Portfolios of Distance Education Students in Selected Colleges and Universities in Zambia

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to establish the challenges faced by distance education students and what institutions of higher learning have put in place to ameliorate the challenges. It was undertaken in Kabwe urban District, covering three institutions: Nkrumah University, Zambian Open University and Mulungushi University simple random sampling technique was used to select the three institutions and respondents. This study used a descriptive research method, employing the use of a questionnaire and interview guide to collect data. Thematic data analysis was the predominant method employed in the study. Findings indicate that many factors in the home, school and circumstantial environments impede participation and performance of distance education students in accessing and being retained in their much-desired formal education at university and college levels. Furthermore, findings revealed that distance education students are more disadvantaged in accessing education at tertiary level due to the burden of family problems, financial problems, psychological problems, institution-related problems and pressure from work as most of them are working. Terminal illnesses and chronic illness, accidents, poverty, loss of employment (retrenchments) of guardians, parents and significant others led some to drop out of university and college, as support was not guaranteed. Others, especially with special education

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needs, were hindered by the policies in the institutions of learning and it was difficult to continue or complete their courses on time. The study recommended that the Government should start offering bursaries to students under distance education as such services are only provided to public government institutions only; and that higher education institutions (HEIs) should establish counseling centers in all the regional centers and employ professional counselors to attend to the needs of the students.

Keywords: Access; retention; quality; distance education; institutions of higher learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The demand for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) will keep augmenting in Africa. A number of people who have had the personal ambition of acquiring particular types of knowledge, skills and attitudes through ODL have always existed. Both internal and external factors have made people to enroll in ODL programme. The motivation to learn may be for the purpose of acquiring knowledge in order to get established in a particular career of interest; upgrading skills on the current job for the purpose of retaining it; and preparing for a change of job in the future. Currently, few people of the relevant Sub-Saharan African population have access to higher education. Therefore, in order to increase the chance of success of the various vision statements on the continent, work is to be done to increase both literacy rate and access to higher education in Africa [1]. Open and distance learning institutions have been supplementing the conventional supply of higher education with the view to increasing the high level manpower that will eventually contribute to the actualization of the continental vision statements on literacy attainments.

Distance education in Zambia was developed to contribute to the development of human resources and meet the educational needs of individuals and the nation through the provision of continuous professional development leading to the award of professional certificates, diplomas and degrees. Kelly [2] intimates that the government further strived to widen the access to education to many adults who, for various reasons, could not attend full time education. But, by the 1970s, many adults did not want to upgrade themselves, hence, all the three indicators of education namely participation, access and retention suffered. As a matter of fact, distance education students have been facing a lot of challenges in the area of furthering their education.

In view of this, the government established the extension studies (Extra Mural Studies) at University of Zambia correspondence in 1967, the adult education advisory board in 1973 and the president citizenship college (PCC) in 1974 and correspondence education unit at Luanshya in 1996, Nkrumah University started in 1997 among others [3]. After the liberalization and privatization policies in Zambia, private higher education institutions (HEIs) were formed like the Zambian Open University which started in 2005, University of Lusaka, Cavendish University and Mulungushi University, to mention but a few.

The University of Zambia is the mother of all Universities in Zambia [4-6]. Currently, distance education appears to be a popular mode of study as nearly all higher education institutions offer their programmes in a dual mode setup, that is regular and distance learning modes.

Today, distance education in Zambia is a preferred mode of study evident by the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) offering programmes in a dual mode (those are regular and distance learning modes). Concomitantly, proponents in the sector of distance education have progressed from a preoccupation with organizational and structural challenges to transactional (teaching-learning) concerns [7]. Notwithstanding the above, much of this is still in its infancy in many HEIs. The transformational shift is the upshot of development in communications technology coupled with attention on collaborative-constructivist learning theories [8].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Students are able to access and engage with quality educational content in a convenient and comfortable environment such as their homes [9-12]. Much as the global COVID pandemic has begun to subside translating into less restrictions, indications are that the e-learning delivery of education will continue to rapidly grow.

Open Distance Learning (ODL) as a mode of education delivery has the advantage of

providing increased flexibility, mobility and affordability. Taking on ODL to meet the needs of today's students is an approach that is evolving not only in developed countries, but also in developing countries [13-18]. ODL can successfully reach those learners with no access to higher education, such as women who are not able to participate in traditional educational programmes as a result of family responsibilities or cultural limitations, economically marginalized groups, and the imprisoned [19].

However, its suitability (ODL) does come with potential and existing challenges for students. Students are faced with obstacles that they must overcome. Even though the growth and expansion of ODL present visible advantages, students who participate in this mode of learning have faced challenges that have been linked to individual, institutional and instructional [20,21, 22, 23, 24]. Cross [25] identified three distinct categories of challenges facing ODL students: Situational, institutional and dispositional. Cross views situational challenges as challenges that include job and home responsibilities that lessen time spent for study. Challenges viewed as institutional include poor logistics system or the absence of suitable advising [26]. Dispositional challenges are related to learners' own attitudes and feelings.

According to Galusha [27], students who take the ODL mode of learning, are motivated by multiple reasons, including convenience. These students tend to be predominantly adult workers that might be time-bound due to their work or location-bound as a result of geographical Distance education students who are mainly adult workers may be time-bound due to work or location-bound due to geographic circumstances or family responsibilities. Knowles (1980) posits that distance learners' behaviour is shaped by a mixture of factors including their needs, characteristics and situation. On the other hand, Moodley [28] identifies the negative attitudes to and stereotyping difference to distance to learning to comprise: a rigid curriculum, in accessible learning materials, socio-economic barriers, poverty and underdevelopment and factors which place them the learner at risk.

Galusha cited in Dabaj [29], submits that there are several obstacles in teaching and learning course of distance education. The dominant and most usual obstacle being the unawareness of the roles as teachers and students. In addition, he states that research indicates that the obstacles of distance education fall into such categories as cost, motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, alienation, absence of experience and training. Furthermore, course content, on the other hand, establishes an additional obstacle and should be modified in distance education (ibid). Therefore, to come up with effective and qualified distance education all obstacles need to be detected and excluded. But it is important to note that these challenges often intersect and fuse together at some point.

Literature on barriers in distance education abound [30,31,32,33]. For example, Lehman [34] categorizes barriers related to the teacher as being philosophical, logistical, administrative, technological-including telecommunication systems, ergonomic anxieties and fund deficiency for new equipment; and obstacles related to students such as absence of interaction such as feedback with instructor and classmates, the absence of support services, resistance to change and lack of training regarding technical issues. Lehman states that many students, like the faculty, are used to and comfortable with traditional classroom education.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There has been a notable increase in higher education institutions offering learning programmes through ODL in Zambia and elsewhere. This is evident by the interest steered in students to enroll and this is on the increase too. To what extent the students are captivated, engaged and retained in learning remains a question this study sought to uncover by establishing the challenges they face.

4. OBJECTIVE

This study established the challenges faced by distance education students and what institutions of higher learning have put in place to ameliorate the challenges.

5. RATIONALE

The research helped to identify portfolios of students pursuing their education through distance learning. In addition, findings of the study will help the government and the learning institutions in mitigating the challenges faced by students pursuing distance education and prepare the minds of learners.

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In addition, the study will help tertiary education institutions offering distance learning to adjust to the needs of the students pursuing distance education.

Furthermore, the findings of the study will help lecturers to make informed decisions in respect of their activities with regards to the institutions they operate from in teaching and learning in distance education.

6. METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive survey design, employing the qualitative research method [35, 36,37]. It was undertaken in Kabwe urban District, covering three institutions: Nkrumah University, Zambian Open University and Mulungushi University.

In this study the researcher sampled 156 students pursuing distance education and 30 lecturers in Kabwe District from the three learning institutions namely; Zambian Open University, Nkrumah University and Mulungushi

University. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the three institutions and respondents. The sampling frame included two key informants: students and lecturers.

Two types of technique were employed to collect data, the questionnaire and interview guide. These had the following five parts: institutional support, psychological support, social support, financial support and instructional support. The parts helped the researcher solicit for and tap into student portfolios with easy. A pilot study was undertaken on a sample for a day to check reliability and validity before the researchers proceeded to go to the entire research sample. Based on the findings of the pretest (pilot study), addition and or, modifications to the questionnaire items and the manner to administer them were made preceding their use in the study. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and the thematic approach. Braun and Clarke [38] posit thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (herein referred to as themes) within data.

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Accessible Sample

Table 1. Sampled Respondents

Institution (Pseudonym)	No. of Students as Respondents		Total
	Male	**Female**	
Zhambe	15	14	29
Nomah	14	17	31
Ptomy	39	57	96
Total	68	88	156
Institution (Pseudonym)	**No. of Lecturers as Respondents**		**Total**
	Male	**Female**	
Zhambe	8	3	11
Nomah	6	5	11
Ptomy	5	3	8
Total	19	11	30

(Source: Primary data)

7.2 Themes Emanating from Findings

7.2.1 Theme 1: Institutional & instructional support

Unanimously, respondents in the study noted that there were structures in place to support teaching and learning in the three higher education institutions (HEIs) to support distance education programmes [15, 39]. They further indicated contentment with progressive measures put in place by their HEIs towards promoting the distance education programmes and meeting teaching-learning needs of students. Comparatively, Simui, *et al* [15] established that within the continuum of interactivity, findings of their study showed a heavy presence of student-content while student-facilitator and student-student forms of interactions are conspicuously missing. Given a five-point

rating of the progressiveness of their HEIs, 52.6% (n=16) strongly agreed, 9.6% (n=3) agreed, 14.1% (n=4) disagreed, 9.0% (n=3) were not sure with 14.7% (n=4) representing the undecided. The undecided and disagree categories showed that the participants could have been comparing the support given to regular students to that of distance education which is usually not the same. Literature reviewed clearly brings out this distinctive comparison of learning patterns and support rendered to distance education and face-to-face students [14,18]. This corroborates with the submission made by lecturers in the ODeL institutions in this study, whose views are reflected below:-

> *Institutional support in this context refers to the counseling services, study locations and learning facilities available at those centers. On the campus, regular students seem to have all that they need for their studies while distance students have to travel to access them.*

Comparatively, the minority of respondents that disagreed to the institutional support were concerned with the late release of examination results. This was considered a problem as students who had to re-sit for examinations needed to know their results early in order to prepare themselves fully. The late release poses challenges to the early completion of their programmes in order to graduate.

In the same vein, they raised concern about the short duration for their tutorials. This is because they travel from faraway places to the study centers for their tutorials and would wish to close early to enable them get back to their destinations and prepare for the following week's work activities (zero week in schools begin around that time). This explains why Macintyre & Macdonald [40] advance that students' main support can be achieved through strong connection with their individual tutors.

Lecturers' interview indicated that students had issues with various aspects of instructions (Participants *Zhambe$_1$, Ptomy$_3$, Nomah$_5$*). For instance, four interviewees commented that, instructional materials are given to students late and in some cases, they do not get the books at all forcing them to photocopy from their friends even when they had paid the fees (Participants *Zhambe$_{2,4,8,9}$, Ptomy$_{1,3,5,10}$, Nomah$_{1,2,3,7}$*).

Findings further reviewed the following about tutor-student engagements in the HEIs:

> *Most students bitterly complained over the challenge of consulting tutors in times of need. Tutors have a tendency of not answering phone calls or replying to messages from students. These concerns are genuine since under normal*

circumstances, all materials are supposed to be given out to students at the beginning of the semester and any delay poses inconvenience.

Almost all respondents appreciated the cordial relationship that existed between tutors and students during tutorial sessions. Majority also agreed that learning materials have been designed in a learner friendly manner, thereby, making it easy to read and understand. Respondents also indicated that lecturers give constructive feedback to them, which encourages them to stay focused. This contradicts with findings of a study by Simui, *et al* (2019) which explored levels of interactivity in distance education using the Community of Inquiry Model at four universities in Zambia and found a heavy presence of student-content while student-facilitator and student-student forms of interactions were conspicuously missing.

Simui, *et al* (2019) thus concluded that such a state of affairs explained why distance education learners appear to be disengaged in the learning process since the instructional materials are not anchored on sound pedagogical distance education principles. Comparatively, findings from students engaged in 'study groups', informally organized point to the conclusion made by Simui *et al*. Suffice to say, this corroborates with findings of a study by Luchembe, Sampa and Mpolomoka [14] on experiences of distance education students informal study groups in higher education.

7.2.2 Theme 2: Psychological and social support

On the question of psychological barriers that distance education students' face, factors those at respondents commented on included the conducive academic atmosphere for learning, academic counseling unit, available avenues for students to report and effective non-academic counseling unit. Most respondents, 68% (106 out of 156) observed that there is a favorable academic atmosphere for learning.

Regarding effective counseling services in place to support students' academic work, most respondents, 58.9% (92 out of 156) strongly disagreed with the statement. If the undecided group is added to those who disagreed, then almost 79.4% of the respondents are not in favor of that statement with only 20.6% agreeing. This points to the absence of effective counselling services in the three HEIs that offer distance learning programmes, a view consistent with findings of a study undertaken by Mpolomoka, *et al* [41]. Contrary to this assertion and finding, Chikopela, *et al* [42] posit that the guidance and counselling services offered at the university of Zambia institution met the needs of most students that accessed the counselling center when in problems.

According to lecturers interviewed, most students' psychological needs are not being addressed. Lecturers contended that literature also reveals this gap in service provision for distance learners who are working class students and at the same time taking care of their families. As such, balancing their time and other roles and responsibilities with the course work needs real support from HEIs. They recommended that:

1. HEIs should, due to distance between the tutor and the learner, always keep the lines of communication and interaction open.
2. The number of tutors should be increased and that tutors should provide timely and consistent guidance and motivation to students to encourage them and aid them attach seriousness to distance education.

7.2.3 Theme 3: Financial support & or constraints

From the data, about 41% (64 out of 156 students) strongly agree that the way the fees have been structured for them is acceptable, whilst 45.5% (71 out of 156) strongly disagree to the fee structure. 13.5% (21 out of 156) were undecided about the arrangement. In a similar manner, the analysis for the cost structure for the academic materials indicates that 44.2% (69 out of 156) agree while 31.4% (49 out of 156) disagree with the arrangement. This means that the arrangements are not favored by most students.

This is not surprising since distance education students happen to be employees who have diverse commitments to meet. Galusha [27] argues that most distance education students have age, type of work and marital status commitments to deal with and lack adequate money to cover the cost of their programmes which constitutes an aspect of situational and financial barrier.

Most students are not also at the level that they can access loans to upgrade themselves. This forms part of the basis for accepting the fee payment structure arrangement by the university. Students interviewed commented the following:

> [We] Students genuinely have financial problems. A number of my colleagues have come to complain about their fees, accommodation and transport to tutorials especially for those who are not accommodated in the institutions.

> One student said that he had not paid his tuition fees because he had to pay for his children's school fees first.

All the respondents indicated that they had never received any form of sponsorship towards their studies in their programmes. Due to this challenge, the students were compelled to raise their tuition and user fees from salaries, personal businesses and loans from lending institutions like Bayport Financial Services. As a result of excessive borrowing to meet the educational costs, most students found themselves in economic crises making it difficult to distribute the meager salary towards the various responsibilities to which education was just a part.

7.3 Emerging Issues

7.3.1 Emerging Issue 1: Disadvantages in accessing tertiary education

Furthermore, findings revealed that distance education students are more disadvantaged in accessing education at tertiary level due to the burden of family problems, financial problems, psychological problems, institution-related problems and pressure from work as most of them are working.

According to revelations of students in the three HEIs, the majority listed the following as emerging issues in distance education accessibility and continuity. Terminal illnesses and chronic illness, accidents, poverty, loss of employment (retrenchments) of guardians, parents and significant others led some to drop

out of university and college, as support was not guaranteed me. Others, especially with special education needs, were hindered by the policies in the institutions of learning and it was difficult to continue or complete their courses on time. Below are their voices:

I enrolled as a distance student, but the College does not seem to support distance students as I thought. Am at crossroads, I stopped for a term, returned but I see myself stopping school again. My place of work is far and the College is centralized, not able to provide support to students like me – disabled who need ICT gadgets to access materials (Second Year Female Student, Aged 31, Ptomy).

I am not able to move about, attend class unless someone lifts me, gives me a hand, guides me and or brings materials to me. This makes me feel out of place, makes me feel like I am not a student. I don't see myself learning like this for the next four years (First Year Male Student, Aged 29, Nomah).

7.3.2 Emerging Issue 2: Use of ICT in Distance HEIs

Unanimously, lecturers recounted how literature on the use of ICT in HEIs abounds. According to them, it even clearly shows deliberate local and international policy ratifications in inform how students should and actually benefit from ICT in teaching and learning. For example, the ICT policy complements and builds upon the National vision 2030, the National Development Plans, the National ICT policy and the Ministry of Education Policy 'Educating Our Future'. What is more is that the ICT policy further provides key strategies that are essential for achieving Zambia's educational development goals. Despite these developments, ICTs resources in the three institutions of higher learning (HEIs) need to be improved as current policies of deregulation and liberalization of communications do not address issues of communications for empowering students' in rural tertiary learning institutions. Chikopela, *et al* [43] also established this problem when they embarked on a study aimed at enhancing research in ODL in selected higher learning institutions in Zambia. Thus, there is a need to put up measures to look into this imbalance by adopting ICTs sensitive policies [44].

This is brought out by students during interviews as shown below:

Studying by distance is easier said than done in Zambia. some of us students who travel days by ox-cats, then lorries and eventually by bus to reach cosmopolitan places where our University is situated face challenges that cannot be undone by ICT. Just the absence of civility tells you ICT is a waste of time for students like us – we won't access anything you send to us, we won't get the announcements you post, text, put across in media until we travel to the nearest boma (central business town) to get our salaries. I am in quagmire as a first-year student, to continue or not to continue. (First Year Female Student, Aged 26, Zhambe).

We are allowed to submit assignments in hard copy, yet the College has an ICT policy which should promote submission of assignments in electronic form, allow us (students) access materials online, among others. The College claims it has created what it calls 'an online portal' for us. But we have never seen it work, have never come close to it in all my 2 years at the College. Our friends studying by distance complain a lot about this gap in ICT, (Second Year Male Student, Aged 30, Ptomy).

Being a student in residence at the University, I have never thought migrating to the full use of ICT in my learning – access to teaching-learning materials, submission of assignments, and accessibility to online library – has been an issue, really. We are given deadlines and we meet them. Physical copies of whatever task we are given is submitted. I have a close relative who studies by distance at this University who complains a lot and at some point even withdrew from studies due to hiccups accessing, submission and loss of results (Third Year Female Student, Aged 37, Nomah).

I stay in a far-flung part of the country, 3 days travelling to get to the line of rail. Electricity is not there, not even any other alternative source of energy (like solar). Mobile network connectivity is absent, thus cutting communication of whatever nature. Studying by distance in such circumstances entails inability to access study materials, loss of communication with my fellow

students and total darkness on my part as a student, when at school (work). All my years of study here have been characterized by such a scenario (Fourth Year Male Student, Aged 48, Zhambe).

Studying at a university is not for poor people like me. I don't work and I have limited means for generating income. I work in my own garden most of the times. I had an opportunity to study at the university, but I failed to continue because I don't a smart phone to use for searching for data, let alone type my assignments and exams. I can't myself continuing with my studies anymore (Third Year Female Student, Aged 36, Ptomy)

Revelations by students corroborate with what Galusha, [27] observes that systems neglect learners in these rural institutions in relation to policy, mission, research and programming. Notwithstanding the above, Mpolomoka, *et al*, [39] made several observations about the usage of ICTs in rural areas and highlights how people in the rural areas can benefit from ICTs both socially and economically and gives examples of productivity measures in terms of social development benefits which can be found in many areas.

7.3.3 Emerging Issue 3: Denied Permission to attend residential school and or Examinations

The majority of respondents bemoaned the challenges they faced at the hands of school administrators who denied them permission to attend to their school (residential school and or examinations). School administrators did not easily grant permission to students to go for residential schools. In most cases, it was established that school administrators seldom allowed students under distance education to leave school stations. Instead, they were requested to make personal arrangements so that they did not interfere with the normal working activities of schools.

School administrators were reluctant to grant leave to students in the event of them sitting for their examination. In most cases, most students did not receive relief from their workloads to accord them chance to concentrate on their studies and or examinations. In most cases, they were compelled to handle their workloads face-to-face with their examinations which in most

cases led to their poor performance in academic activities.

7.3.4 Emerging Issue 4: Taking care of ill/sick close relations

Findings reveal that students engage in caring for their extended families at the expense of their studies, and this was one of the prominently highlighted emerging issues. These coincide with findings by Philippa Waterhouse, Rajvinder Samra & Mathijs Lucassen [45] that there is less attention directed to the association between students' personal circumstances and students' satisfaction. Findings also indicate that female students are sole caretakers of the sick and the aged. This corroborates with findings of a study undertaken by Chikopela, Ngambi, Mandyata and Ndhlovu (2019), who established gender-based violence amongst women with disabilities and their significant others. In view of this, it becomes difficult to take care of the sick and the aged while undertaking their studies.

7.3.5 Emerging Issue 5: Correspondence / Mobile Marriages

Respondents unanimously point to vices surrounding student teachers and students from various work circles, male or female alike as facing insurmountable pressure relating to how married couples deal with working from different work stations and pursuing further studies. In many narratives that came from the participants, this was overly mentioned by all. This finding was also established by related literature reviewed [46, 24, 41].

8. CONCLUSION

Distance education has now gained popularity in Zambia, like in Africa and the world at large. HEIs in Zambia still face many challenges as evident in revelations by students herein. Findings of this have shown that this has led to challenges which have made it (distance education) not maintain the expected standards. From this study, the general picture shows that while students in HEIs were committed towards continuing their education through distance learning, they were faced with a lot of challenges that greatly affected their studies and performance. Among them are: issues of institutional support, instructional challenges, financial challenges, accommodation, sanitation and sponsorship as all students under distance learning in all higher institutions of learning were

compelled to pay for both accommodation and tuition fees on their own.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The government should start offering bursaries for students under distance education as such services are provided to government institutions only
2. HEIs put in place effective counselling services where students can access counseling support.
3. Students in outside network coverage, remote and rural areas of the country, who are geographically distant from tutors, must be given self-tailored services/provisions.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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