Open and distance learning governance in public higher learning institutions in Zambia: successes and challenges

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Abstract

The growth and need for equity in the provision of tertiary education particularly in teacher training universities has risen in the past five years in Zambia. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to discuss the successes and challenges of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) governance in public higher learning institutions in Zambia. Being a qualitative study, descriptive approach was used as a design. Semi-structured questionnaires were distributed to seventy (70) ODL students, five (5) senior managers and twenty (20) academic staff using purposive sampling procedure. Interviews were held to ten (10) selected staff and twenty (20) students. In this sense, the sample size was 130 participants. The key findings among others revealed that despite the existence of ODL programmes in public higher learning institutions in Zambia, there has not been a deliberate policy instituted to strengthen governance structures and management systems that support open distance learning provision. Other challenges include failure to effectively integrate the use of information and communication technology in the management and delivery of ODL programmes, lack of adequate infrastructure and inability to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation systems for effective programme design and delivery. The study also indicates lack of trained personnel to manage ODL, inability to design instructional strategies and appropriate curriculum design responsive to the needs of learners. From the findings, this study recommends to the university to introducing remote centres, virtual and flipped classrooms, blended learning and 100% on-line learning.

1. Background

Clark (2020) in Sari and Nayir (2020), notes that the emergence of distance education (DE) applications dates back to about 300 years. One of the first known applications was the weekly lessons delivered to students in the USA via mail. England, Switzerland and Australia have provided DE with different tools (mail, radio, television etc.) years ago due to geographically dispersed and sparse population distribution (Burns, 2011). This view is further supported by Doug (2002) who contends that DE has been around for over 100 years and explains that it was done through correspondence courses started in Europe. This implies that as technology advanced, the definition of distance learning also changed. Therefore, this becomes important and justifies why we need to understand how the concept of DE has evolved over the years. However, it must be noted that defining DE is complex because of the nature of its evolvement. This is in agreement with Gatewood (2014) who contends that defining DE is made more difficult because the development of DE has changed quickly from first-generation to fifth-generation correspondence education. For instance, Greenberg (1998) defines DE as, "planned teaching and learning experiences that use a wide spectrum of technologies to reach the learner at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning." One can argue that Greenberg's definition does not address whether the student is learning asynchronously or synchronously. Moore (2011) ex-plains that DE is composed of two elements, each of which can be measured. The first element is the provision for a two-way communication, while some systems or programmes offer greater amounts of two-way communication than others. The second element is the extent to which a programme is responsive to the needs of the individual learner. This means that some programmes are very structured while others are more responsive to the needs and goals of the individual student.

Further, DE has been defined by Perraton (1988) as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and time from the learner. The link between that "someone" and the learner is provided by different means

of communication and institutional support. Keegan (1996) states that DE and training result from the technological separation of teachers and learners, which frees the student from the necessity of travelling to a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet fixed people, in order to be trained. According to Keegan, distance education includes:

i.   The separation of teacher and student which distinguishes it from the conventional 'face-to-face' learning.

ii.   The use of technical media usually prints for writing by both the teacher and learner and so conveys the educational content.

iii. The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogues.

iv.   The possibility of occasional meetings for didactic and socialisation purposes.

Simpson (2000) notes the term 'distance education' has been applied to a tremendous variety of programmes serving numerous audiences through a wide variety of media. For instance, the American Council on Education (ACE) defines DE as a system and a process of connecting learners with distributed learning resources. Students in the DE system communicate with the teachers and other fellow students through several media. It is clear from the definition by Simpson that lecturers and students are separated by space, not necessarily time. Furthermore, it offers flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.

Additionally, in the era of COVID 19, a lot of awareness has set in among the general citizenry to the effect that Open Distance Education is taking centre stage in a number of Public Higher Learning institutions. The stigma usually associated with Open Distance Education has now been swallowed up with learners and Lecturers alike getting to appreciate the significance of this kind of learning across the breadth of the public higher learning institutions. Such an attitude and development reflects the level of self-awareness embedded within civic education which among many others raises some awareness in people on what actions they need to take, when to take and how they take such actions. This is supported in many ways by works that have been done around this area (Muleya, 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2019; Machila et al, 2018; Bergersen and Muleya, 2019; Mupeta and Muleya, 2019; Habanyati et al, 2020; Magasu et al, 2020; Mupeta et al, 2020; Mwanangombe et al, 2020; Mwase et al, 2020)

Differences in time and space for DE place situational constraints that are not seen in traditional classrooms and must be addressed. According to Saykili (2018), a better

word to define DE is "online."

This is because technology has reshaped the nature of educational materials and how they are produced and delivered, how interaction and communication occurs in DE. Technology has advanced a great deal such that distance learning and online learning have for all practical purposes become synonymous, and that technology is being used to carry out DE. By implication, the rapid developments in technology have made DE easy. Though this is not the case in sub-Saharan Africa where you have DE student coming from remote areas where there is no internet connectivity. For instance, most rural parts of Zambia are not yet connected to the national electricity grid. Therefore, this study identifies Keegan's definition to be the most thorough, although it does not define education as opposed to learning. However, according to Sari and Nayir (2020), for a proper understanding of the philosophy of the DE system, an effective Learning Management System (LMS) should be considered just like a school without a building, and it is important to consider each course as a classroom.

A study by UNESCO (2002) observes that open and distance learning is becoming accepted and indispensable part of the main stream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries. It, however, highlights the challenges involved in the provision of Open and Distance Learning. The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the move towards more knowledge-intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies create new challenges for the design and delivery of education. Knowledge about common challenges and successes of students in the DE programme at Kwame Nkrumah University in Zambia has been and should continue to be an area of concern. This is because student retention and progression depends on the support they receive from; first the lecturers, immediate family members and thirdly their peers. In 2010 the University research committee conducted a research into this area and the findings showed a number of teething problems at the time. Issues of inadequate modules and poor distribution, inadequate lecture rooms, long ques for payments of fees, and registration, seemingly inadequate prepared lecturers, verbal harassments in some cases, poor career counselling, inadequate library resources, inadequate textbooks and many other concerns were reported. A follow up research was conducted in August 2016 which also captured the lecturers involved in teaching distance students. The results showed steady improvements in a number of areas except in the areas of poor module distribution, inadequate lecture rooms, long ques for registration, inadequate teaching and learning materials, poor writing and research skills by students, limited time for residential school and much else.

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by constructivist theory. The constructivist epistemology assumes that learners construct their own knowledge on the basis of interaction with their environment. Four epistemological assumptions are essential for what we refer to as 'constructivist learning. 'The main epistemological assumptions, according to Giddens (1976) are that:

i. Knowledge is physically-constructed by the learners who are involved in the active learning processes.

ii. Knowledge is symbolically-constructed by the learners who are making them own representations.

iii. Knowledge is socially-constructed by the learners who convey their experience to others.

iv. Knowledge is theoretically-constructed by the learners who try to make sense of things even if they do not yet completely understand them.

It is evident that learning is a complicated process which contains many interacting ingredients. All humans interact with their environment and learn about their world through those interactions in order to achieve their goals. Within this process, we focus on some characteristic attributes in terms of meaningful learning. The notion of an active learner originates from the work of Kolb (1984) based on Lewin's writing on theory of learning. Kolb advocates experience-based learning which is closely related to learning-by-doing. It can be characterised in short by the following four steps; experience, reflection, abstraction and testing. This theory is in line with the scope of distance education as we establish the successes and challenges from a pedagogical front.

2. Methodology

Being a qualitative study, descriptive approach was used as a design. Semi-structured questionnaires were distributed to seventy (70) ODL students, five (5) senior managers and twenty (20) academic staff using purposive sampling procedure. Interviews were held to ten (10) selected staff and twenty (20) students. In this sense, the sample size was 130 participants. The results were analysed using thematic analysis.

3. Findings

The first objective of this study was to establish the meaning of distance learning from a student perspective. The following themes emerged; education that involves less contact time; learning while doing your work; learning by oneself; and education that helped to further education. It was clear that DE was non-contact and catered for those who were not on full-time learning and that it was flexible in terms of delivery of lessons. This is what one distance learning student said;

I can describe DE as that type of Education which is conducted with less contact time between students and lecturers

Another question was then asked to give their experience with distance education at the institution. Students gave numerous examples of their experiences of distance learning, some of which were either positive and others negative. Many of the non-gendered experiences that emerged were situational and were determined by personal experiences with DE. These were shaped by individual factors which came out clearly as they were defining DE. However, their experiences were categorised under several sub-themes and these included the following:

i. Learning while Working;

ii. Learning while at Home Attending to Family Needs;

iii. Academic;

iv. Technical;

v. Personal;

vi. Use of Time; and

vii. Benefits of Distance Education.

Learning while Working

All the participants said that they were able to learn while working. While this was the case, there were moments when there were interruptions in meeting university deadlines and this was when work was rather more demanding. Some of these work-related interruptions were unmanageable. This is what one participant said;

The option of learning by distance has helped many of us to have a place at the university. I am able to do my work and study at the same time. But I must be quick to point out that studying and work is not easy…You have to find time to balance both.

Another participant, a worker said;

Learning by distance has provided us with an opportunity to learn while we continue working. This is something that cannot be tolerated under full-time studies. One has to go on study leave. But it is not easy to go on study leave these days. Our Ministry does not allow us to go on study leave unless the Government sponsors us.

Another participant, a third year student said;

Distance learning is a good arrangement for some of us who work…there is, however, a bit of stress…meeting deadlines. I have tried to beat deadlines but other times I have failed. My work involves travelling in and out the station and when I am out of the station, my studies stall.

Learning while at Home Attending to Family Needs

All the participants acknowledged the fact that they were able to learn while they were at home attending to their family matters. It was evident that distance learning allowed participants to engage in numerous activities outside the classroom. The participants explained that, with DE, they were in a position to perform house chores, attend to family needs, and meet other social expectations like going to funerals and visiting the sick. While this was the case, this privilege did not go without challenges. This is what one participant, a third year, said;

I am able to learn while at home and I will go about my chores, fetching water visit the sick, and have the time to touch my modules. I do not think these could be done when in full-time…

Another participant, female student, second year said;

I am able to learn while at home and I will go about my chores and have the time to read my modules. This means that for some students it was easy for them to find time to study despite the fact that they were responsible for many other house chores.

A Lecturer at X University had this to say about her learning experiences;

I started my University education by distance. But I was there for only one Semester thereafter I had to quit. I failed to manage my time as I could not cope with work as a Teacher and at the same time do University work. In fact, I was not well oriented into the system of distance learning. This made it very difficult for me to follow what was required of me to do. I also had very few friends to consult. But when I changed to full- time learning things were a lot easier for me, and I did well. Just imagine, now

I am a Lecturer! I have no regrets for quitting distance learning.

Academic Issues

Participants indicated that there was lack of feedback with DE. Sometimes students went into writing the examinations without knowing their course assessments. More than half of the participants noted the lack of feedback. The participants wanted to receive formative feedback from their lecturers on their assignments and exercises. This was not only going to show the students' their weaknesses and strengths of their work, but also provide advice, guidance and support for improvement of their writing skills. As one participant, a fourth year, commented:

The challenge is, lack of feedback when doing the writing exercises. If there is a feedback, I will be able to find the strengths and the weaknesses of the compositions that I made. The feedback is expected to give improvement or correct the mistakes (that I made)

The focus of distance learning was purely passing examinations and not understanding concepts. Some modules were difficult to understand when we study at home. There was need for the lecturer to make us understand the concepts but two weeks was too little. One student, English major, commented:

For me, making composition is the most difficult (task)… sometimes I get confused and I fail to make correct sentences. I really need someone to explain

Meanwhile, six participants felt that limited knowledge of vocabulary was a major challenge they experienced in some courses. One male first year student experienced difficulties with the understanding of the English language and had difficulties in writing. This is what he had to say;

The most difficult situation is when I write a composition. I fail to find the most suitable words (to express my ideas). I have to find other expressions or phrases which have similar meanings to the words that I want to use. Constructing good sentences has always been a challenge on my part.

As noted from the excerpt above, it is clear that the participant had difficulties in expressing herself using the English language as his constructions of the sentences were not very clear. Indeed, early feedback surveys or informal discussions are effective in getting students to provide feedback on what is working well in a course, and solicit suggestions and ideas on what might help them have a better course experience. A request for informal feedback is an easy opening for students who might have comments, suggestions, or questions.

Technical Issues

There were a number of notable technical issues that posed challenges in relation to service delivery and use. Seven sub-themes emerged during the analysis and these included absence of communication with the lecturer and online tutor, absence of a face-to-face tutorial, difficulty in purchasing course materials, limited opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills, limited time in the examination, being unfamiliar with modern technology, and poor quality of course materials. Comments related to each theme were almost equally distributed. However, absence of communication with the lecturer and the online Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) tutor received more attention from the participants. This is what a third year female student said on this issue:

I cannot ask the lecturer directly that I cannot access the portal because the lecturer is not online…and I cannot have a discussion with other students on the portal who are taking the same courses as I do…You will also notice that other students have not been invited on the portal or the lecturer is missing

Personal Issues

The sub-themes related to the personal challenges that students faced covered the following: becoming an autonomous student; isolation; discipline; limited time to study; pace of learning; lack of motivation; lack of enthusiasm and interest in writing. Among the issues, limited time to study and feelings of isolation received greater attention from the participants. Most of the participants who were also working reported that they did not have enough time to study due to their employment responsibilities. This is what a first year distance learning student said;

The most difficult or challenging situation is that I spend most of my time at work. Therefore, I do not have time to do my Maths

Another participant indicated that the major challenge was feeling of isolation from other students, lecturer, and online tutor. This is what was said:

I do not know where to ask for help. Sometimes I browse the internet to find the answers for my problems or I use Google Translate to check my composition, but it is confusing because grammatically the sentences are not correct

On the contrary, one male third year indicated that he enjoyed distance learning and had this to say on the time;

Distance learning gives me ample time to study. From the time of residential to the period of examinations, I used to study all that needed to be studied without much pressure though some of my friends have been working on gun-point when it is time for exam because they tend to relax after the residential school, forgetting that they are students

Positive experiences of Distance Education

On the benefits that come when you are a distance student, the students indicated that a significant amount of knowledge can be obtained at a lower cost in the process of distant learning. Another advantage indicated by participants was associated with academic mobility. Distance learners usually have many responsibilities connected with their work or families. These responsibilities significantly reduce their opportunity to study full-time. Distance education allows them to solve this problem. It was further established that distance learning students suffer to a much lesser extent from cultural, psychological, social and economic difficulties connected with learning full-time. Nevertheless, the process of DE also has some problems. One of the participants from Eastern Province had this to say;

The greatest benefit I have seen by studying through distance is that I am able to do my studies and continue working at the same time. By this, it is clear that DE offers an opportunity to people to acquire higher education which could have, otherwise, been difficult.

In the same vein, another participant, a second year student had this to say;

Studying by distance has been beneficial in the sense that it provided an opportunity for me to raise money for fees. The period from registration to examination was adequate enough to prepare myself.

It was further established in this study that courses under DE took long to be completed. This is what one participant said;

With DE, you take long to complete your course. Instead of four years, you end up taking six years. This is costly to some extent

4. Discussion

a. Successes

In spite of the elicited challenges in this study, research on student-centred learning suggests that student engagement is highly indicative of student success (Angelino et al.

2007). In particular, the involvement, interaction, or engagement of students in online subjects is crucial if it is to be anything more than just a content-driven subject. Furthermore, the importance of the facilitation of a distance learning community where a group works together via technology to construct knowledge and achieve learning outcomes cannot be under-estimated. It is advocated that a central focus when delivering online subjects should be the development of activities that result in engagement with the content, lecturer, and other students (Palloff and Pratt, 2007). By implication, distance learning should be made interactive by the use of technology. This is the only way DE can be deemed successful.

The above discussion is further supported by Tinto (1975) who argue that not only does the degree of student engagement in the online environment have a significant effect on a student's learning experience, it is the facilitator's responsibility to sustain and drive this relationship. This can be achieved by designing interactive activities that promote students' engagement and collaboration with their peers as well as the instructor.

The fact that students used study modules helped students to have the background information on the courses they were studying. These modules were prepared by the concerned lecturers and developed by Institute of Distance Education (IDE). This study established that modules were of great assistance to the students as they gave them an opportunity to understand that the various courses they were undertaking were all about and had contained most of the content and instructional works for the student for any learning programme.

Furthermore, this study established that DE motivated the students. Positive feelings of independence, self-reliance flowing from successful distance learning study engendered a sense of resilience, academic achievement. For some, improved performance at work either through putting their knowledge into practice or capacity to take on greater responsibilities acted as a powerful motivator. As for the University initiative influencing student motivation to succeed, feelings of value for money were highlighted in terms of both quality of materials provided. Relatively low tuition fees coupled with encouraging levels of support provided by the lecturers and indeed relatively short completion period, were out-lined by students.

b.   Challenges

Despite the expanding growth of Open Distance Learning and its benefits, students who enrol with Open Distance Learning have been shown to face many challenges related to individual, institutional and instructional (Bhalalusesa, 1998a; 1998b; 1999a). Further, Dhanarajan, (2001) agrees with the findings of this study and contends that although DE offers significant opportunities in terms of expanding education opportunities, especially in higher education, in developed and developing countries, there have been failures due to the low quality resulting from the lack of investment in educational institutions and the adoption of traditional methods by teaching staff. (Cross (1981) identifies and gives four distinct categories of challenges facing Distance Learning students as; situational, institutional, epistemological and dispositional. According to Cross, situational challenges include job and home responsibilities that reduce time for study. Institutional-related challenges include poor logistics sys-tem or a lack of appropriate advising (Kruger and Casey, 2000). Dispositional challenges are related to learners 'own attitudes and feelings. Berge and Mrozowski (2001) classified challenges to distance learners as situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and/or cultural-related challenges. Zirnkle (2001) identified specific challenges facing distance learners as programme costs, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns and poor technical assistance. Other challenges documented by Zirnkle are inadequate feedback and poor teacher contact, alienation and isolation, and poor student support services. This indicates lack of trained personnel to manage ODL, inability to design instructioanl strategies and appropriate curriculum design responsive to the needs of learners at X University.

Like the findings of this study, Garland (1993) identified some situational challenges for students to be persistence in distance learning. These included inadequate learning support to facilitate distance learning and lack of enough time to get assistance from Lecturers and Tutors. For example, students indicated that the course took more time than anticipated because they failed to judge the demands of work, home and school. Kember (1989) argued that poor time management led to challenges such as learners' inability to integrate the demands of off campus study with family, work and social commitments. Musingafi, et al (2015) found that teachers who enrolled in the Open Distance Learning faced challenges related to failure of trainees to receive training materials on time, students' engagement in other economic activities to supplement their family incomes, and poor learner support services especially where study centres are under-resourced and overstretched. Kamau (2007) contends that, without an effective learners' support service system that provides on-site face-to-face, timely feedback on student performance and access to library services, student achievement will be under-mined and drop-out rates and procrastination will increase.

It was established in this study that open distance learning also presents new challenges in information dissemination, especially in developing countries. Most adult students noted lack of technical competences regarding ICT. This finding is similar to studies by Mossberger et al (2003), who observe that technical competence was needed in

order to have effective access to contemporary ICT is a challenge to distance learners. Technical competence refers to the skills needed to operate the hardware and software of ICT, including the skills of using networked systems to access and share information. Lack of these skills is a critical challenge as learners may fail to use the various physical, digital and human resources involved in ICT like the use of MOODLE platform which is being used at the Institute of Distance Education.

It was revealed in this study that DE takes away the social interaction with peers and lecturers. This view was supported by Kamau (2007) who noted that the geographical distance aspect of distance learning takes away much of the social interactions that would be present in traditional learning environments. Due to distance, students face practical problems of contacting academic and administrative staff, obtaining study materials and borrowing library books. Furthermore, distance students suffer from the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other students and are often denied the perception that they belong to a scholarly community. This may lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities. This problem must be moderated by institutions providing a sense of personal involvement between the student and the institution. One way to solve this problem is through the use of tutors that communicate with students electronically, by phone or personally at personal contact programmes. Students feel that having a good rapport with tutors is very important during the course, as this can accelerate their progression (Bullen, 2003). This is in agreement with the finding of this study.

The issue of real time feedback from lecturers or otherwise, as Basu (2012) put it, seemed to be a common challenge in most institutions providing DE. It was echoed by Zirnke (2001), Maxwell et al (2015), Hara and Kling (2003) who said that students experience confusion, anxiety, and frustration due to lack of prompt or clear feedback from their lecturers. On this score Kamau (2007) is in agreement with the findings of this study and warns that without an effective learner support service system that provides on-site face to face; timely feedback on student performance and access to library services, student achievement will be undermined and drop-out rates and procrastinations will increase. This challenge at Kwame Nkrumah University indicates lack of adequate infrastructure and inability to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation systems for effective programme design and delivery.

In terms of challenges impeding their progress, the reasons advanced by students were: inadequate content coverage, repeat course- lack of DE study skills, wrong entry and missing results for end of year examination, unreliable marking by some lecturers and lack of time to do research, which Garland (2007) identified as one of the persistent challenges for students in distance learning. For instance, students felt that a two-week residential period

was not enough regarding their workload and inadequate resources such as books. Lecturer respondents outlined DE students' challenges thus: students' failure to read their modules before residential and in between residential school as their time is dedicated to writing assignments which should have been written at home, students" lack of understanding what it means to study by Distance Education, and limited time allocated for residential school. Kember (1989), however, argues that poor time management leads to challenges such as learners' ability to integrate the demand of off campus study with family, work and social commitments. Kember's view seems to be apt to the findings in this study. Other challenges as faced by lecturers included, plagiarism by students, poor writing and research skills by students, lack of enough learning space resulting in lecture clashes, teaching huge numbers, lack of teaching and learning materials to concretize concepts, and rushing through planned.

The challenges highlighted in this study provide a comprehensive picture of the circumstances that distance students face, and the need for educational institutions to organise and structure good teaching and learning practices for them. For example, the emphasis on the use of interactive media is critical for dialogic purposes. In addition, the art of designing courses to suit the requirements of distance students, and to ensure the adequate availability of support services are among the key roles of distance educators, and are central to the enhancement of effective learning strategies. From the challenges the DE students were facing, it was clear that there was no deliberate policy instituted to strengthen governance structures and management systems that support open distance learning provision.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has made an attempt to bring out the successes and challenges of distance education from 2017 to date. The key findings were that despite the existence of ODL programmes for over five years at the University, there hasn't been a deliberate policy instituted to strengthen governance structures and management systems that support open distance learning provision. For instance, non-existence of principle guidelines in the operations of ODL such as issues of sustainability, inclusiveness and use of technology in the delivery of lessons, absence of developed cost-effective and efficient measures in the provision of resources for open distance learning. Other challenges include failure to integrate the use of information and communication technology in the management and delivery of ODL programmes, lack of adequate infrastructure and inability to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation systems for effective programme design and delivery. To make DE more attractive and efficient, there is need to focus on the use of technology more efficiently. Factors such as security

features, internet speed, internet access and digital literacy levels of DE students must be put into consideration.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings the following recommendations are made to the institution;

i. Providing training in all aspects of open and distance learning through short courses especially in ICT to orient all the incoming students to new ideas regarding distance education. This can be regarded as a prerequisite to registration.

ii. Developing human and infrastructure resource capacity to plan, design, develop, manage, and evaluate open and distance learning systems and programmes as frequent as possible.

iii. Periodically evaluate open and distance learning programmes to improve their quality and ensure that they are responsive to emerging needs.

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