whether distance education tutors at Domasi College of Education (DCE) give comments on assignments, the nature of the effects of TMAs feedback comments on learner performance and, finally, the use of comments on assignments as a medium of instruction to distance learners.

The concerns that learners had on the lack of comments or lack of comprehensive comments on TMAs was validated though this study. According document analysis, 75% of TMAs that were analysed lacked comprehensive comments, 15% had hollow comments that were not helpful to learners, while 5% had null comments that are symbols, which do not offer any guidance to learners. Furthermore, 30% of interviewees concurred that their assignments did not contain feedback comments, while 40% had received assignments containing harmful comments.

This study also revealed that tutors on distance education programmes under investigation wrote diverse comments on assignments. The comments were classified as teaching or non-teaching. These comments have impact on the overall performance of the learners. Feedback comments on TMAs also served as a platform through which tutors provide feedback that could assist learners perform better on distance learning programmes. On account of TMAs comments, some learners learn new skills like writing, study and critical skills, which are essential in distance learning (Spronk, 2002), while others use comments to assess their understanding of the course, identify weaknesses and strengths and even search for new information to augment their knowledge.

Meanwhile, some learners found TMAs comments very discouraging, because they felt the comments were not constructive. This may result in learners developing negative attitudes towards both the course and the tutor, thereby hindering communication between the tutor and the learner. Finally, the study also established challenges that contributed to the lack of comprehensive feedback on TMAs, such as lack of tutor training on how to mark distance learning assignments and work overload on the part of the tutors.

Therefore, given that the findings of this study are informative and significant, they could serve as a basis for ODL institutions to provide and improve the support that
learners get through feedback comments on tutor marked assignments (TMAs). ODL institutions could also benchmark best practices for TMAs in order to continue providing instructional support to distance learners through pedagogical comments on TMAs.

On account of the challenges that TMAs face as a support service for distance learners, the study recommends that ODL institutions should intensify training workshops to orient tutors on the importance and of TMAs feedback comments. Such workshops should take the tutors through the concept of who tutors are in distance education, their role in marking assignments, the effect TMAs comments on learners’ performance. Tutor induction and training workshops should have a hands-on dimension that allows tutors to acquire skills on how to write feedback comments on tutor marked assignments for distance learners.

Finally, fulltime academics and those who train tutors on how to mark distance education assignments should sample marked assignments in order to assess and determine whether tutors are marking according to agreed standards. Such monitoring should be seen as a quality assurance measure that contributes to enhance learner performance.
References


### Appendix I: Types of teaching comments on assignment-responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of comments</th>
<th>Description of the type of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Positive comments** | 1. These are comments that approve of the stand taken by the learner.  
2. They indicate that the answer is up to the mark, excellent or in spite of the flaws in the answer, it is original.  
3. These comments encourage the learner to repeat and better his performance because of the realisation that he is on the same wave length of that of the tutor.  
4. It is these comments that actually result in and then further mutually advantageous communication between the tutor and the learner. |
| **Constructive comments** | 1. These are comments that offer suggestions as to how the answer could have been improved.  
2. They are helpful in effecting purposeful deductive communication. |
| **Global comments** | 1. These are comments that are written at the end of the assignment-responses to cover the entire assignment-response with reference to various aspects of the answer.  
2. These comments help to explain the overall grade. |

*Sources: Kumwenda, 2003:58-60*

### Appendix II: Types of non-teaching comments on assignment-responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of comments</th>
<th>Description of the type of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Harmful comments** | 1. They put the learner off from learning.  
2. They fail to establish a rapport between the learner and the tutor.  
3. The learner feels hurt by such remarks.  
4. The implication of this to learning is that they form a blocked between the learner and the tutor as such communication is hindered. |
| **Hollow comments** | 1. These are comments that a learner cannot make any meaning out of them.  
2. They do not convey anything purposeful and does not promote learning. |
| **Misleading comments** | 1. These are comments that put learners off track.  
2. The comments may ask a learner to do something that does not serve any purpose.  
3. The comments do not point out to earlier mistakes. |
| **Null comments** | 1. These are comments which do not confirm or question, illustrate or explain, refute or approve of anything.  
2. These include all types of non-verbal remarks like question marks, underlining and side brackets among others which are not helpful to the learners and learners do not decode them and in fact, cannot do so. |

*Sources: Kumwenda, 2003:60-62*
Sustainable models for collaborations and partnerships in open and
distance learning: A case of Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) recognizes that forming collaborations and partnerships is both advantageous and necessary in order to compete at the global level. This study examined ZOU’s models for collaborations and partnerships in open and distance learning. Data were collected through document analysis and face to face, email, and telephone interviews. The interviews were contacted with a manager in the registrar’s office, a director for legal services, two faculty deans, two faculty chairpersons, four programme leaders, and four programme coordinators. The above mentioned interviewees were selected for interviews because of their involvement in collaborations and partnerships at different levels, including identifying, implementing, and evaluating ZOU partnerships. The data were analysed through content analysis. The study found out that most of ZOU’s partnerships are inactive because of lack of commitment and monitoring and evaluation systems. The study recommends that ZOU develops systems to monitor and evaluate the collaborations and partnerships. It is concluded that ZOU does not have a documented policy specific to maintaining and sustaining collaborations and partnerships as well as specific models to guide the implementation of partnerships.

Introduction

Academic collaborations and partnerships are part of the popular discourse in higher education circles. The researcher has observed that academic partnerships and collaborations and their efforts to foster inter institutional cooperation have gained tenure across the global village and, in particular, Southern Africa. While collaborations and partnerships have grown and benefited most traditional higher education institutions, very little of the ODL institutions’ models for collaborations and partnerships have been documented. Therefore, there is paucity of knowledge of collaboration and partnership models found in ODL institutions. This paper reports the findings of a study that examined ZOU’s models of collaboration and partnerships. It will present the introduction, background to the study, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, recommendations and conclusions.
Background to the Study

Open and distance learning has been given ample attention in many parts of the world. In Africa and Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, this attention has triggered off phenomenal growth through collaborations and partnerships of ODL institutions. To fully utilize the strengths of ODL, the collaborations amongst ODL institutions are highly encouraged by SADC ODL secretariat based in the SADC headquarters in Botswana, Gaborone. Evidence of collaborations amongst ODL institutions in SADC countries exists in the form of associations and consortia such as Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) and National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning of South Africa (NADEOSA).

Across higher education, the word collaboration has become synonymous with effective scholarships and collegiality (Lomas, Burke & Page: 2008). Definitions of collaboration include, “an active working partnership supported by some kind of institutional commitment” (Neil, 1981:25). Brinkerhoff (2002:14) defines partnership as a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labour based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner’. For the purposes of this paper, collaboration is defined as a process of participation through which ODL institutions and other organisations or associations work together to achieve desired research, teaching and learning goals. The term partnership in this paper is used to refer to any relationship between ODL institutions and independent organisations created to achieve some mutually beneficial learning goals and objectives.

Importance of the Study

The study is of importance to ODL practitioners in order to gain insight of sustainable models for collaborations. Collaborations and partnerships are important to understand in ODL institutions because they generate new ideas. The interplay of ideas generated by the vastly different experiences of partners can ignite true resourcefulness. Furthermore partnerships leverage complementary skills, strengths and markets. The researcher believes that critical teaching, technical and business skills which may be limited in supply within a single institution often can be more readily available in another partner. The essence of this paper is to create awareness of such benefits of partnerships in the ODL community in Southern Africa.

Literature Review

According to Daniel (2005) the factors that make effective collaborations at inter-institutional level are 1) clarity of purpose, 2) small group (the smaller the group of partners the more chances of success), 3) contribution of all partners, 4) committed people and 5) adequate funding.
Michelau and Poulin (2008) conducted a study on academic collaborations in the United States and Canada. The study was undertaken through a survey design. The researchers targeted 85 academic collaborations with a survey seeking input on the amount and sources of their funding. The study concluded that academic collaborations foster inter-institutional partnerships that share resources to increase institutional capacity for sharing of and access to courses and programmes. In this study the researcher sought information for institutions that already have MOAs and MOUs with ZOU and qualitative research approach was undertaken as opposed to a survey.

Ramage, McFarland and Jurafsky (2010) undertook a study of “Academic Collaboration in Computational Linguistics with Latent Mixtures of Authors” in the United States at Stanford University. The study followed a trend analysis approach. The purpose of the study was to determine the collaborative properties of papers written by authors of linguistics. The researchers found out that significant variations exist in the way people collaborate within subfields. This study sought to investigate the collaborative models that exist in the institution and was not confined to a specific discipline or department. Keyter (2002) wrote about “Institutional open and distance learning collaboration in Namibia”. The study was undertaken through desk research. The study established that ODL institutions in Namibia that include the University of Namibia (UNAM), Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), Polytechnic of Namibia (PN) and National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) collaborate at different levels with University of South Africa (UNISA), Technikon South Africa (TSA) and others. The study concluded that smart partnerships formed by Namibian Institutions offering ODL have gained from a network of centres around the country and are providing improved study facilities for ODL students.

Lee, Thurub-Nkhosi and Giannini-Gachago (2005) report on an informal collaboration model that was between University of Botswana and University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre. The report says that informal collaborations in higher education institutions (HEIs) arise due to bureaucratic or political barriers forcing practitioners to form academic partnerships that foster informal collaborations and partnerships among institutions. The informal collaboration between University of Botswana and University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre was used to develop a quality assurance tool for e-Learning and compare approaches in e-Learning course development and quality assurance proceedings at both universities.

University of South Africa (UNISA) has an International Relations and Partnership Directorate (IRPD), whose role is to strategically position UNISA internationally as a leading open and distance learning institution through mutually beneficial partnerships and collaborations. The directorate seeks to encourage greater international interaction between UNISA and other public institutions of higher learning, governments, national, regional and international organisations.
IRPD currently administers and manages over 115 collaboration agreements in 36 countries around the world. The evidence is shown by IRPD’s list of licenses grouped under licenses in Africa, outside Africa and internationally. Out of the 52 703 international students registered in South African Universities in 2005 academic year, 16 600 of them (31.4%) were UNISA students (Council on Higher Education October, 2009).

According to UNISA policy document (2008), UNISA collaborates with distance education institutions in South Africa, Africa and internationally to make opportunities available for employees and students. For example UNISA collaborates with Universities in Canada, United Kingdom, Bahrain and Germany. In Africa, UNISA collaborations include the Adult Learning and Distance Education Centre (ADLEC) in Seychelles, AEA Training Centre in Mauritius, Africa Centre for Capacity Building (ACCB) in Zambia, BA Isago University College (Pty) Ltd in Botswana. These UNISA collaborations are in areas that include student support services, academic development of courseware and the use of multimedia, integration of technology to support communication at a distance, training and development of university employees, joint development of formal and non-formal courses or instructional material or the licensing of material, acquisition of experience on common policy issues and sourcing of tutors for face to face tuition or e-tutoring.

In the United Kingdom, the Open University (OUUK) has a Directorate called Business Development, which has the overall responsibility for the University’s International Strategy and Employer Engagement. The focus of OUUK collaborative ventures is on finding new ways to fulfil the mission of opening up educational opportunities to more people in more places. Currently OUUK has 15 partners found in the Arab world, Bangladesh, Botswana, China, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Romania, Russia, Singapore, Slovak and Czech Republics, South Africa and Vietnam. OUUK offers a range of partnership models, which can be adapted to suit the needs of each institution. According to the www.ouworldwide.com website, the OUUK operates two collaboration models; the 1) partnership to use under licence OUUK course materials to offer as partner institution degrees and 2) partnerships to offer OUUK degrees using OUUK study materials.

**Partnership to offer your own degrees using licensed OUUK course materials**

Open University course materials comprise of books, DVDs, CDs, software, and online materials and support. All materials are produced to a very high standard and are renowned throughout the world for the quality and comprehensiveness of their teaching. The partner institution can license OUUK course materials for use in their own education and training programmes.
Key features of this model are:

- Partner institution can use OU material which may be translated and/or adapted
- Partner institutions do not have to use the whole course but can choose which units or printed materials to use or leave out
- Partner institutions are responsible for examining and assessing students
- Partner students receive the partner’s qualification
- Expert consultancy and advice can be provided on how to teach distance education courses and how to make Open University course materials relevant to partner students (http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/main/the-ou-explained/partnership, 2011)

Partnerships to offer Open University Degrees

Under this model, the partner institution participates in the delivery of OUUK degree programmes in their country. Whilst there is less scope for adapting programmes to suit local needs, partner students will benefit from achieving an internationally recognised UK degree without leaving their own countries. Partner institution benefits from a strategic relationship with the world’s premier distance learning institution and gains in-depth knowledge of OU’s systems and methodologies, which will enhance a partner’s own capabilities and reputation.

Under this model, the responsibilities between OUUK and the partner institution are as indicated in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OU’s responsibilities</th>
<th>Partner’s responsibilities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Register students</td>
<td>Market programmes to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Award credit/qualifications</td>
<td>Recruit students and collect fees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide partnership manager</td>
<td>Manage communication with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ tutors</td>
<td>Receive and distribute course materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor tutors</td>
<td>Provide advice and guidance to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage assessment and examination</td>
<td>Employing local tutors may be possible once the programme is established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retain direct control of all quality assurance activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://www.ouworldwide.com/global_partnerships.asp

The most important point illustrated in the above model is the clear definition of roles between the OUUK and partner institutions. This is a key aspect in all OUUK partnerships that involve offering learning programmes on behalf of a partner.
The review of this literature has revealed that there are several models of collaborations and partnerships amongst ODL institutions and that there is need to establish directorates with specific mandates to implementing them. The literature has revealed that, where partners share responsibilities and resources, both institutions benefit. Specific benefits that have been revealed are use of learning resources by partners, gaining marketing strategies from mega universities and improved employment opportunities. Another observation from the literature is that partnerships are not limited to universities only, but extent to other organisations. Finally, this literature review has revealed that not all types of academic collaborations are equal, as they often involve different institutions that may be at different levels of development.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used for the study. A case study was the design for the study. Data were collected through document analysis and in-depth face to face, telephone and e-mail interviews. The researcher developed an interview schedule of 10 questions with room for probes used especially during telephone and face to face interviews. A similar set of questions were used to interrogate the documents read and analysed. The documents interrogated were from the registrar’s office, faculty reports and partners’ websites. The questions included those about collaboration and partnership models, challenges, achievements and strategies for sustaining the partnerships. Three questions formed the research agenda:

1. What Models have emerged for academic partnerships in ZOU?
2. What is the perceived value of academic partnerships?
3. Are there recommendations and principles or best practices that can be identified to support the further development of academic partnerships?

Data Collection

Data collection was through document analysis and in-depth interviews. The interviews were contacted with manager in registrar’s office, director for legal services, four faculty deans, two faculty chairpersons, four programme leaders and four programme coordinators. The above mentioned interviewees were selected for interviews because of their involvement in collaborations and partnerships at different levels of identifying the possible partners. The responses were transcribed into scripts.

The documents that were read primarily focused on the legal foundations for identifying and implementing collaborations and partnerships. Some of the documents were in the form of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Memorandum of Association (MOA). In addition to the ZOU legal documents and reports, websites of the partners’ were visited to understand their businesses and their operations in terms of their
mandates and activities. However, instruments for implementing collaborations and partnerships and reports for monitoring the partnerships, which could have been used in this study, were sought but not found.

Data Analysis Techniques

The researcher analysed transcripts from the in-depth interview questions using qualitative methods for summarising narrative data. The researcher analysed and organized the narrative using predetermined thematic categories associated with the questions and then re-analysed it using the themes that emerged from the data. Following categorization of the themes, the narrative was re-read to identify the themes and segments of the narrative that reflected the themes. Documents, primarily from the ZOU and the partners’ websites were reviewed for their relevance to getting insight of the ZOU collaborations and partnerships’ models. The information was then summarised to provide descriptions of different partners and documents that have influenced the evolution of the collaborations and partnerships in the ZOU.

The meta-synthesis was conducted through the use of analytic techniques derived from qualitative research, primarily thematic analysis (Manning & Luyt, 2011). Critical themes that emerged from the different sources of data were identified. The data from the three sources, primarily key informants interviews, document analysis and web based scripts, were then analysed for information relevant to the themes. The data and narratives were examined for consistency and contradictions within each theme. The themes were then used to organize the results for the report and provide foundation and framework for conclusions. The researcher triangulated data through analysis of the interview, documents analysis and web-based scripts.

Results

We present the findings of the meta-synthesis using the themes that emerged from the analysis as organizing constructs. The document analysis and interview results are presented in the context of the following themes.

Context

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) started in 1993 as Centre for Distance Education within University of Zimbabwe and evolved to University of Zimbabwe College for Distance Education in 1997 before becoming state-funded University in 1999. ZOU is a multidisciplinary inter-faculty institution offering degrees and non-degree qualifications through ODL to youth and adult learners. It is a learning institution that serves all types of people and draws its students from all over the country including impoverished rural areas. At present it has four faculties of Commerce and Law, Applied Sciences,
Science and Technology and Education, Arts and Humanities. By December 2010 ZOU was offering 37 degree programmes (Kurasha & Gwarinda, 2010). The University has eleven (11) regional centres, with an annual graduation rate of 2 500 and a 16 000 student enrolment in 2010.

Nature of Agreements

ZOU has most of its collaborations and partnerships in the form of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). A Memorandum of Understanding is defined as a written agreement which clarifies broad relationships and responsibilities between two or more organizations that share services, clients, and resources (http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/memorandum-of-understanding-MOU-or-MoU). On the other hand, a Memorandum of Agreement is a written agreement that clarifies the actions, responsibilities, matrix and specific deliverables to be produced by the partners (http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/memorandum-of-understanding-MOU-or-MoU).

Collaborating ODL Institutions and Organizations

ZOU has several Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) and Memorandum of Agreements (MOAs) with several ODL institutions and organizations in and outside Zimbabwe. As of December 2011, ZOU had 66 MOUs and MOAs with sister ODL institutions in Zimbabwe, Africa, Asia and Europe. Some of the partners will now be briefly described.

Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) was created by an Act of Parliament in December 1998. Its creation marked a milestone in the development of distance education in Botswana and a significant step towards realizing Botswana’s Vision 2016, which emphasizes the elimination of poverty through the provision of knowledge and skills.

ZOU collaborates with BOCODOL on exchange of programmes, learner support, research, quality assurance, accreditation, consultancies and staff exchange. The partnership is driven by the ZOU Faculty of Commerce and Law. There are two BOCODOL diploma programmes introduced since 2007; namely, Diploma in Business Management and Diploma in Human Resources Management. These two programmes are quality assured by the Zimbabwe Open University. On the other hand, a ZOU Bachelor of Commerce (Human Resources and Industrial Relations) degree is offered by BOCODOL under joint offer provisions between ZOU and BOCODOL.

A second ZOU partnership is with the Nairobi-based Regional AIDS Training Network (RATN). RATN was established in 1997 as a project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) designed to build regional capacity for HIV
response in Eastern and Southern Africa. RATN is currently made up of a membership of twenty nine Training Member Institutions (RATN MIs) that develop and deliver skills development courses targeted at mid-level STI/HIV/AIDS workers, trainers, programme managers and senior policy makers.

CONNECT (Zimbabwe Institute of Systematic Therapy) is a Zimbabwean welfare organisation (registration no. 7/85), staffed by professional counsellors and trainers, which collaborates with ZOU’s Faculty of Applied Sciences. This non-governmental organisation (NGO) offers counselling, training, and consultancy services to all sectors of the community covering a wide range of problems. CONNECT is the leading Zimbabwean training organisation in family therapy and systemic counselling, offering long term “distance education” courses for grassroots workers, as well as more intensive training in family therapy for those wishing to specialise in the field. Short courses are also available on specific training needs, according to demand. Faculty of Applied Sciences collaborates with CONNECT in areas of quality assurance, module writing, moderation of examinations and training of staff.

On January 1, 2010, Swedish Linnaeus University opened its doors for the first time as Sweden’s newest university, the result of a merger between Kalmar University and Växjö University. Linnaeus University pursues teaching and research in Kalmar and Växjö. Kalmar, with its close proximity to the coast and the Baltic Sea, is noted for its prominent research in the natural sciences. In Växjö, the humanities and social sciences are strong research areas, as well as research connected with the forestry and the wood industry.

Although ZOU does not have a formal agreement with Linnaeus University yet, the collaboration between the later and Faculty of Science and Technology dates back to 2004. The collaboration has been in staff exchange and research. In 2011, one of ZOU staff members from the Faculty of Science and Technology was given a scholarship to study for a PhD at Linnaeus University for three years.

Meanwhile, another open university that collaborates with ZOU is Open University Malaysia (OUM). Open University Malaysia was established in August 2000, followed by its official launching on 26 August 2002. Although incorporated as a private university under the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996, the University leverages on the quality, prestige and capabilities of its strategic partners - a consortium of the 11 public universities.

OUM’s strengths span a wide range of disciplines, from IT and Engineering to the Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Science. Employing the latest approaches in the teaching-learning process, it offers academic programmes that cater to the demands of industry and the marketplace in general. Through OUM, working adults can upgrade their knowledge and skills for the purpose of career progression, career transition or pursuing lifelong learning ambitions through distance learning.
ZOU collaborates with OUM in areas of Information Technology and Communication (ITC) learning materials, professional development skills and administration knowledge and skills. ZOU staff has on several occasions visited OUM on contact and sabbatical leave with a goal to understand OUM’s academic and administrative issues. Currently ZOU is adapting the OUM ITC learning materials to suit the Zimbabwean context because ZOU is working towards establishing the Faculty of ITC.

Finally, ZOU collaborates with a local religious organisation, the Domboshava Theological College (DTC), an interdenominational, evangelical Christian college. The collaboration is on the joint offering of religious degrees with the college.

Discussion

The importance of collaborations and partnerships with other ODL institutions has received increasing recognition over the past three years. The model for ZOU collaborations and partnerships is different from those from other institutions in that the collaborations are manned from the registrar’s office unlike UNISA, IGNOU and OUUK that have directorates for collaborations and partnerships. The study has revealed that most of ZOU’s collaborations and partnerships are dormant. For example, the MOU with Vaal University, South Africa expired in 2009 and there is no indication of the evaluation of the partnership or any documentation to indicate whether the partnership was renewed or what transpired during the collaborations.

Interviews with the registrar’s office revealed that there is no specific office responsible for monitoring the established collaborations and partnerships. When the manager was asked for follow up minutes of the MOUs and MOAs he said:

We do not have any minutes besides the signed documents. There is no manager in the registrar’s office responsible for the MOUs and MOAs and as such we do not know whether we are benefiting from them.

This was confirmed by lack of reports on evaluations on the signed collaborations from the documents analysed. On further probes with an officer in the registrar’s office, it was observed that ZOU does not have a policy specific for initiating, planning, implementing, and evaluating the collaborations and partnerships. This was also confirmed from the interviews with the faculty deans and chairpersons. In summary, two of the deans and one chairperson had this to say:

After the signing of the MOUs or MOAs we rarely do evaluations or meetings with the people in the registrar’s office to evaluate the agreements and see whether we are benefiting. We do not have evaluation instruments or policies to measure the progress or successes of the MOUs or MOAs.
The study revealed that ZOU does not have in place procedures or systems for implementing the MOUs and MOAs. For example, the data collected did not reveal the systems or policies such as those for intellectual property, conflict of interest and procedures relating to joint research funding. This is contrary to other ODL institutions, such as OUUK, IGNOU and UNISA, which have documented systems and policies for collaborations and partnerships that are posted on their websites. ZOU does not have information that tells prospective partners how ZOU implements collaborations and partnerships. ZOU does not give licenses to partners but nurtures its partners by quality assurance and sharing of programmes. What has emerged from the data is not a specific collaboration model, but a collaboration process where the collaborations are in most cases initiated at departmental level, approved at faculty level, legalised at University level and send back for implementation at faculty level. The study also revealed that ZOU also operates informal collaboration, wherein collaborations are implemented without the MOU (Lee, Thurub-Nkhosi & Giannini-Gachago, 2005).

This study also revealed that, while most of the MOUs and MOAs indicate collaborative research and consultancies as some of the collaborating areas, both information from the documents and interviews did not reveal collaborative initiatives in this area. Data also revealed that the collaborations in research are mostly on paper because no research contracts were identified. Furthermore, no professorial chairs were identified as well as joint research in which the private sector and ZOU contribute jointly to provide researchers, research funding, and researchers’ facilities and equipment, and collaborate on equal terms in pursuit of common projects, with the aim of achieving excellence. In addition, no endowed chairs exist as evidence of private sector and ZOU collaboration in research. Endowed chairs and endowed research departments are educational and research bodies funded by private donations to cover the expenses needed to establish and operate the body (personal costs, research costs, administration costs).

The study revealed perceived values and benefits accruing from collaborations and partnerships as improved delivery of programmes, staff development opportunities, improved communication and information dissemination, increased resource availability, enhanced use of programmes and resources available in the partners’ communities and improved public image. The interviewees also revealed that the benefits of the collaborations may be immediate or long term, direct or indirect. One of the interviewees said that they had been offered premises for holding tutorials for free by one of the partners. However, on further probing it was found out that the University had not taken up the offer, yet the faculty was still experiencing problems in accommodating tutorials. Another interviewee said;

Our collaboration with RATN has exposed some of our faculty to knowledge and skills in monitoring and evaluation through staff development courses implemented by the organisation (RATN)
Yet another interviewee said

Our collaboration with Domboshava Training College has opened space for our students’ tutorials and most of our students have practical sessions in the churches affiliated to the College. Before this collaboration our students had problems in securing places for practical lessons.

While these benefits are real in some departments, the benefits are not fully realized due to lack of proper collaboration implementation procedures and policies.

Some of the barriers to effective collaborations and partners revealed by this study include, but are not limited to:

• lack of staff or time to participate in the collaboration
• slowed decision making or bureaucracy
• mistrust of other organisations
• limited resources or lack of willingness to share existing resources
• position statements that are inconsistent with policies of individual coalition members
• decreased levels of cooperation among collaborators during a crisis
• conflicts with organisational focus and priorities between the collaboration and its members

This study also revealed that ZOU experienced brain drain during 2006-2009 due to economic meltdown and this resulted in the shortage of staff knowledgeable in managing collaborations. This is reflected in most of the MOUs and MOAs not being active as nothing is being implemented in most of the agreements. As for slowed decision making, interviewees from the faculties and departments decried the time taken to make decisions to implement proposed collaborations at faculty or departmental level by those in senior positions. Data also revealed that some of the MOAs and MOUs were inactive during the economic recession although there were people who had been implementing them before the economic crisis.

**Limitations**

The study collected information from people identified as sources for information needed for this study. Relatively speaking, there are lots of data and information in the study’s data bank. However, the researcher admits that there are a number of limitations. First, some partner institutions’ administrators identified to respond to telephone and e-mail interviews were too busy to take time to respond to the interview questions. Second, there are some respondents who prefer not to disclose their perceptions with regard to collaborations and partnerships. Third, the researcher send the interview questions to the partners’ Vice Chancellors and Chief Executive Officers (CEO) some of them for various reasons were not able to pass the questions to staff involved in the
partnerships. Email and telephone follow-ups did not yield favourable results. Because of the various limitations listed, the information and data for this study might not have included perceptions and views of all ZOU members and partners. There are, hence, limitations to the conclusions made, which are largely based on these data.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations for sustaining collaborations between ODL institutions and other organisations emerged from this study:

1. Develop, document, and implement a policy specific to initiation, planning, implementing and evaluating collaborations and partnerships as a mechanism for creating awareness, sustenance and support for collaboration and partnerships.
2. Involve department practitioners to explore and better define the academic link or administrative link and what both types of institutions gain from the effort.
3. Design a model for implementing the collaborations and partnerships that allow the institution to follow and evaluate the collaborations and partnerships during and at the end of the stipulated time.
4. Assign an officer in the ZOU registrar’s office to link with the faculties and units so as to monitor the developments, challenges, and benefits of the collaborations and partnership for improvements and knowledge management.
5. Encourage faculty, departments, and service units to leverage their influence with implementation of the MOU’s and MOAs to their benefit.
6. Undertake research to investigate why most ZOU MOAs and MOUs are not benefiting the institution and the individuals.
7. Undertake research to investigate why ZOU does not have collaborations with the Zimbabwe traditional or conventional universities that are using the dual mode system.

**Conclusions**

The study concludes that ODL institutions benefit from collaborations and partnerships. However, monitoring systems should be developed and implemented in order to have effective collaborations and partnerships. This study demonstrates that there are substantial opportunities for collaborations beyond existing partnerships which are primarily with other ODL institutions and the private sector. It is concluded that ZOU has collaborations and partnerships with public and private organisations. It is concluded that ZOU’s collaborations and partnerships are not successful due to lack of implementing procedures and policies as well as knowledgeable implementers. It is further concluded that ZOU does not have collaborations with local conventional universities which are using dual mode. Finally, it is also concluded that ZOU needs to improve on its systems of managing collaborations and partnerships in order to benefit from them.
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Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model as a learner support tool for distance learners: Case study of distance learners at the University of Swaziland

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Abstract

The study was carried out to assess whether the PRO model can be used as a learner support tool for distance learners. The objectives of the study were to: 1) examine the level of application that reflects use of the model; 2) assess whether the delivery systems used in distance learning support the model; 3) measure the extent to which distance learners can be assisted by the model to improve their professional and academic performance; and, finally, 4) determine the level of self-directedness for distance learners. Fifty (50) learners from the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) participated in the study. A questionnaire was used to collect data. The findings revealed that most learners were unknowingly practicing the model and that delivery systems used in distance learning have potential for self-directedness. It was, therefore, recommended that the model form a package for learners involved in DE programmes as a learner support tool.

Background Information

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE) is a sub-division of the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) that offers a variety of programmes in different disciplines through distance education (DE) as a mode of delivery. While DE programmes have been running at UNISWA for several years, many challenges have emerged such as absenteeism, low performance in some programmes, lack of motivation, poor quality of materials used and other social roles hindering the learning process (Nyakutse et al, 2009; Sukati, 2009; Maphanga, 2004, 2008; Maziya, 2009).

Eastmond (1995) defined distance education as the use of print or electronic communications media to deliver instruction when facilitators and learners are separated in place and/or time. Of the six (6) characteristics of distance education identified by Eastmond (1995), two are directly linked to the learner’s efforts in learning at a distance. The first involves the learner taking responsibility for setting his/her pace and time, while the second concerns the learner getting an opportunity to learn in his/her own community.

Age-wise, the majority of distance learners are adults. Since adults have different learning needs from those of children, it is necessary to understand how adults learn, in
order to effectively design courses meant for adult learners. The theory of andragogy describes the art and science of helping adults learn. The theory explains that adult learners have distinct and unique characteristics. According to Knowles (1984), the main assumptions of the andragogy theory include; (1) adults need to know why they need to learn something, (2) adults need to learn experientially, (3) adults approach learning as problem-solving, and (4) adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value. The above assumptions clearly indicate the importance of being a self-directed learner. Thus, when designing courses for adults, the designer should know what affects adult learning as well as how or why they learn.

Although distance learning is an excellent method of reaching the adult learner, adult learners require a high degree of flexibility in learning provisions in order to deal with the priorities of work and home that they find competing with learning entails. The structure of distance learning gives adults the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of learning. However, a challenge which emanates from such flexibility is the possible loss of learners’ motivation due to the lack of or limited face-to-face interactions with lecturers and peers. This isolation can be a barrier to successful distance learning.

Since distance learning implies that the lecturer and learner are physically separated during the learning process it means that there is a lot to be done on the side of the learner to make his or her learning successful. In this case, the learner may be compelled to adopt independent learning characteristics as per the core elements of the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model which is discussed below.

**The PRO Model**

The PRO model stands for Personal Responsibility Orientation. As a conceptual model, the PRO explains that for a learner to be successful in the learning process, he or she needs to have learner self-direction and be self-directed in learning. Learner self-direction implies that the individual learner possesses characteristics of being responsible towards personal learning endeavours. This means the learner is able to overcome learning challenges without being pushed or persuaded by anybody else.

This model stems from self-directed learning, which is vital in distance education and open and distance learning (ODL) where the learner is often on his/her own. In their work on self-direction in learning, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) presented a framework for understanding key dimensions of the concept, which they called the personality responsibility orientation (PRO) model.
There are three major aspects of the PRO model that characterize its potential to influence learner performance. The first is learner self-direction (personal attribute), which refers to how motivated the learner is in terms of being proactive in all his/her learning endeavours. The second is self-direction in learning (learner control), whereby the learner takes more responsibility in the learning. The third is self-directed learning where the learner has acquired full self-direction; the learner has control of both the objectives and means of learning. For learning designers/facilitators, it entails the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the learning process in a manner that suits learner self-direction.

Another key construct of the PRO model is that learning is centred upon the individual who exercises control for learning while assuming accountability for their actions (Hiemstra, 1994). According to the model, learners utilize their personal responsibility through characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction along with their own personal learning characteristics to achieve self-direction in learning within a greater social context.

Once the learners have attained full personal responsibility for learning, as indicated in the model above, they are able to take primary responsibility for the teaching and learning process like planning, implementation and evaluation of learning activities. That is, they actively participate on all the learning endeavours. These aspects of the PRO model befit adult education teaching and learning models. That is because, adults are assumed to engage in learning programmes for the purpose of solving problems
that directly affect their lives as opposed to the traditional banking of knowledge. This study, therefore, aims at assessing whether the PRO model can be used as a learner support tool for distance and ODL learners.

**Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Examine the level of application that reflects use of the personal responsibility orientation model in the teaching and learning process for selected programmes;
2. Assess whether or not the delivery systems used foster personal responsibility among adults as learners;
3. Measure the extent to which learners can be assisted by the model to improve their performance;
4. Determine the level of self-directedness among targeted adult distance learners.

**Research Design**

A research design is a detailed plan or methods for obtaining data scientifically (Schaefer, 2007). Leedy and Ormrod (2005) contend that the research design provides the overall structure for the procedures the researcher follows, the data the researcher collects, and the data analysis conducted. In this study, the researcher used a case study design whereupon data was collected using a questionnaire. The reason being to determine why or how the PRO model can be used to distance learners while using learners at the University of Swaziland as a Case.

**Population and Sample size**

In the study, stratified random sampling was used since the learners were doing different programmes. Thus, the sample was divided into three strata, selecting members from each stratum at random to represent the population. Numbers from 1 to 50 were placed in a box and those who picked 1 to 20 were picked for the study from each group. The population consisted of adult learners enrolled in the BEd (Primary), BEd (Secondary) and BEd (Adult Education). All programmes are run through distance mode by the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) at the University of Swaziland. Table 1 below shows the sample size.
Table 1: Sample Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Return</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B.Ed Primary (IDE) Year 1</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Ed Secondary (IDE) Year 1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Ed Adult Education (IDE) Year 2-5</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presentation of Findings

The results of the study are presented in table format followed by a brief discussion on the findings. The next presentation is the gender and age distribution which are presented in tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2: Distribution by Gender (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 above reveals that there were more females in the study at 30 (60%) compared to 20 (40%) males. Compared to the total population (130), there were 78 (60%) females and 52 (40%) males. The result above indicates more females were enrolled in the three programmes. While self-directed learning knows no gender, some studies have shown that women carry a big load in terms of responsibilities, yet in this study there were more female participants.

Table 3: Age Distribution (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 – 25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 – 35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 – 40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 – 45</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 and above</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On age distribution, the results in Table 3 above show that there were more learners within the 31-35-year age group, where there were 22 (44%), followed by an age range of 26-30 at 17 (34%). The 36-40-year age group comprised 20% of the sample. The results above indicate that more learners enrolled in the three programmes were between the ages of 26 – 40 totalling 78% of the sampled learners.

Results based on the objectives

The researcher wanted to find out the level of application of the PRO model by asking specific questions that may show the level of application and/or non-application of the model by learners. The first question was designed to probe reasons for enrolling in the programme by the learners. The idea was to determine whether the characteristics of the learner and factors within the social context (which is part and parcel of the PRO model) had compelled the learner to take-up further studies.

Objective 1: Level of application that reflects use of the model

Table 4: Reason for enrolling in the programme (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To upgrade my skills</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get promoted</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Keep up-to-date</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (Get more knowledge)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the learners (46 or 92%) indicated that upgrading their skills was the main reason to enrol. Only (2 or 4%) said they wanted to get a promotion, while another 4% wanted to get more knowledge. While there could be various reasons for adults to engage in further learning, it can be deduced that upgrading of one’s skill is of utmost importance. This may be happening due to the changing working environment and general context.

Participants in the study were also asked about the types of social roles they perform while at the same time undertaking studies. The idea was to establish whether his or her personal characteristics and external pressures from the social context also motivated the person to undertake further studies. The following roles were outstanding as most of the participants indicated them as important roles. These roles were also seen as a challenge to some of the participants in the study because they were clearly in competition with study time required for distance learning.
The following social roles performed that were performed by distance learners while enrolled on distance learning programmes:

1. Attending to community meetings
2. Taking care of the family
3. Attending community projects
4. Attending funerals
5. Looking after siblings
6. Running a business
7. Attending church meetings
8. Helping the disadvantaged
9. Assisting the youth

**Objective 2: Delivery systems used support the model**

The researcher wanted to find out whether the delivery systems used in the distance education programmes of the Institute of Distance Education may support the model; meaning, do they promote learner self-direction? For example, a condition for learners to be self-directed is that learning and support materials must be easily accessible. In this study, printed modules were the major delivery system used and supported with limited face-to-face contact sessions. The participants were asked to indicate whether modules enhanced learner self-direction. The results of the responses given by the research sample appear in table 5 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To an extent</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the participants (30 or 60%) indicated that modules enhance self-directedness as one learns individually most of the time. Fifteen (30%) of the participants indicated that modules enhanced self-directedness to an extent. There were only 5 (10%) participants who felt that modules did not enhance self-directedness. No reasons were given for the responses. However, most participants indicated that modules enhanced self-directedness also reported that if these had been accompanied by other media (such as audio, video, DVD, etc.) that could strengthen self-directedness.

The researcher also wanted to find out whether access to learning resources was good or maybe the learners faced difficulties in accessing learning materials. This is presented in table 6 below.
Table 6: Access to learning resources (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the accessibility of learning resources, there was a close relationship between fair and good in the responses of the research sample. Twenty two (44%) said access was fair, while 19 (38%) said it was good. Nine (18%) said it was difficult to access learning resources. Most of the learning resources are based on campus at the university. It is possible that some of the learners are able to access other sources by surfing the Internet. This appears to be the case based on the number of online references that students provide when submitting their assignments.

**Evaluation of the programme**

The researcher wanted to find out how the learners felt about learning at a distance in terms of understanding the content and/or learning materials presented. This was to gauge how they felt about the programmes they were enrolled.

Table 7: Evaluation of the programme on learner feelings about the programme (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the evaluation of the programme, 25 (50%) participants said the level of difficulty of the study materials in their programmes of study was moderate in terms of understanding the learning material. Twenty (40%) participants felt that the courses in the programmes they were doing were fair. One person (2%) said it was easy and 4 (8%) said it was difficult to study. While the words fair and moderate were used in the study, it can be deduced that the majority of the participants (90%) felt the programmes were reasonable in terms of the level of understanding the content and the learning materials.
Objective 3: Adapting elements of the model to improve learner performance

The researcher wanted to determine how the PRO model can be used by instructional designers, planners, tutors, and facilitators of DE and ODL programmes to assist learners improve their performance. This idea is based on two characteristics of the model, both of which look at learner characteristics and factors within the wider social context. Since an adult learner has many responsibilities (personal, family, job/work and community), how does he or she strike a balance between competing responsibilities so that learning performance is enhanced? Accordingly, learners were asked about the challenges they face while enrolled in educational programmes. Below are some of the major challenges they cited.

**Challenges faced by an adult learner**

1. Balancing school work and job demands
2. Lack of time for study purposes
3. Sometimes employers do not give permission to attend classes
4. Attending to community and other social roles as well as family roles
5. Lack of funds
6. Travel long distances/Lack of transport
7. Not given full recognition when using campus facilities (e.g. Library)/Lack of access to the library
8. Failing a subject/Lack of feedback from lecturers

The list above indicates that adult learners tend to face many challenges while pursuing their studies. According to Hiemstra and Brockett (1994), personal responsibility refers to individuals assuming ownership for their own thoughts and actions. As a result, personal responsibility and empowerment are important factors for one to be self-directed. The question is whether learners are empowered to overcome the challenges they face while studying. Most of the challenges outlined above are concerned with the social factors that learners encounter while studying.

This is in line with the PRO model which suggests that the point of departure is not only to fully understand self-directed learning activity, the interface existing between individual learners and any facilitator or learning resource, but also to recognize appropriate social dimensions. In this case, most challenges faced by learners in the research sample fall in the social dimension.

Objective 4: Level of self-directedness for distance learners.

The researcher wanted to determine the level of self-directedness among learners in the research sample of for this study by examining issues such as regular attendance
of class sessions, promptness in submission of assignments, study habits away from campus and initiation of own learning. The results of this investigation are presented in tables 8 - 11 below. The results in table 8 are on learner attendance of face-to-face sessions, those in table 9 are on assignment submission, while those in table 10 are on off-campus study habits, and those in table 11 are on learner initiatives to learners to study beyond assigned work.

**Table 8: Attendance of on campus study sessions (N=50)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 above shows that 32 (64%) respondents attended class sessions regularly while 14 (28%) said their attendance was fair. Only 4 (8%) said their attendance was irregular. Reasons for irregularity cited by the four participants are as follows:

- Sometimes not getting permission to attend residential sessions
- Not having enough cooperation at work though most of the time I attend sessions on weekends
- Not enough leave days to attend residential sessions
- Responsibilities at home

**Table 9: Submission of Assignments (N=50)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occurrence</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always on-time</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet deadlines</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes late</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 above indicates that 29 (58%) participants meet deadlines when submitting their assignments. Thirteen (26%) chose to use the words “Always on-time” when submitting their assignments, while only 8 (16%) felt that they were sometimes late. The responses above indicate that most of the learners (74%) try their level-best to submit their assignments on stipulated dates. This indicates that in spite of challenges faced by distance learners due to many competing social roles and other challenges cited earlier, most distance learners in this study take their studies seriously.
Table 10: Study habits away from campus (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 above indicates that 25 (50%) participants felt that their study habits were good. Perhaps such response indicates that they assumed responsibility for their own learning. Meanwhile, 22 (44%) respondents felt that their study habits, when away from campus, were fair, while only 3 (6%) participants felt their off-campus study habits were very good. The results above indicate that the majority of learners felt that their study habits were either fair or good (94%). However, table 10 also shows that off-campus study habits of females were better than those for male counterparts, yet women adult learners generally carry more personal responsibilities in the home than men.

Table 11: Initiation of own learning by reading beyond what is given by lecturers (N=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occurrence</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less often</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of learners 34 (68%) said they often initiate their own learning beyond what is given by lecturers while 12 (24%) initiate their learning less often. Only 4 (8%) said they initiate their own learning very often. From the result above, it can be deduced that most learners do try to read or do work beyond what is stipulated or given by lecturers and that, of these learners, the female learners do better than males.

Discussion of Findings

The study was carried out to assess whether the PRO model can be used as a learner support enhancement mechanism for the benefit of distance learners. The findings indicate that most learners undertake personal responsibility of their learning in spite of many challenges that they face.

In this study, since the majority of the learners were females (60%), it is also possible that they tend to face most of the challenges/constraints as the roles they play in the
home are numerous. Some studies e.g. Newswatch (2002); Nyakutse et al (2009) also support that more females than males are involved in distance education and/or open and distance learning.

Regarding the level of application of the PRO model in terms of learner characteristics, it is evident that the majority of learners (92%) took the initiative to enrol in a DE programme. This shows learner self-direction. Badza and Chakuchichi (2009) reported that 70% of the participants in their study on women access to higher education through ODL showed that studying at their own pace among others was a main reason for enrolling in ODL.

Personal responsibility on the part of learners also showed that, in spite of the fact that distance learners have many social roles to play, they still continued to enrol and actively participate in learning programme activities. Social roles such as attending community meetings, dealing with family matters as well as take up church commitments were mentioned by the learners in the study. These roles were also constraints on some of the learners. This is also supported by Nyakutse et al (2009), who reported that too many chores to do in the house, inadequate study time and too many responsibilities (community activities) were cited by their sample as major constraints.

Self-direction in learning was revealed showing that the majority (64%) attended class regularly; 58% met deadlines on assignment submission while 26% were always on-time when submitting assignments. It also appears that most respondents were disciplined because 50% rated themselves ‘Good’ in relation to study habits when away from campus while 44% rated themselves ‘Fair’. On whether or not they initiated their own learning beyond what was given by lecturers, 68% said they often initiated their own learning. This is good though it can be improved.

The PRO model addresses characteristics of the teaching-learning transaction as a way of promoting self-directed learning. Most learners in the study (60%) felt that modules enhanced self-directedness in learning, while 30% concurred to some extent. This means the teaching-learning transaction needs to be improved to promote more self-directedness. The teaching-learning transaction should also address accessibility to learning resources by the learners, given that only 38% said access was ‘Good’, while more (44%) learners said it was ‘Fair’. On how they felt about the level of difficulty of course materials, 50% said the materials were ‘Moderate’, while 40% said they were ‘Fair’. These responses also suggest that there is room for overall improvement on the way distance learning materials for the programmes should be packaged.

One of the objectives of the study was to determine how the PRO model can be used to transform learning and improve learner performance, since learner performance could be hindered by many factors, including the challenges that learners reported facing. For example, balancing school-work and job demands and lack of time to study were
some of the major challenges cited by the sample. This finding supports an earlier study by Badza and Chakuchichi (2009) who investigated factors that hinder women access to higher education through ODL. Their study reported that social factors, time management, attitudes of society, accessing resources and financial constraints were challenges to learners in ODL. Therefore, from this study and earlier studies, it is important that programme planners bear in mind the social responsibilities, as well as challenges, learners face when pursuing DE programmes.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, as well as other corroborating studies in the field, the researcher concludes that adult learners undertaking DE or ODL programmes need adequate support in order to be self-directed in their quest for lifelong learning and up-skilling. In that way, distance learners are more likely to take personal responsibility for learning and regulating the extent to which wider contextual constraints affect their learning. Therefore, the adult students can better manage the learning process by learning coping strategies to meet many of the challenges they encounter along the way. For example, they can contribute towards the evaluation of programmes so that they are redesigned in such a way that they encourage experiential learning in order to suit their needs as adult learners learning in distance education or ODL environments and contribute to the institution of appropriate learner support tools that promote adult learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommends the following:

1. When adult students enrol for further studies through distance education or ODL, the PRO model should form an integral part of the package for learner orientation and on-going learner support measures.
2. Programme planners should allow the many social responsibilities experienced by distance learners to inform them when designing flexible programmes that meet learner needs and or study requirements.
3. Challenges faced by learners can be alleviated through the design of interactive learning materials that do not require the learner to attend face-to-face sessions, especially when conflicting social roles and responsibilities prevent them from presenting themselves for face-to-face sessions.
4. Where applicable, new media technologies (audio/video files, e-books, podcasts, e-learning, participative web programmes, etc.) should be made available so that they further enhance learner self-directedness.
References


Maphanga P. (2008). Perceptions of learners and academic staff towards the use of multimedia systems in Distance Education: A Case study of the Institute of Distance Education. Unpublished Research Report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Bachelor’s degree in Adult Education of the University of Swaziland.


Motivating factors associated with participation in distance learning programmes: Case study of Bachelor of Education adult learners at the University of Swaziland

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University of Swaziland

Abstract

The study set out to investigate motivating factors associated with participation in DE programmes for adult learners at the University of Swaziland. The objectives were to: (i) determine what influences adult learners to participate in distance learning programmes; (ii) identify the adult learners’ preferred learning method/s; (iii) establish what motivates adult learners to stay in the programme. A questionnaire was used to collect data on the 100 students who participated in the study. The findings revealed that most of the students were influenced to learn by distance so as to secure professional advancement. It further revealed that the students’ most preferred method of learning was through hands-on experience; however, the widely used method during their face-to-face sessions was the lecture method. It also revealed that most of the students were motivated to continue with the programme because it is relevant to their needs.

Introduction

Life in the new decade imposes pressures and demands on adults to balance home and family life with highly stressful job demands and diverse social responsibilities in a rapidly changing socio-technological environment. These demands do not only present daunting challenges to cope with, they are additional burdensome to adults who choose to pursue further education, even if they were to go to a residential institution. However, fewer adults have the opportunity of devoting several years of their lives to being a fulltime student, yet the need for upgrading is even greater because of rapid technological change. This rapid technological change is also challenging the world’s education system to find innovative ways of increasing educational opportunities to this type of adult. Many educational institutions are turning to distance education as the answer to many of these challenges.

At its most basic level, distance education is a system and process that connects learners and instructors with educational resources from a variety of geographically separate sites using a variety of media. Students and instructors are separated from each other by either distance or time. However, two-way communication exists between the learner, instructor, and other learners through print or some form of electronic media (University of South Carolina, 2010).
Distance learning is an excellent method of reaching the adult learner who desires a high degree of flexibility in dealing with competing priorities of work, home and school. The structure of distance learning gives the adult learner the greatest possible control over time, place and pace of learning. However, distance education is not without problems. One of the challenges of distance education is the loss of student motivation due to lack of face-to-face contact with teachers and peers, while other barriers include potentially prohibitive start-up costs and lack of institutional support (Moore, 1973). Motivation-wise, Moore (1991; 1993) suggested that there was a need to cross what he called transactional distance, which is a psychological and communication space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner.

According to the motivation theory, there are three key interactive components that have to work together to shorten the transactional distance and provide for a meaningful learning experience. The three interactive components include dialogue (interaction between learners and teachers), structure (of the instructional programmes) and autonomy (the degree of self-directedness of the learner). This theory blends in very well with learners taking the leading role in their learning.

**Adult learner motivation**

Motivation is a very important factor that influences the nature and quality of the learning outcome in any learning situation. Galbraith (2004) notes that even with self-directed adult learners, motivation remains a vital characteristic that drives adult learners to develop new relationships, continue to learn and accumulate knowledge, adapt new strategies and also increase their leadership potential in a learning situation and even at their work places.

In education motivation has several effects on how students learn and how they behave towards a subject matter. According to Ormrod (2004), motivation can direct behaviour towards a particular goal, lead to increased effort and energy, increase initiation of and persistence in activities, enhance cognitive processing, and lead to improved performance.

**Distance Education at the University of Swaziland.**

The University of Swaziland (UNISWA), the only university in the country, established the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) in 1994 after realising how the inherent constraints in admissions to full-time courses on campus were inhibiting opportunities for access to higher education in Swaziland. The IDE was set up to offer higher education programmes through distance education mode for those who were, for some reason, being deprived of the opportunity to enter the mainstream education, especially those in employment and other adults who wanted to upgrade their education in various fields (IDE Handbook, 2009).
The IDE delivers instruction to its learners through printed course materials distributed to learners and by organising face-to-face lecturing and tutorial sessions. Since face-to-face contact sessions are generally considered significant academic inputs in distance education, IDE has made students attendance compulsory. Therefore, IDE provides flexible arrangement through a system of off-campus study facilities which enable learners to study at their own paces, place, and convenience. According to the IDE Handbook (2009), the distance education system in IDE is more learner-oriented and promotes the learner as an active participant in the teaching-learning process.

Given the fact that more adults are enrolling in distance learning programmes all over the world, despite their highly stressful lives, there is need for systematic enquiry to determine participation and personal experiences of distance students in the learning process. It is important to investigate how these students learn, why they learn, where they learn and also when they learn. In addition, it is also equally important to identify the factors that motivate them to engage in distance learning programmes.

In this connection, a few studies conducted at UNISWA have looked at motivation and how adults engage in DE learning. Nyakutse et al (2009) found that too many household chores and inadequate study time were major constraints to distance learning. Lack of family and/or spousal support and weak financial base were a further constraint. On the other hand, a desire for professional advancement influenced and motivated learners to engage in DE programmes, while absenteeism and arriving late for tutorials severely compromised students’ ability to engage in self-directed learning (Tsabedze, 2012). In this regard, therefore, this study investigated the motivating factors associated with adult participation in distance learning programmes on a University of Swaziland distance education programme.

**Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study were to:
1. Determine what influences adult learners to participate in distance learning programmes;
2. Identify preferred learning method/s of adult learners;
3. Establish what motivates adult learners to stay on distance education programmes.

**Review of Relevant Literature**

It is noted that a sizeable body of literature by various scholars exists on adult motivation and distance learning. This literature review focuses on what the scholars say about distance learning, motivating adult learners in distance learning programmes, and adult participation in distance learning programmes.
Distance Learning

Distance learning provides many benefits, including meeting the needs of non-traditional learners who face career and family responsibilities that keep them from taking traditional courses. Hence, the number of non-traditional students has grown more rapidly than the number of traditional students (Department of Education, 2001). Meanwhile, the demand for higher education continues to expand throughout the world. According to Goddard (2005), as many as 150 million people will be seeking higher education by 2025. Therefore, the distance-learning will have a major contribution to make to the educational requirements of the 21st century by opening access to higher education to meet this growing demand.

According to Chun & Hinton (2001), the growth in non-traditional adult enrolment in higher education demands a different and more flexible delivery system that is designed to ensure compatibility with the characteristics and needs of the adult learner. In view of this increasing demand, the provision of distance education should come from reputable institutions that can guarantee the authenticity, quality, and competitive standards of distance learning programmes so that stakeholders can have confidence in higher distance education.

Motivating Adult Learners in Distance learning Programmes

According to Mancuso (2001), adult learners can be defined as persons who are no longer dependent on parents or guardians, have assumed major life responsibilities (e.g. work, family, community), whose self-identities are beyond those of a fulltime student and who operate independently in society. Research on adult learners suggests some important differences from their younger counterparts. These include prior knowledge and experience, self-directedness, a greater capacity for critical reflection, and more active engagement in the learning experience (“Serving Adult Learners”, 1999).

Motivation of adult learners is a key concern for distance education providers, which requires that one who teaches adults must understand what motivates his/her students (Andrews et al, 1981). Research on motivating adult learners has generally focussed on three aspects, including learner characteristics, teacher characteristics and instructional methodology, and characteristics of lesson content (Rinne, 1998). Hence, to understand how and why people invest energy to attain educational goals, it is important to acknowledge that the learning environment and teaching practices are critical sources for goal definition and attainment.

Motivation becomes more central to the learning experience depending on one’s orientation to learning. Adults may be motivated externally, and/or internally. The research of Tough (1979) as cited in Knowles (1984) found that these internal and external motivating factors have a significant impact on the improvement in adult
learning, helping to reduce obstacles to learning that can result in diminished interest and a reduced attention span. In addition, Wlodkowski (1999), supported by numerous psychological theories identified six major factors that have an impact on learner motivation, including attitude, need, stimulation, affect, competence, and reinforcement. D’Souza and Maheshwari (2007) identified student, teacher, content, method/process, and the environment as key ingredients that impact student motivation. The student must have access, ability, interest, and value the education, while the method or process must be inventive, encouraging, interesting, beneficial, and provide tools that can be applied to the student’s real life.

Ts Abedze (2012), in her study of 99 adult learners concerning factors that motivate learners to engage in learning, reported that learners were motivated to learn when a variety of methods are used (46.5%), 26.3 % preferred experiential or hands-on methods, while 21.2% preferred to learn in groups and 6.1% wanted to learn individually.

Since motivation is a critical variable in adult learning, teachers of adults should be aware of possible motivations behind their students’ enrolment so that they can better shape or modify their teaching materials and classroom exercises. However, it is likely that any group of students will have a variety of motivations and all need to be considered.

**Adult Participation in Distance Learning Programmes**

Adult participation in distance learning programmes has gained prominence over the years. This is reflected in the increased number of adults who are enrolling in degree programmes as well as adult and continuing education programmes (US News, April 2008). Many researchers have found it worth investigating why adults participate in distance learning programme, with many of the studies examining reasons for adult participation in distance learning programmes. For example, Tobias (1991) examined reasons given by adults in New Zealand for undertaking formal learning through distance education. The most important reason given by those over the age of fifty was that it gave them an interest outside the home, while they also cited learning more about the special interest and making a contribution to the community as other reasons for pursuing distance learning.

Meanwhile, investigations of reasons for participation in distance learning in Canada and in the United States found that the intellectual stimulation and new knowledge acquisition proved to be most important among interviewed adults. Other important reasons reported by Boshier (1971) included meeting new people, the opportunity to socialize, and the opportunity to travel.

It is evident that adult learners have a wide variety of reasons for pursuing learning at a distance, including constraints of time, distance and finances, the opportunity to
take courses or hear outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable, and the ability to come in contact with other students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds. As a result, they gain not only new knowledge but also new social skills, including the ability to communicate and collaborate with widely dispersed colleagues and peers whom they may never have seen.

**Methodology and Data Collection**

The survey method was used as a research method for this study. The target population comprised students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education programme at the University of Swaziland’s Institute of Distance Education during the 2010/2011 academic year. The total population was 227 adult students; however, due to time limitations a sample of 100 learners which was 44.05% of the population was used in this study.

In this study the researchers used simple random sampling where a probability sampling technique was used. The researchers randomly picked 100 students from the students who were enrolled in the BEd degree programme. This was made simply by repeatedly picking one student after every 5th student from each class during their study days until the population of 100 was formed. This technique was chosen since it is the least sophisticated of all sampling designs. However, the technique also gives every member of the population an equal chance of being selected. According to Leedy (2005), simple random sampling is easy when the population is small and all of its members are known.

A questionnaire was used for collecting data because it is a good way for collecting information from literate respondents. The questionnaire was also used because the participants can respond to questions with the assurance that their responses will be anonymous, so that they may be more truthful than they would be in a personal interview, particularly when they are talking about sensitive or controversial issues (Leedy, 2005).

The questionnaire was hand-delivered by the researchers to the respondents during their study sessions. Although a questionnaire has the disadvantage of a low return rate, capturing the learners in their classroom during their study sessions using a special time set aside for completion of the questionnaire enhanced their attention and speedy response.

**Findings**

**Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

The majority learners (67 or 67%) were females in the 31-34 year age group. Of the sample, 52% was married and with children, while 84% were employed. Background variables of the sample are presented in table 1 below. These demographic characteristics
have implications for learner motivation, because learners have other commitments. For example, women often carry a big load in the home as well as work, and yet undertake studies at the same time.

**Table 1**: Demographic characteristics of respondents (N=100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>67.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 and above</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Influences to participate in Distance Learning**

The researchers wanted to know the extent to which factors such as improving education, gaining qualification, improve work-related competencies, develop personal and social skills, develop employment skills, earn while you learn, secure professional advancement, satisfy an inquiring mind, and gain social contact, influenced learners to pursue distance education. Respondents’ rating scores of these factors are depicted pictorially in Figure 1 below.
According to Figure 1, the highest rated factor was to secure professional advancement, with 51 (51%) of the respondents saying it influenced them to a ‘very great extent’. The desire to improve education was rated second by 50 (50%) of the respondents, while gain qualification, improve work related competencies and earn as you learn were rated ‘very great extent’ by 42 (42%) of the respondents. On the other hand, develop employment skills was rated ‘very great extent’ by 38 (38%). The least rated factors were to satisfy an inquiring mind and to gain social contact. Figure 1 below presents the findings:

Preferred Learning Method

It was also the objective of the study to find out from the respondents their preferred learning method, as well as the teaching method most commonly used in the delivery of DE/ODL programmes. According to Table 2, the majority of the respondents (45 or 45%) preferred to learn through hands-on experience, while a minority (2 or 2%) of the respondents preferred to learn individually. On the other hand, the lecture method was cited by the majority of respondents 87 (87%) as the most widely used method of teaching during their face-to-face classes, which are conducted quite often even though this is a distance learning programme. This implies lack of proper methodologies used for distance learners.
Table 2: Preferred Learning Method (N=100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preferred learning method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning through hands-on experience</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With a variety of methods</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individually</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In groups</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method mostly used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>87.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture and group</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture and discussion</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of face-to-face contacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite often</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learner’s Motivation

Based on the objective of establishing what motivates adult learners to stay on the programme, the researchers wanted the respondents to rate themselves on the extent that the following factors enabled them to stay in the learning programme: relevance, accessibility, affordability, time convenience, helps them to keep away from problems and maintain job status. The ratings of respondents concerning these factors appear in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Responses on what enables respondents to stay in the programme
The results in Figure 2 above show that a majority of the respondents (50 or 50%) strongly agreed that ‘relevance of programme’ as the most important factor that kept them on the programme because their needs were being met. On the other hand, 45 (45%) respondents cited maintenance of job status as the factor that motivated them to continue on the programme, while 39 (39%) strongly agreed that their continuance on the programme was because of ‘accessibility’. On the ‘affordability’ factor, 54% of the respondents indicated that they were unsure of whether this influenced them to remain on the programme. This perception might reflect the fact that a majority of respondents were not responsible for paying their tuition, which is paid by their employers. Meanwhile, the factor that was least associated with keeping respondents on the programme was ‘keeping respondents away from problems’, which was cited by 55 (55%) respondents who reported that they had not enrolled on the distance education programme in order to keep away from problems.

The respondents were also requested to rate the extent to which selected factors inhibited them from participating in distance learning. Factors often associated with inhibiting participation in distance learning that were used in this study included lack of feedback on assignments, inconvenient schedule for face-to-face tuition, lecturer unavailability face-to-face sessions, and lack of support from family. The findings appearing in Figure 3 below show that ‘inconvenient schedule for face-to-face tuition’ was the highest rated factor cited by 53 (53%) respondents as inhibiting participation in distance learning programmes. Fifty one (51%) respondents also cited ‘lack of feedback on assignments’ as an inhibiting factor, while 49 (49%) respondents rated ‘lecturer unavailability face-to-face sessions’ as equally inhibiting. Meanwhile, ‘lack of support from family’ was cited by the least number of respondents (33 or 33%) as inhibiting them from participating in the learning programme to a great extent.

**Figure 3:** Responses on factors that could inhibit adult participation in distance learning
As per data gathered from the questionnaires on whether the programme was suitable or not for adult learners, 89 (89%) respondents said that the programme was suitable, and they gave different responses. Of these, 37 (37%) explained that the programme was suitable for them because they were able to work and learn, while 20 (20%) said that it was suitable because they found it relevant to their needs. Of the remaining 32 respondents, 8 (8%) said that it enables them to improve their education while on the job and 24 (24%) did not give reasons why they said the programme was suitable. Only 11 (11%) respondents reported that they found the programme unsuitable for them. From the 11 (11%) who said the programme was unsuitable, 9 (9%) revealed that the modules on the programme were not suitable for self-study, hence, they needed to be improved to suit distance learners’ needs. Only 2 (2%) respondents cited ‘lecturer unavailability face-to-face sessions’ as the reason why they found the programme unsuitable; suggesting that lecturer attendance should be monitored during face-to-face sessions. However, from the analysis, it is clear that the majority of the respondents are happy with the programme.

Discussion of Findings

Two-thirds of the respondents (67%) were females, a majority (84%) of whom were employed. This makes it more challenging as women carry a heavy load as homemakers as well. Furthermore, the study revealed that 76% of the respondents got to know about the programme from their friends, who might have been enrolled on the programme. Meanwhile, a similar percentage of respondents (76%) reported that they sometimes miss classes during contact sessions. Most of these respondents cited family problems and work commitments as reasons for missing classes. While family problems and work commitments cannot easily be set aside, it might be prudent for the Institute of Distance Education to use online learning and have greater flexibility in scheduling of learning times in order to mitigate this situation. From the study, the findings also show that the lecture method is the widely used method of teaching during face-to-face sessions and that these are conducted quite often, contrary to common practice in distance education programmes.

Securing professional advancement was the highest rated factor that encouraged 51% of the respondents for this study to participate on distance programmes. This suggests that adult learners are motivated to participate in distance education when that involvement will lead to professional advancement. This is supported by Chun and Hinton (2001), who argue that distance learning is designed to primarily ensure compatibility with the characteristics and needs of the adult learner. As revealed earlier in this study, professionally active adults constituted the majority of the respondents.

Half the students in this study also revealed that they continued on the programme because it was relevant to their needs, while 53% were inhibited from participating on distance education programmes when face-to-face sessions were inconveniently
scheduled. This means that by retaining their jobs while attending school, adult learners are able to continue to gain in work experience while pursuing educational goals. This is further supported by Boshier (1971) who found that intellectual stimulation and acquiring new knowledge were the most important factors considered by adults who pursue further studies.

Conclusion

The following conclusions reflect the major findings of this study:

1. Securing professional advancement was rated as the most influential factor that encouraged adults to participate in distance learning. However, other important variables that influenced adult learners to participate in distance learning included opportunity to improve general education, gaining advanced qualifications, improving work-related competencies, learning while earning a living, and also developing skills for employment.

2. The lecture method was the most widely used teaching method during contact sessions. While the high frequency of conducting face-to-face sessions was to the learners’ benefit, this may also be the cost distance learning. In addition, this method and its frequency were not the preferred approach; on the contrary, most respondents preferred hands-on-experience, which engage and motivate learners.

3. Finally, most respondents were motivated to continue with the programme because it was deemed relevant to their needs, while they would drop out if the contact sessions were inconveniently scheduled.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Distance Education planners at the University of Swaziland’s Institute of Distance Education should actively seek to link distance learning programmes with professional needs of the working adult when planning education programmes for adults.

2. There is need for the involvement of learners in needs assessment and programme design. Such an exercise can help the programme provider understand and interpret the needs and relevance of the programme to the learner and, thereby, reduce deterrents to learning.

3. Modules used should be reviewed, because some do not suit self-study. Perhaps the introduction of E-learning and other support materials can reduce the use of too many lecturers which may be too costly for distance learners who might be required to meet of the full cost tuition.
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Face-to-face tutorials: The case of the Institute of Distance Education and the possible introduction of Moodle

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Abstract

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE) and the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) operate as a dual-mode institution by offering both fulltime and distance learning programmes. IDE utilises the distance education method as the main medium of teaching and learning (Sukati & Chandraiah, 2004; Sukati et al., 2007, Sukati 2011). This mode of instruction is built on the principles of mutual communication between learner and instructor or tutor in view of an efficient application of social constructivism in educational settings (Fowler et al., 2010; Fowler, forthcoming). This distinctive method of learning means IDE depends largely on print material, face-to-face lecturing and tutoring and limited multimedia usage, including CDs and Moodle Learning Management System (Ferreira-Meyers, 2010a, 2010b, Nkosi & Ferreira-Meyers, 2011). In this paper, the authors mainly investigate the advantages of tutorials as they are undertaken at UNISWA and identify certain problem areas in this regard. While tutorials are seen as productive, they do not fully fulfil their promise of enhancing learners’ knowledge, attitudes and skills. The authors contend that Moodle could solve some of the tutorial problems at IDE by offering additional support to the learners working at a distance.

Introduction

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE), a Faculty within the University of Swaziland, utilises the distance education mode as the main medium of teaching and learning1. In this paper the researchers investigate the position of learners and tutors at IDE regarding tutorials, both current face-to-face (F2F) and possible online tutorials2.

A previous survey conducted within IDE in 2004 revealed that lecturing sessions were more effective and useful as compared to tutorial sessions3 (Sukati & Chandraiah, 2004). The previous study acts as the basis for the present one which investigates open

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1 This mode of instruction is built on the principles of mutual communication between learner and instructor/tutor in view of an efficient application of social constructivism in educational settings.
2 The term ‘tutorial’ usually refers to a small-group learning context that often, but not always, supports and extends the learning experience offered by lectures or distance learning materials (Lublin, 2000: 45).
3 A lecture refers to the exposition of a given subject delivered before an audience or a class, as for the purpose of instruction, while a tutorial ideally should refer to a more individualized setting for learning (or in a small group) or a self-paced instructional program that provides step by step information in presenting a concept or learning unit. However, the latter is often mirrored on a lecture session at UNISWA.
distance learning (ODL) practitioners, practice and how tutorials can become just as effective as lecture sessions. Additionally, this study seeks to influence change with regards to tutorials by addressing and posing pertinent questions faced by the majority of ODL institutions in the SADC region; namely, how can tutorials be improved to serve fully their purpose of enhancing the transfer of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

**Background**

The University of Swaziland is the only national university in the Kingdom of Swaziland. It had 5417 students enrolled in the 2011-2012 academic year\(^4\). Of these, 1695 (31.3%) were distance learners enrolled in the Institute of Distance Education\(^5\) (IDE). An important principle for UNISWA and IDE is that the distance education and conventional learner should be equivalent in terms of their academic standard. As a result, both categories of learners cover the same course materials over the same time and are assessed using the same methods; the only difference is the mode of delivery.

IDE distance learning programmes depend largely on print material, F2F lecturing and tutoring and limited multi-media usage, including CDs and Moodle Learning Management System (Ferreira-Meyers, 2010a, 2010b; Nkosi & Ferreira-Meyers, 2011). Printed study materials, in the form of course modules, constitute the main instructional support, which accounts for over 70% of distance teaching. Although the modules are designed to be interactive, IDE acknowledges that face-to-face sessions are necessary because modules alone are inadequate for meaningful, effective and quality learning in the current pedagogical set-up. Consequently, the role of a tutor as facilitator in an interactive DE system is a critical component of the IDE learner support system\(^7\).

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\(^4\) Previous years’ statistics show that in 2009/2010, 1744 (31.6%) of 5523 UNISWA students were distance learners, while in 2010/2011, 1866 (33.5%) of the 5573 in UNISWA were distance learners. This information was gathered from the Admissions Office.

\(^5\) The Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), a dedicated distance learning provider, provides distance learning experience similar to that provided by IDE. BOCODOL provides distance education programmes and short courses at the school equivalency (open schooling) and tertiary levels using multimedia instructional materials, including printed materials, radio, CDs, video and face-to-face tutorial sessions offered in in over 70 learning centres scattered throughout the country. There are plans to introduce web-based learning using the Moodle learning management system. However, many of the learning centres do not currently have access to the internet (Fowler et al, 2011).

\(^6\) IDE was established in 1994 to meet the increasing demand for higher education from suitably qualified learners who are unable to take up a conventional university place for lack of space, family, financial or employment reasons. For example, between 1995 and 1998, 20% of the 2181 applicants who qualified to undertake university education were rejected by the University because of lack of space on campus (Dlamini, 1998). In this regards, IDE offering various programmes, ranging from certificate level programmes in French, Portuguese and Psychosocial Support and a post-graduate Certificate in Education, diplomas in Adult Education and Law, to degrees programmes in Humanities, Commerce and Education.

\(^7\) The role of the tutor is to encourage interaction and guide learners and not teach them. It is generally acknowledged that “the tutor has traditionally played a central role in learner support in distance education, mediating between packaged learning materials and the learner, acting as subject matter expert, learning coach and facilitator to answer questions arising from their study, guide them to other sources of information, to point out the connections between concepts, and perhaps most importantly, to give learners feedback about their performance” (PREST Module B6: 7).
The situation in which IDE finds itself is not unique to Swaziland. The Polytechnic of Namibia (2011) also reported that distance “learners, in contrast to learners studying full-time on campus, have limited access to their tutors and fellow learners, and support from the same. They study mainly in isolation and have limited resources such as libraries, appropriate study facilities and information communication technology”. Furthermore, the tutorials keep learners in touch with the DE institution by not limiting their services offered exclusively to academic issues but by extending assistance to the learners by addressing personal problems through counselling services.

**Purpose**

The rationale for conducting this study is to influence change regarding tutorials, so that they could be considered as a learner support tool that promotes distance learning. In addition, this paper seeks to encourage distance learners to appreciate the value tutorials as much as lectures. Learners in previous studies have cited lack of interactivity and clarification on subject content as the reasons for not appreciating the value tutorials, mainly due of inexperienced and less qualified tutors

Each IDE semester course has 15 hours of lectures and 10 hours of F2F tutorial spread over 15 weeks. Although tutorials are critical in supporting learners, the role of the tutor in DE has been undervalued (Lentell, 2003). This is because even the most well designed and packaged materials, whether print- based or technology-enhanced, do not constitute learning experience in themselves, but rather a learning resource to be supported by tutors.

The majority of IDE tutors are lecturers who are recruited from conventional programmes. Therefore, the general tendency for many is to transfer the lecture delivery mode of teaching into the IDE tutorial session (Fowler, 2010:2), yet DE tutorials have specific teaching techniques. This transfer of teaching methodology hinders the effectiveness of F2F tutorials and might be one of the reasons why IDE distance learners have negative attitudes towards tutorials. This negativity translates into irregular attendance of tutorials by DE learners which, in turn, many UNISWA lecturers and tutors associate with poor learner performance.

**Theoretical Framework**

The present study relied mainly on the social constructivist theory, which emphasises the importance of social interactions in learning as opportunities for dialogue and assistance. Significant to this theory is the inference that tutorials provide the opportunity for learners to engage actively with tutors and course

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8 Evidence of this is noted in a statement presented by Sukati and Chandraiah (2004) which says: “although the real purpose of interactivity in face-to-face sessions was not achieved to a large extent … this could be due to the appointment of less experienced and less qualified tutors”.

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material. Since tutorials provide scope for learners ‘to construct, refine, and rethink hypotheses by means of feedback’, they encourage learners to practice analytic and problem-solving skills, to see connections and determine relevance, and to accept and incorporate conceptual knowledge (Lublin, 2000). Active learning, as a distance learning concept, also finds expression in constructivism, which asserts that prior knowledge is the initial point for new learning, which becomes more effective when a student is actively engaged in the learning process rather than attempting to receive knowledge passively (Lublin, 2000; Vytosky, 1978; Meyes, 1995 and Biggs, 1995).

Social constructivism theory was chosen because it assists in explaining the importance of ‘dialogue’ that is provided through face-to-face tutorials and in promoting the maintenance of two-way communication in distance learning. The use of F2F interaction during tutorials should be used to initiate and prompt verbal dialogue that allows discussion of feedback and motivating learners. This is because, during tutorials, tutors who have the responsibility to guide and probe learners by asking questions that lead learners to comprehend concept constructs, meanings and reach independent conclusions on the subject matter.

The social constructivist theory by Vygotsky (1978) has room for an active involved teacher. According to Bauersfeld (1995), social constructivist theory encourages tutors to adapt to the role of facilitators who are in continuous dialogue with learners (Rhodes & Bellamy, 1999). Therefore, tutors must invite learners to participate in a constructivist process that allows them to be involved in decisions about their learning. An important quality of a constructivist class is its interactivity, which involves authentic student-student and student-tutor interaction (Quintana, 2005:4). This quality is important in distance education, where the learner is separated from instructors, fellow learners, etc. According to (Bukhari, 1997), the role of tutorials in distance education includes

a) establishing a personal link,
b) offering individual help,
c) allowing the learners to interact,
d) providing psychological boost,
e) promoting practical experience,
f) providing opportunity for written work,
g) helping students to work confidently when on their own,
h) encouraging students to work independently, and
i) promoting formation of self-help groups
Research Questions

The following are research questions which the study set out to answer:

1. Are F2F tutorials an effective support mechanism for both teaching and learning?
2. What are the challenges faced with F2F tutorials?

Furthermore, the current perception amongst IDE tutors and learners regarding F2F tutorials is probed and the paper reflects on other key debatable questions concerning the role of tutorials as a support tool in distance education, such as:

1. What additional support, in form of activities and initiatives, is required by distance learners for them to value tutorials and improve teaching and learning in IDE? For example, e-learning, social networking, study groups, etc.?

Sample and Design

The mixed method approach, which entails both qualitative and qualitative research, was applied in this study. The study used questionnaires, document analysis and interviews as the main data collection tools.

Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of randomly selected 96 IDE learners drawn from 1st year BA Humanities, Diploma in Commerce and Diploma in Law. Another sample of 7 learners was purposively selected from a group of Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) learners, who also filled in questionnaires. As a form of non-probability sampling, purposive sampling was chosen for a variety of criteria, including specialist knowledge of the research issue and capacity and willingness to participate in the research. In this case the participants were chosen because they were most likely to contribute useful data, in terms of relevance and depth.

A focus group interview was conducted with five 1st year learners, while in-depth interviews with 2 representatives chosen from the PGCE group were conducted to further substantiate some of the facts gathered through the questionnaires. These participants indicated their willingness to contribute further in focus group discussions. From 30 IDE tutors and lecturers who were surveyed, 14 completed questionnaires were returned. Three interviewees from this group were randomly selected for interview on the management and effectiveness of face-face tutorials.

The research questions were designed so that the responses solicited indicated the prevailing perceptions the target population had regarding F2F tutorials. This was achieved through asking relevant personal and practical questions through

9 The questionnaire can be found at the end of this paper.
questionnaires and in-depth interviews about the management of the IDE tutorials and how they can be managed more effectively. This information was fed into the analyses and enabled the researcher to make relevant recommendations that influence a new thinking in the conduct of tutorials. Additional to interview and questionnaire data, personal knowledge, observations, informal discussions with colleagues, and previous reports on tutorials were also used to compare the experience of F2F tutorial sessions at IDE with practices in other distance education providers, especially within the SADC region.

Methodology and Data Collection Techniques

This study, which sought to influence the mind-set towards F2F tutorials, qualifies as both exploratory and action research. The study is based on the ‘mixed’ or ‘multiple’ research approach, which combines a predominantly qualitative method with limited quantitative aspects. It has been argued that mixed methods can validate information and “also provide more comprehensive answers to research questions going beyond the limitations of a single approach” (PREST Module A5, 2004: 2). The issue of reliability in any kind of research is best tackled through triangulation, of which this study used the qualitative and quantitative to triangulate data gathered using multiple techniques. Macun & Pose (cited in PREST Module B1, 2004: 89) stipulate that triangulation is crucial to strengthen and verify research findings. Some limited quantitative research methods were also applied, when analysing the data to reach the study findings.

Results

Perceptions of Tutorials in IDE

Table 1: A summary of tutorial to closed-ended question items from IDE BA Humanities, Commerce and Diploma Law and PGCE participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closed – Ended Questions</th>
<th>IDE year 1</th>
<th>PGCE Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Do you understand why tutorials are conducted?</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. Have you attended/some tutorial sessions?</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. Do you agree with the following statements?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I enjoyed the tutorials</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I found the session useful</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The session helped me understand the module and course material</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tutorial sessions are very interactive</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. Do you think it is necessary to prepare for tutorials?</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4. What do you do in preparation for tutorials?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read module</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prepare questions for discussion or explanation</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Highlight area you don’t understand and need further explanation</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read additional information</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5. Do tutorials help you reflect/revise on the content in the subject modules and lectures?</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6. I prefer face-to-face tutorials to lectures.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7. I would prefer more tutorials than the face-to-face lectures.</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8. Are tutorials necessary at all in distance education?</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Would e-learning/getting information form computers/interactive sessions using a computer help or assist in the course?</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. Would e-learning/getting information form computers/interactive sessions using a computer make it easier to participate in tutorials?</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Do you have access to computers off campus?</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis and comments based on significant indicators derived from Table 1**

- The results show that the majority (76%) of distance learners in the 1st year (referring to BA Humanities, Diploma in Commerce, and Diploma in Law learners) demonstrated they understood why tutorials are conducted, 89% understood the need to prepare for them, while 100% of Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) respondents showed they understood why tutorials where conducted and the need to prepare for them.

- From the 1st Year group 80% preferred face-to-face tutorials, whilst only 40% of the PGCE group said they required them. The results indicated that those who attended the tutorials did benefit from the tutorials because 83% claimed they helped them reflect on subject content.

- The results indicate that the majority of the 1st years enjoy the tutorials as do the PGCE group.

- In the 1st year group 79% felt that online tutorials were acceptable and would work well and make it easier to participate in tutorials from a distance. This is in spite of the fact that only 44% of this group had access to computers.
• In the PGCE group 75% still expressed the need for lectures as opposed to e-learning even though 80% of them had access to computers.

• The analysis of the responses indicates that the concept of DE has not been properly explained or understood, as learners still expressed preference for face-to-face contact sessions. A comparison of responses between 1st year and PGCE learners shows that 1st year learners had greater need for face-to-face contact sessions than their PGCE counterparts. This might be because the former have more free time to spend in class, unlike PGCE learners who are adults in fulltime employment. Nevertheless, both groups want face-to-face interaction, which should not be the case in an “ideal” distance learning setting.

• Although 80% of the 1st Years expressed preference for tutorials, when asked whether they needed more tutorials only 43% reported that they would like the number of tutorials sessions to be increased from the current 10 hours.

• Questionnaire results show that 57% 1st Year learners attend tutorials, compared to 80% PGCE learners. This shows that tutorial attendance by 1st year learners needs to improve. This is confirmed by questionnaire data, which show that 76% and 80% 1st Year and PGCE distance learners, respectively, enjoyed and benefitted from tutorials.

• There is no doubt that both 1st Year and PGCE learners find tutorials necessary, as the results indicated 89% 1st year learners and 100% PGCE distance learners support of tutorials.

• Both 1st Years and PGCE learners recognise the need to prepare for tutorials. Eighty-eight per cent (88%) 1st Years and 100% reported that they prepared for tutorials by reading modules in advance of tutorial sessions. However, only 75% 1st years and PGCE consulted sources other than modules. Meanwhile, (89%) of 1st years prepared questions for discussions, while 93% identified areas they needed further guidance from tutors.

• From the results there is a concern regarding online learning as delivery method. There is still a large percentage of learners who need to be influenced to recognise that online tutorials would be just as effective as face-to-face tutorials. This is seen in that only 59% agreeing that online tutorials would make it easier to participate in tutorials. A significant added challenge is the fact that only 56% 1st Year learners had access to computers when off campus. On the other hand, the majority (80%) of PGCE learners indicated that they had access to computers/online tutorial facilities. This could be attributed to the fact that they are mostly employed and have the option of using computers at work if they do not own a personal one.
### Table 2: Lecturers’ response to the closed-ended questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closed – Ended Questions</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Do you understand why tutorials are conducted?</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. Have you attended/some tutorial sessions?</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3. Do you agree with the following statements?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I enjoyed the tutorials</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I found the session useful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The session helped me understand the module and course material</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tutorial sessions are very interactive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Do you think it is necessary to prepare for tutorials</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. What do you do in preparation for tutorials?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read module</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prepare questions for discussion or explanation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Highlight area you don’t understand and need further explanation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read additional information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11. Do tutorials help me reflect/revise on the content in the subject modules and lectures</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12. I prefer face-to-face tutorials to lectures</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13. I would prefer more tutorials than the face-to-face lectures</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Are tutorials necessary at all in distance education</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Would e-learning/getting information from computers/interactive sessions using a computer help or assist in the course?</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Would e-learning/getting information from computers/interactive sessions using a computer make it easier to participate in tutorials?</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q23. Do you have access to computers off campus?</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis and Commentary on Lecturers and tutors closed-ended questions**

- Tutors and lecturers understand the objectives for tutorials. No improvement is too small when striving for quality teaching and learning. Therefore, the fact that 12% do not comprehend the aim of tutorials, is a clear indication that they need to conduct workshops on what value tutorials add to DE teaching and learning.

- According to the evidence gathered from the questionnaires, the tutorials were found useful by 80% - 100% of the tutors. They prepared in advance for them and felt that they helped them reflect on their subject matter.
• 60% admitted their preference for tutorials as opposed to lectures and 100% agreed that tutorials allowed for reflection on subject content and, like the learners, 90% believe that they are necessary in distance learning.

• 55% agreed that online learning would be beneficial, indicating that tutors need to be trained adequately on computer skills so they could feel comfortable and able to lead tutorials online. The fact that only 50% thought that computing tutorials would make it easier to participate in online tutorials confirms that tutors need to be empowered with computer skills or provided adequately with access to the computers. The low off-campus access rate of 30% indicates that most IDE tutors lecturers cannot access computers when off campus.

The prevailing perception with regards to tutorials in IDE can be summarised as follows:

• Despite the fact that both tutors/lecturers and students understood the theory behind tutorials, the practice on the ground did not tally with that knowledge. Instead, both learners and tutors consider ‘tutoring’ time to mean ‘lecturing’ time. Thus, in reality tutorials have an impact but not the impact they should have.

• Although pursuing DE programmes, independent learning is not something IDE learners grasp and they clearly don’t expect they have to do it.

• Both learners and tutors find it challenging to relate to the ODL concept of no contact hours at all.

Discussion of Results

The main findings reveal that, despite the fact that both IDE tutors and learners clearly understand the aim of tutorials and claim that they value them; there is evidence contrary to this. The statistics reveal that tutorials are undervalued. Learners and tutors indicate that they do not fully recognise the tutorials as added value to their learning and teaching. Additionally, the underpinning ‘theory’ behind tutorials and the ‘practice’ on the ground is questionable, and this was revealed through interviews. The results demonstrate that, in theory, tutorials are important but they do not affect the target population’s behaviour change. Either attendance is poor or preparation for the tutorial is inadequate. The main similarity exists in the fact that both groups (tutors/lecturers and learners) agreed that online tutorials would be a good alternative platform for tutorials. It was further gathered that access to computers on campus was adequate and those who are currently gainfully employed confirmed that they could access the e-learning platform (Moodle) from their off-campus sites quite easily. Overall, the learners and tutors felt that if the tutorials were allocated sufficient time and were better structured, such that learners submitted questions in advance, the F2F tutorials would be efficiently managed.
Overall Comments Derived from Results

- Tutorials should provide an opportunity for learners to engage more actively in the learning process. This would serve the aim of the target population becoming independent learners as expected of distance learning.

- IDE appears to be running the DE as part-time learning programmes, which confuses both the learner and lecturer when it comes to tutorials. As long as IDE continues to accept mostly post-high school learners, face-to-face tutorials will continue to be confused for lectures, thereby undermining the chances of creating independent distance learners.

- IDE learners have self-contained modules but are not inspired to read and use them to their full potential because they depend more on a combination of lectures and tutorials. When learners have not read the modules, tutors tend to lecture and tutor.

- Questionnaire data alone is not reliable and needs to be validated. Questionnaires possess the threat that they will be answered hastily as opposed to interviews, which allow more room to probe for additional information. Justification for this view is the fact that, in the questionnaires, tutorials were viewed in good light, but in-depth interviews, with interviewees from 1st Years and PCGE learners and lecturers/tutors, indicate that these do not take tutorials seriously. Time constraints and timetabling prevent them from conducting genuine tutorial sessions, 1st year learners expect more lecture time instead of tutorial time.

- Tutorial hours should not be reduced unless they can be substituted by online learning. With the problems currently encountered by the F2F sessions and new developments concerning ICT availability, accessibility, affordability and other related factors, it is imperative that the IDE instructional delivery system be reviewed with a view to improving and enhancing teaching and learning (Sukati, 2010).

- The results gathered in this study confirm the results obtained earlier studies (Sukati & Chandraiah, 2004; Sukati, 2010), in that the IDE learners tend to prefer lectures to tutorials. The main reason for this could be lack of understanding of distance education, which further justifies why research of this nature is critical to advocate for a paradigm shift towards valuing tutorials as a vital, complementary and highly regarded DE support tool.

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10 Problem - Lack of interactivity and clarification on subject content were the main reasons cited by learners for not regarding tutorials as valuable as lectures. Evidence of this is noted in a statement (Sukati and Chandraiah, 2004) which says that although the real purpose of interactivity in face-to-face sessions was not achieved to a large extent…this could be due to the appointment of less experienced and less qualified tutors.
Tutors and learners like the concept of F2F contact hours. Neither of them would like to eliminate these completely. On the one hand, PGCE groups are mature and have some work experience, so they can be trusted to study independently, especially after completing a 5-year programme (BA and Postgraduate Certificate programme). On the other hand, the 1st Year learners clearly need the guidance/orientation offered by lectures and tutorials because the majority are fresh from high school and lack study/work experience.

Recommendations

IDE needs to revisit the criteria for accepting distance learners, because current 1st year candidates are more suited to the fulltime programmes than the DE ones. DE at UNISWA is often referred to as part-time learning instead of distance learning programmes. This is also perpetuated by the fact that most learners are post-high school and unemployed, they have time to attend the tutorials and expect repeat lectures, which can be likened to revision sessions. This encourages the notion that tutorials are meant for lecturing.

IDE needs to workshop tutors/lecturers and learners more on the DE concept and how to facilitate successful tutorial sessions. The stakeholders have to understand that tutorials are currently not effective because they are not used in line with their original objective, which is that of clarifying grey areas and discussing issues related to learning materials. Tutorials aim to offer solutions as to how to support lecturers and modules. While a paradigm shift cannot be achieved overnight, it can be achieved in the long-term through regular training and workshop sessions.

As IDE is in the process of reducing the contact hours, finding ways of influencing or changing the mind-set of the target audience about tutorials will make the transition smoother. Policies must be developed to provide support to the use of tutorials in DE. Research, such as the present one, could be useful in guiding short-term action. It may also educate stakeholders, challenge their current thinking and influence their policies over time.

Online learning is an alternative option, which requires training and equipment. After all, in other DE organisations advanced technology is used in tutoring forums, for example, at the University of South Africa, the Open University in Malaysia, the Open University UK, the Open University of the Netherlands, etc. This is a good practice which allows tutoring without the transport costs and inconvenience of travelling long distances in order to attend tutorials at the institution.

Besides, less lecture hours may possibly enable more learners to be accepted because they will not have to come to the campus as frequently, but instead can
read/study the self-contained modules and participate in online tutorials or attend tutorials at regional centres to clear up any grey areas.

**Conclusion**

In this study, the authors have looked at the perceptions of tutorial practices at the Institute of Distance Education of the University of Swaziland. In general, these sessions have not been able to reach the objectives set for them. Another main finding was that IDE learners and tutors comprehend the theory behind tutorials but the practice on the ground does not support this.

At IDE tutorial sessions have traditionally been held as F2F sessions, but now need to be organised differently due to a variety of reasons, some of which were discussed within the paper. In looking for a viable option, the IDE has started offering online teaching and learning components. In view of the limited success of the use of the Moodle learning management platform, the same platform should be analysed in order to determine whether it would be a useful tool for conducting online tutorials.

This study suggests that, even though online tutorials would be the preferred option, F2F tutorials remain also a realistic and practical option. Besides the financial implications, the weak bandwidth throughout Swaziland prevents the majority of IDE learners from accessing the ‘Moodle’ platform, which would enable them to participate in online tutorials. Parallel to this result, the study revealed that tutors also face a similar challenge in that, when they are off campus, they have difficulty accessing the Internet. However, bandwidth is continually improving so attested by more students, tutors, and lecturers who now use mobile phones to access the internet. Further research on the use of m-learning is therefore warranted.

The main lesson that has been learnt from the pilots and the subsequent university-wide implementation reflect increased sense of ownership on the part of staff and learners, as a direct result from their greater participation in using and creating course content using Moodle. The use of an explicit structure inherent in Moodle has also helped staff reflect on their pedagogical knowledge and seek improvements in both course content and delivery. This ‘rediscovering of pedagogy’ combined with the sense of ownership are key factors in sustaining the initiative.

Fowler et al. (2011:1)\(^1\) state that the creation of distance education courses “should and often does result in a ‘rediscovery’ of pedagogy which in turn leads to improved learning. Many conventional universities are now waking up to lack of explicit

\(^1\) Fowler, C., Vilakati, N. and Sukati, C., “From distance learning to e-learning: Experiences and Challenges from the University of Swaziland”, in Okeke, C. and Mndebele, C. (eds), Education reforms in the Kingdom of Swaziland - Challenges and Responses in the 21st Century, Swaziland, forthcoming publication 2011.
pedagogy and are adopting e-learning, in particular, to support their everyday learning and teaching.” The introduction of the Moodle platform, its usage by a daily-growing compliment of lecturers and learners, allowed the researchers to look at the pedagogical benefits of Moodle and e-learning in distance learning tutorials.
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NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The DEASA/SADC-CDE international Journal of Open and Distance Learning (IJODL) is a refereed journal. The IJODL welcomes original articles which report on empirical and theoretical distance education and also accepts papers in other related areas as well as book reviews. All articles published by the IJODL are peer-reviewed anonymously by at least two referees.

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