

# Implementation of learner support services in distance teacher education programmes in selected public colleges of education in Zambia

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## Abstract

The use of distance education to widen access to educational provision emerged around the 1960s. Learner support services (LSS) make up a fundamental part of the success of the distance education system. This study assessed the implementation of learner support services in distance teacher education programs in selected public colleges of education in Zambia. Overall, the study found that both students and teacher educators were aware of LSS although the majority of the distance teacher education students indicated that LSS was not well implemented. Others stated that giving of modules and also going to the college to revise after paying money was what constituted LSS. However, participants were of the view that the modules given to them were generally not of good quality and the revision questions were too many. Based on the findings, learner support in distance education programs for teachers had a number of challenges that had greatly contributed to compromising the quality of the graduate teachers on the distance mode of learning. Furthermore, the data revealed that the implementation of learner support tended to be more theoretical than the application on the ground as would be expected. Despite some of the lecturers knowing that LSS is the backbone of distance education, the results revealed that their understanding of LSS was just meeting the learners and discussing what was to be written during examinations. Such lecturers did not understand the fact that LSS is cardinal in distance education (DE). The study also found that all the intakes of DE learners were not adequately given LSS and as a result their responses were not in line with what LSS is. Thus, it is recommended that colleges should develop different support tools and strategies to augment its students' motivational, psychological, and emotional state that might contribute to their affective involvement.

**Key words:** Distance Education, Learner Support Services, Colleges of Education

## 1. Background

Education is an unavoidable and important tool for human resource and national development. However, in most of the developing countries, due to inadequate resources, it is almost impossible to educate all citizens through on-campus teaching (Mwansa 2010). A huge amount of money is needed to establish the infrastructure for on-campus teaching which is out of the reach of the developing countries. In order to educate the majority of their people, developing countries are to depend on an open learning and distance education system (Chiyongo, 2010).

Distance education or long-distance learning is the education of students who may not always be physically present at a school. Distance education may also be a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology and instructional system designs that aim to provide education to learners who are physically separated from their lecturers and the institution (Perraton, 1992).

The use of distance education emerged around the 1960s. Distance and Open Learning in Zambia has a long history dating as far back as the 1940s, when many Zambians were studying for post primary qualifications through commercial colleges in South Africa and Britain. When Zambia got its political

independence from the British colonial rule in 1964, there was a shortage of educated and trained personnel in both the public and the private sector. This prompted the government of Zambia to adopt Distance and Open Learning as a viable strategy to enhance access to education.

The University of Zambia, which was established in 1966, has had its Department of Distance Education, now called the Institute of Education, from its inception. The report on the Lockwood Commission (1963) commended that the University should have distance students in order to realize the aim of providing more opportunities for higher studies that included teacher education programs (Akakandelwa, 2007). However, there is no evidence of how distance students' learner support service has been implemented at the oldest university to provide a standard guideline for colleges of education offering distance programs.

Learners support services (LSS) make up a fundamental part of the success of the distance education system. LSS in distance education includes all activities beyond the production and distribution of course materials that support the progress of the learners in their study (Mundende et al, 2016; Simpson, 2000). It is concerned with a wide range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate learning. The goal of LSS is to minimize the negative effects of isolation by providing counselling to overcome the problems faced by students including isolation and alienation, place to study, access to libraries, convenient working hours and domestic and personal problems (Craft, 2002). The range of activities involved in distance education is wider, and the skills required to develop, produce and deliver courses are more diverse than typically found in conventional education (Chiyongo, 2006).

The distance education learner's needs for a variety of learner support services have been well justified by many researchers (Keegan, 2013; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2013; Moore, 2011; Paul and Brindley, 1996; Lamb and Smith, 2000). These expressed the conviction that learner support services can personalize and humanize distance education systems. While course-material writing and development tends to focus more on content, support services tend to focus on facilitating each student's full development (Brindley, 1988). Siaciwena (2007) confirmed that in Zambia, student support services had in the past been affected by some problems that included lack of trained staff in the area of student support. Colleges offering distance programs are on the increase despite the challenges listed in the previous sections. In fact, Mulenga (2020) explained many other challenges that

higher education is facing in Africa, one of them being the mushrooming of higher educational institutions that also venture in distance education even if they do not have experience in this mode of study and quality administrative practices and structures.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Providing support to distance learners is a vitally important component of delivering quality distance education (Moore, 2003; Simpson, 2000). Support services contribute to academic, personal, and career development of students and assist them in overcoming the inherent difficulties of studying at a distance, resulting largely because of feelings of isolation (LaPadula, 2003). Moreover, support services contribute directly to the two key issues of distance education: recruitment and retention (Mills, 2003). Students without adequate support are likely to delay completion of their studies or drop out from the distance programs (Reid, 1995).

Despite the aforementioned significance of learner support, learner support mechanisms are often underdeveloped or overlooked in most distance education institutions (Scheer & Lockee, 2003). One reason for the unfortunate situation is that most distance institutions have an inadequate understanding of how to plan and organize quality learner support systems. Many researchers have acknowledged the pressing need for more research studies guiding us in the development and implementation of quality learner support systems in distance education (Robinson, 1995; Visser & Visser, 2000). In Zambia, with the mushrooming of colleges of education and the fact that each college has large cohorts of students learning on distance it was significantly vital that a study of this nature is conducted regarding the presence and efficiency of LSS in the three target colleges.

### *Objectives*

In an attempt to achieve the purpose, the objectives that guided this study were;

- i. to establish the teacher educators' knowledge of the Learner Support Services in teacher education programs in Zambia.
- ii. to establish the challenges of implementing Learner Support Services in distance teacher education programs in public colleges of education in Zambia.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### *Implementation of Learner Support Services*

The success of distance education programs depends mainly on the effectiveness of the LSS. Ascertaining the needs of learners is the prerequisite for the design and development of the LSS (Evans, 1994). Commonwealth of Learning and Asian Development Bank (1999) have developed a training toolkit for LSS and have identified the following factors that influence learners in the way they approach their studies:

- i. Individual factors: educational and social background; present knowledge level; Learning needs and their learning styles; values, attitudes, and cultural background; motivation and desire for learning.
- ii. Demographic factors: age group; sex, marital status; occupations (if any); income background; their geographic location (i.e., whether rural or urban);
- iii. Motivation factors: reasons of learning, their aspirations, hopes and expectations; relevance of the programme to their lives and their work;
- iv. Learning factors: their learning skills and styles.
- v. Subject background: existing knowledge and skills in the subject; personal interests and experiences on the subject; their feeling about the programme.
- vi. Resource factors: these factors call for answers to the questions like (a) when, where and how will they be learning? (b) who will be paying their fees and expenses? (c) how much time will they have available for the study? (d) What access do they have to the study centers, media/facilities, to human support - counsellors, other learners?

### *Learner Support Services (LSS)*

Learner Support Service (LSS) comprises a cluster of facilities and activities that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process to make it easier and more interesting for the learners. All these activities beyond the production and delivery of course material assist in the progress of students in

terms of learning, interacting and effective communication (Simpson, 2000) and, therefore, the support system may range from study center counselling/tutorial support to administrative problem solving (Rumble, 1992). The design and development of the LSS should be based on the context in which the system works (Sewart, 1993). Hence, the local conditions and nature of the given distance learning (DL) institution should be taken into consideration while developing the LSS, i.e., whether dual or single mode has an influence on the provision, organization and management of LSS. In fact, the success or failure and the overall image of the ODL institution is determined by the strength and weakness of the LSS (Kishore, 1998).

There is consensus among educators that not all learners are willing to undertake the tasks that are required for successful learning, and therefore learners need support and structured learning experiences (Collis, 1998), which brings about the recognition of the supportive element of education. This support can take the following resources that the learner can engage during the learning process such as learning materials; library resources; tutor/facilitator and resource which relate to the mediation process such as the media, and technology (Abrami, 2011).

### *Challenges in Implementing Learner Support Services*

In any educational setting, learners can face various kinds of issues and barriers that can prevent their cognitive and affective involvement in the learning process. Distance education is no exception. Indeed, intensity and frequency of learning problems usually multiply when the learning takes place at a distance in isolation from the instructor and other students (Chen, 2009). Nonetheless, there is some evidence to suggest that among problems distance learners encounter, some are within the power of the institution to remove through different support services (Bernard & Amundsen, 2008; Keegan, 2005). This further suggests that identifying support services that can assist learners to overcome these problems requires an investigation of these problems in the first place.

Some studies have documented institutional problems as leading to challenges in implementing learner support services. Bower (2001) found that in America, conflict in how tenure and promotion are awarded can pose a threat to the provision of learner support services in distance education, this is because tenure and promotion are usually a function of the right mix of teaching, research and service. Time dedicated to

developing distance education training materials is not time dedicated to activities that are required for tenure and promotion. This has been seen to particularly affect staff in research universities that focus on research and number of publications. Within the American context, a survey by the National Centre for Education Statistics found that 40% of institutions offering distance education asked faculty to teach distance courses without providing any training for the experience (NCES, 1998).

Moore (2003), in a review, identified Institution-generated problems that arise from malfunctions in the administrative system, such as failure in delivering course materials on time or untimely notification of test results. There were emotional problems, which were difficult to identify because students usually present these problems as external ones. Goyal and Purohit (2011) suggested that issues and barriers encountered by distance learners could be explained by various factors. He classified these factors under three main categories: personal, pedagogical (learning), and institutional factors.

The findings of an evaluation of the Primary Teachers' Diploma through Distance Learning in Zambia conducted by Siaciwena et al. (2005) found that: (a) There was no consistent system for distributing modules and reports which frequently made it difficult for students to complete assignments on time. (b) The effectiveness of the student support and tutoring system was limited by the low frequency and short duration of contact sessions. (c) Some tutors were not conversant with the content of the modules before contact sessions. (d) District management teams were not well prepared in terms of knowledge and skills for supporting students. In general, the programme coordination did not seem to work well, and roles and responsibilities were not clear to the stakeholders. Rumble and Harry (2018) advised that distance students need special help when they begin their studies in order to promote their study motivation.

The study by Chifwepa (2006) revealed that the University of Zambia provides administrative support, academic support and counselling to the distance education students. It was through these services that interaction between the students and university staff was promoted. Anuwar (2008) stated that with most of the distance students coming from the rural areas where internet is very poor, that limits them accessing their course materials online. This challenge has made most of the distance students working from the remote and rural areas miss important announcements and assignments from the electronic portal leading to

them being frustrated with school ultimately leading to withdraw from school.

Many distance educators recognize that without adequate support, distance learners who run into these issues are most prone to delayed completion of their studies or to completely drop out of the program (Moore, 2003; Rowntree, 1992). Unfortunately, in this case again literature is not clear on the key challenges facing the distance students in collage institutions. Therefore, learner support services should continuously be evaluated to show the challenges affecting the implementation of learner support services.

### ***Research Gap Identified in the Literature Review***

No research seems to have been conducted in Zambia on the implementation of learner support services in distance teacher education programs. The significance of this research, therefore, is that it was the first of its kind in this area in Zambia.

The DL system has come to stay with us as an accepted form of education as the existing 'brick and mortar' campuses alone cannot meet the current and future demand for higher education. The DL system emphasizes self-learning and non-traditional pedagogy, yet the structure and content of the bulk of the programs offered in DL are replications of that offered by the conventional system. Learner support in many DL institutes in Zambia in terms of its quality and dimensions appear to be very poor. The improvement of the quality of the DL system calls for overhauling in the system of support services. The LSS needs to be strengthened and at the same time it is to be expanded in conformity with the technological diffusion happening in the world. In an era of commercialization of higher education, the hope of many lies in the DL for improving their human resource quality. It has become imperative to formulate a national policy for standards in distance learning programs in general and learner support services in particular, offered by the DL institutions.

This literature review has shown that there are a number of challenges in the implementation of learner support, among them are inadequate expertise of trainers in providing distance education, lack of interactive forums for students to engage with teacher educators as well as with fellow students. The review of literature has also shown that the problems encountered in implementing learner support services are unique to different contexts and institutions and these differences in context need to be taken into consideration. This literature shows that there exists

a gap in the Zambian distance teacher education sector on how the challenges of implementation of learner support services are taken into consideration in curriculum design so as to improve learning outcomes.

### 3. Methodology

This research was guided by the mixed methods paradigm. A mixed method is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and “mixing” both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study or a series of studies to understand a research problem (Creswell & Plano, 2011). Further, Creswell (2012) suggested that the basic assumption is that the uses of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself.

This study used the convergent parallel design. In this design the researcher simultaneously collected both qualitative and quantitative data, compared them, and then used the results to provide answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2012). Creswell (2012) further explained that this design is also appropriate when the researcher is dealing with a research problem whose questions are designed to elicit different types of data as either qualitative or quantitative.

It is this direct comparison of the both the qualitative and quantitative data sets which provides a ‘convergence’ of data sources as illustrated in figure 1 (Creswell, 2012).

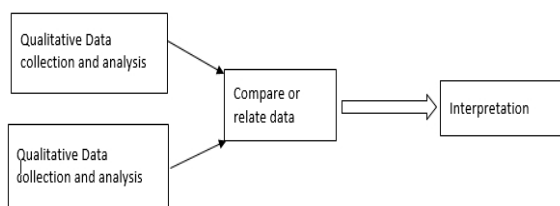


Figure 1. The convergent parallel design applied in this study.

The target population for this study consisted of all principals of public colleges of education, all teacher educators and all distance learners from public colleges of education in Zambia. The actual sample size for this study had 140 respondents. For quantitative data collection, the researcher targeted a sample size of participants that could give a 95 percent level of confidence and 5 percent (0.05) sampling error using the Yamane (1967) formula.

To find out the implementation of learner support services in the Zambian colleges, the researchers focused on public colleges of education with distance students coming from rural and remote areas of the country. College characteristics of the participants for data collection in the three colleges were established through interviews with college principals. Purposive sampling was used to sample the three principals and teacher educators of colleges of education. These were sampled because they were thought to be knowledgeable about learner support services in their colleges. Stratified sampling technique and then simple random sampling were used for the selection of distance education learners using the class registers.

Table 1: Socio-demographic and college characteristics n (%)

(n = 110)		Teacher educators		Students	
Participants' characteristics		(n = 30)	%		%
College	Charles Lwanga	10	33.3	31	28.2
	Chipata	10	33.3	40	36.4
	Malcom Moffat	10	33.3	39	35.5
Gender	Male	19	63.3	45	40.9
	Female	11	36.7	65	59.1
Age range	20-29yrs	1	3.3	46	41.8
	30-39yrs	6	20	54	49.1
	40-49yrs	18	60	10	9.1
	Above 50yrs	5	16.7		
Qualification	GCE School certificate	0	0	14	12.7
	Certificate	0	0	33	30.0
	Diploma	0	0	63	57.3
	Degree	13	43.3	0	0
	Masters	15	50	0	0
	PhD	2	6.7	0	0
Length at the college	Less than 1 year	2	6.7	26	23.6
	1-2yrs	2	6.7	14	12.7
	2-3yrs	2	6.7	37	33.6
	3-4yrs	2	6.7	33	30.0
	More than 5yrs	22	73.4	0	0
Year of	1 <sup>st</sup> year	N/A	N/A	32	29.1



study	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	N/A	N/A	9	8.2
	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	N/A	N/A	24	21.8
	4 <sup>th</sup> year	N/A	N/A	45	40.9
Employment status	Not employed	0	0	31	28.2
	Employed	30	100	79	78.8

(n = 110)

The gender distribution of distance learners was as displayed in Table 1. As indicated, 59.1% of learners' who participated in the study were female while 40.9% were male. Meaning, there were more female learners than male learners. Further, 71.8% of the participants were in employment while 28.2% were not in employment. This indicate that distance education was mainly was being undertaken by those who were already in employment as they may have wanted to advance their education while in employment.

In order to collect reliable qualitative and quantitative data for this study, the following instruments were used; questionnaires and Focus Group Discussion guide were used to collect information from teacher educators and learners whereas key informant interview schedules were used to collect information from the College Principals.

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the help of Statistical Package for Social Science Software (SPSS) version 20.0 software. Qualitative data analysis began immediately the researcher started conducting the interviews. Punch (2014) stated that qualitative data analysis is a process of continuous search for patterns and explication of their meanings, through progressive focusing, reflexive iteration and grounded interpretation, which aims to generate rich accounts of the phenomena studied and link them to literature.

#### 4. Presentation of Findings

Research question one sought to establish the teacher educators' knowledge of the LSS in distance teacher education programmes in public colleges of education in Zambia. This question was very important for this study because the researchers needed to establish if the respondents were knowledgeable of the subject matter. If the respondents had knowledge, then it was

going to be easy to share ideas on LSS. The question was stated as follows;

#### *Teacher educators' knowledge of Learner Support Services*

In order to answer this question, the researcher got information from teacher educators who were involved in teaching distance education and learners who were studying by distance education mode. Two categories of respondents were key to providing answers to this research question. These were teacher educators and DE students who had either completed their one-year study by distance up to those learners who were in their final year of study using DE mode. Learners are the direct beneficiaries of any curriculum and are therefore thought to be in a better position to tell if the programme benefited them or not. Two questionnaires, asking for the same information were administered to both teacher educators and learners requesting them to indicate what they understood about LSS and what LSS were available at the institution.

#### *Student Expectations of Learner Support Services*

Table 2 contains responses from all students from all the three colleges on learners' expectations on Learner Support. The learners were asked to indicate with a tick ✓ in the appropriate box the extent to which they agreed with the statements on the expectations they had on distance education learner support services.

Table 2: Frequency and percentage distributions of students' expectations of Learner Support Services

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Partially Agree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%
A good distance education college is supposed to provide study centres	4	4	3	3	5	5	31	28	67	61

equipped with modern resources.										
A good distance education college is supposed to provide study centres equipped with unlimited internet.	16	15	11	10	6	6	26	24	51	46
A good distance education college's lecturer will respond to students' emails and letters.	2	2	3	3	10	9	26	24	69	63
Lecturers in distance colleges should be available on phone or email.	2	2	2	2	3	3	35	32	68	62
Students in distance education will receive feedback on time to help them prepare for exams	5	5	3	3	5	5	16	15	81	74
<b>Average</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>61</b>

Table 2 shows that 61% strongly agreed on the expectations about LSS and 24% were also in agreement with this assertion. Only 4 % partially agreed. Furthermore, 4% disagreed and 5 % strongly disagreed. A close scrutiny of the results in the table indicates that 74% strongly agreed to the statement that students in distance education expect to receive feedback on time to help them prepare for exams.

Similarly, 63% strongly agreed that a good distance education college' lecturers is expected to respond to students' emails and letters, while 62% strongly agreed that lecturers in distance colleges are expected to be available on phone or email, and 61% agreed to the statement that a good distance education college is supposed to provide study centers equipped with modern resources such as computers. In addition, 46% still strongly agreed to the statement that a good distance education college is supposed to provide study centers equipped with unlimited internet.

These results suggest that most of the learners from the three colleges of education who participated in the study are aware of what to expect in learner support services. As revealed in table 2, the overall responses from the learners were on a higher side in line with what was expected of LSS awareness.

Differences in awareness of what to expect in learner support services among groups. One- way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the learners' awareness of what to expect in learner support services among group variables of colleges, age, qualifications, length at college, and year of study. The results are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Awareness of what to expect in learner support services among groups (One-way ANOVA)

Subgroup	<i>F</i>	Sig (p)
Colleges	.937	.395
Age	1.419	.224
Qualifications	1.206	.304
Length at college	.857	.466
Year of study	1.368	.257

Table 3 shows that colleges, age, qualifications, length at college, and year of study did not differ significantly on the learners' awareness of what to expect in learner support services,  $F(2,107) = .937$ ,  $p = .395$ ,  $F(5,104) = 1.419$ ,  $p = .224$ ,  $F(2,107) = 1.206$ ,  $p = .304$ ,  $F(3,106) = .857$ ,  $p = .466$ ,  $F(3,106) = 1.368$ ,  $p = .257$  respectively.

These results show that despite the subgroups of colleges, age, qualifications, length at college, and year of study, all learners were aware of what to expect in learner support services.

***Differences in awareness of what to expect in learner support services between groups***

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the learners' responses on awareness of what to expect in learner support services between the learner group variables of gender and employment status.

Table 4 reveals that there was no significant difference in the means of males ( $M=21.91$ ,  $SD=2.97$ ) and females ( $M=21.50$ ,  $SD=2.82$ ),  $t(108)=.721$ ,  $p=.473$ ) and employed ( $M=21.71$ ,  $SD=2.90$ ) and non-employed ( $M=21.58$ ,  $SD=2.81$ ),  $t(108)=.209$ ,  $p=.835$ ) respectively on the awareness of what to expect in learner support services.

Table 4: Awareness of what to expect in learner support services between gender and employment status groups.

Subgroup	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig (p)</i>
Gender	.721	.473
Employment Status	.209	.835
Qualifications	1.206	.304
Length at college	.857	.466
Year of study	1.368	.257

These results imply that both gender and employment status groups were aware of what to expect in learner support services.

This study has shown that most of the teacher educators and principals interviewed had a difference in the perception and understanding of distance education. This is clearly indicated in their definitions of what learner support services are. Participants interviewed had this to share: CCE DEC said that:

Learner support in my understanding is in three aspects which include administration, social and academic. When we talk about learner support, we are talking of help that we can give to these learners with challenges in learning of these topics. In the administrative, we are talking about the aspect of students that may have challenges in paying their tuition fees and lapses in the learning progress. These need to be guided and helped following the government policies. As regard to social aspect, our students have many problems that they face which come from work or families and these issues may impede their learning process. Therefore, we always try to find ways that we can help them come out of such situations. Under academic aspect we need to share knowledge through modules which is the key that we have been using at this college.

Another CLCE DEC stated that:

Learner support services are various activities which are supposed to be carried in order to make learning more meaningful and profitable to the learners. This can also be described as the activities which will make learners get the best out of their learning.

And another MMCE DEC said that:

Learner support is comprised of the services we try to provide to some of the learners to enhance their learning of different studies.

Finally, MMCEP also stated that:

LSS is helping the learners to learn in a conducive environment and also to help them complete their studies with less problems.

MMCEDEC said that:

Students are provided with the study materials such as modules that are very interactive, recorded lessons and visits to the students who may not be able to make it to the college for their residential for instance those in Muchinga and Northern provinces we visit them to give necessary help and information they may need.

The coordinator CCE stated that:



The support that is given here at the College of education is the module pamphlets where we teach through the modules as they read it. We also have an interactive forum on WhatsApp where we engage students to ask questions and we give them some tasks to complete before their residential. On the administrative part students are helped with registration challenges and finances. For example, when students have not finished paying their tuition fees, we don't ask them to go home when they come for their residential sessions. Instead, we come into agreements where we meet such students and ask them to sign some commitment forms. Students are also helped socially with the use of the social media where we ask them to discuss some challenging components of the course. We encourage students also to communicate with the lecturers on WhatsApp group for any help they need.

One of the principals, MMCEP, interviewed also added that:

Students are given modules to prepare them for the contact sessions. We also give assignments to the students, but this is where we have a challenge on how to receive the assignments from the students. Each intake and each class will always have a WhatsApp group for their interactions with the fellow students and lecturers.

Teacher educators' responses on the provision of Learner Support to distance education students

Table 5 contains responses from all teacher educators from all the three colleges on the provision of Learner Support. Teacher educators were asked to indicate with a tick (✓) in the appropriate box the extent to which they rated the provision of learner support services to distance education students.

Table 5: Frequency and percentage distribution of teacher responses on the provision of Learner Support to distance education students

	Almost never		Seldom		Not less/not a lot		Quiet a lot		Extremely a lot		Not applicable	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Distributing learner materials on time	6	20	6	20	8	27	6	20	4	13	0	0
Online discussion/debate in a group	15	50	2	7	4	13	3	10	5	17	0	0
Online lectures given by experts	19	63	4	13	4	13	3	10	0	0	0	0
Assignments for group work	5	17	5	17	5	17	11	37	4	13	0	0
Feedback on assignments	5	17	2	7	11	37	10	40	0	0	0	0
Lecturers are available to provide feedback on assignment to DE students	3	10	0	0	4	13	9	30	14	47	0	0
Average	9	29	3	11	6	20	7	24	5	15	0	0

Table 5 shows that 29% of the respondents said that they almost never provided Learner Support to distance education students and 11% of the respondents said that they seldom provided Learner Support to distance education students, 20% of the respondents said that they not less or not a lot provided Learner Support to distance education students and 24% of the respondents said that they quiet a lot provided Learner Support to distance education.

From the findings, it is clear that the respondents have little knowledge on what constitutes LSS. LSS is the backbone of any distance education. As a result, the researchers expected stake holders especially the coordinators of distance education to understand fully what constitutes LSS. The difference in the perception and understanding of learner support services is also an indicator that there is need to have a standard operation definition that can help these colleges benefit from the provision of these services to their distance students.

#### ***Differences in the provision of Learner Support to distance education students***

One- way ANOVA tests were conducted to compare the teacher educators' responses of what they expect on the provision of learner support services to distance education students group variables of colleges, age, qualifications, Length in service teacher educators at college and length at college as teacher educators.

As shown in table 6, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated that the three colleges of education, age, qualifications, length in service teacher educators at college and length at college as teacher educators did not differ significantly on the provision of learner support services to distance education students, F

(2,27) = 5.010,  $p = .014$ ,  $F(5,24) = .507$ ,  $p = .768$ ,  $F(2,27) = 2.478$ ,  $p = .103$ ,  $F(3,26) = .218$ ,  $p = .883$ ,  $F(2,27) = .263$ ,  $p = .851$ .

Table 6: Provision of Learner Support to distance education students among teacher educators in the three colleges of education, age, qualifications, length in service as teacher educators at college and length at college as teacher educators.

Subgroup	F	Sig (p)
College	5.010	.014
Age	.507	.768
Qualifications	2.478	.103
Length in service as teacher educator at college	.218	.883
Length at college as teacher educators	.263	.851

These results show that almost all teacher-educators held the right qualifications to provide the training in the colleges of education. However, the teacher-educators did not serve long in colleges of education and most of them did not serve in colleges from their preservice. However, they were capable of providing the training to the learners in the colleges of education.

### ***The Challenges of LSS provision to the Distance Students***

#### **Study material provision challenges**

Regarding the challenges students faced in the implementation of learner support services in the institution, students indicated that the biggest challenge was to get the course outline and study materials on time when residential school was just starting. Failure to give students enough time to research certain information important in their course from the library was a challenge. This was in line with what CCEDEC stated in his response that:

The other challenge was the teacher educators assuming that all the students had pre-knowledge on what they had to learn. This in most cases didn't seem to be true. Some of these students didn't know what was in the syllabus.

The other challenge in the implementation was lack of study modules. These modules were always in short supply; as a result, the institution could offer soft copies which would be expensive to print on the part of the students. Missing learner support because of lack of transport to the nearest center and shortage of money to pay for learner support was cited to be the biggest challenge. Some students could only attend classes once in a year after full payment. Also, as part of the challenge was poor record keeping by the institutions. For example, at times the learning institution could announce that their assignments and tests had gone missing or misplaced.

The responses of the teacher educators from the three colleges of education revealed that the biggest challenge was electricity cuts, and also not having study centers for meeting students other than depending on times of residential school.

#### **Communication and Technological challenges**

Another challenge cited by learners was poor communication between the institution and the students mainly by delays to communicate to them. For example, when asked about how effective communication was, students explained that:

The institution fails to communicate to students about the promotion results feedback on time as well as any changes concerning their semester in terms of the opening dates. Communication barriers due to network problems especially to those who were coming from rural areas could not be over emphasized.

Another student also added to that:

The absence of accurate feedback on several issues such as assignment feedback and lack of study materials such as updated books coupled with too much work to be covered in a short period of time was another challenge. On the other hand, some lecturers were too lazy to teach and not organized.

Some teacher educators cited failure of online systems, as a challenge. one of them stated that:

Location where the learners were to be met for LS was another challenge. Most students come from rural areas where there is no internet and network is a problem. Availability of resources and funds to conduct effective LS was yet another challenge.

Another coordinator said that:

One of the major challenges is communication hardships. When you want to give an assignment to all the students through WhatsApp, others may not have, while others may receive. This is also a challenge to the dissemination of information where others may receive the information, others may not. It is clear that technology has its own advantages and disadvantages to the implementation of LSS for the distance learners. Even if some students have smart phones, others may have the bundles while others may not have. When they are here at the college, they have access to the internet but when they go back to their workstations which are remote and rural for some students, then communication become difficulty.

Transport and financial challenges

Related to the communication and technological challenges was the transport challenges which affected the provision of learner support services. This applied to both teacher educators and students. One of the students complained that:

Transport is becoming a major challenge especially for us from the very far places. I have to use a minimum of three buses to find myself to this school. Transport fares increase at a faster rate and they say it is triggered by the increased fuel prices. These days I spend more than K450 just to get to school and almost the same amount to get back home. That's more than K900 residential and with the already existing economic challenges; it becomes another major inhibitor to attending the residential school which are very short but important.

It was further confirmed by the statement given by one of the principals who said that:

Transport challenges for some students who come from very difficult areas to access such as islands and other remote areas face a lot of issues to come for contact sessions. To meet these students, it's very difficult because small vehicles cannot reach due to the bad and

poor roads. The only way to get some these places faster is using a land cruiser vehicles and helicopters.

Another principal also indicated that students have financial challenges which they need more support because some students would even fail to pay their tuition fees. Some of these students have families and their salaries are very low to have school as their major expense. In an interview, the principal also added that:

There are more financial challenges which are not enough for the teacher educators to go for field work and interact with the students. Most of us at some point will have to sacrifice from our pockets to meet the distance students from their centers. As a result, we are losing more distance students to other institutions.

### ***Ways to improve learner support services at colleges of education in Zambia***

The challenges that have been expressed in the previous section were what led participants to make the following suggestions, one of them was by CCEP who mentioned that:

To access these students with transport challenges we have to interact with DRCs where we can communicate with DC officers who have transport like land cruisers to use during the monitoring of what the students are doing. For other students who may be coming from very far district we should arrange and agree to meet them at the central place and interact with them.

Another CCEP suggested that:

We have agreed with the district resource centers to recruit more distance education students and an MoU was done where it was agreed that if they recruit 10 DE students then they get X amount of money. We also asked the DRCs to check on the students and update the college on the challenges that they are going through.

CCEDEC said that:

We are planning to put in place a system where the DE learners will be interacting with the DRD and we will be sending letters to the DRD where DE learners will be getting their

feedback. This in an effort to level the playing field the DE for the students to be using much of the resource centers than their own gadgets and internet. For example, instead the students coming to the college to pick their assignments and feedback they can go to their DRCs where these resources can be provided. The other way is to find out from the students themselves, otherwise we may be doing this, but students have something they believe.

Meanwhile, CCEP suggested that:

There is need for more capacity building among the teacher educators and facilitators with the skills of how to handle distance programs. When this is done then we can talk about the material support production. Here we need to produce the materials and then we look at the regional and geographical challenges of the learners. This is because challenges of the learners in the Copperbelt are not the challenges of the students in Chipata. We need to coordinate with the resource centers. Having connected with the resource centers then we need to equip the resource centers with materials such as computers, internet and electronic books for e-learning and other teachers who don't have computers and internet. These computers can be used by these teachers to wire their assignments to their lecturers.

CCEP further stated that:

It is possible to standardize learner support services if we can have a standardized syllabus. Except that there may be a few things particularly regional and geographical issues for each district. In the same line, we need to have a working framework and general guidelines on what LSS are, why, how and who to implement the learner LSS in the DE learning.

Additionally, it is worth noting that CCEDEC said that:

We need to bring on board different stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and others that can help support the provision of LLS in the colleges of education in Zambia. We should also meet as sister colleges and discuss how we can improve the implementation of learner support services.

We need to develop the guidelines for DE LSS, modules, and syllabus so that all the students may have the same content after they graduate from any college in Zambia. This will help make the students from the different colleges but in the same district form study groups, interact and help each other. We should also think of upgrading as colleges in terms of the programmes because people are learning, and they want better qualification.

## 5. Discussion

### *Educator's knowledge on learner support services in teacher education programs*

From the students' point of view, the findings of the research reveal that most students from the three colleges agreed that learner's support services meant the resources that learners can access in order to facilitate their learning processes. It was observed that in distance education, support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction. The researchers also observed that these resources may be library facilities, various media and software programs, community leaders, or they could be various socio-economic variables such as student's financial self-sufficiency and capacity to cope with their roles and responsibilities in the family and community.

Having knowledge about LSS is key to proper implementation of LSS in institutions that are offering distance education. Learner support is a mechanism to help the learner to learn (Nyongesa, 2007). Learner Support comprises a cluster of activities that are supposed to facilitate knowledge transfer and help the learner grasp instructional material easily and make the learning process interesting. Therefore, it is imperative that the educators' knowledge and that of students is understood. In conventional systems, class room transactions, peer team interactions and library facility are components of learning. Even though exists a dearth of literature on learner support services in Zambia, a number of studies have been conducted in various parts of the world to understand how learner support services are implemented and the implications which LSS have for curriculum development. Lee (2003) conducted a survey in the United states of America which found that cost effective of learner support was needed for a learner centered approach on top down rather than analysis of

learner needs, this study paid attention to the status of the learner in distance education and not how it is implemented. In Uganda, Basaza et al. (2010), using a case study found that poor infrastructure, high cost of an education, outdated curriculum, inadequate expertise in the distance education and poor attitudes towards distance learning were among the challenges of implementing distance education in Uganda.

Möwes (2005) in an evaluation of student support services in open and distance learning at the University of Namibia, in which a mixed methods study was employed, provided evidence that adult distance education students indeed valued the provision of student support services, although this study is limited, it can inform the case in Zambia. In Zambia a collective case study conducted by Chinyongo (2010) found that clients and providers perceived distance teacher education to be important. A study was conducted by Thaanyane (2010) in Lesotho to investigate the teachers experience in implementing a new curriculum in business education. The study that used qualitative methods found that teachers were not adequately trained to effectively implement business education, many teachers were not involved in the curriculum design, and the teachers had not undergone training in teaching methods because they did not have adequate knowledge on how LSS are supposed to be implemented. In the same study it was also found that pass rates were low in business studies because teachers disliked teaching theory, as a consequence made students to concentrate on more practical subjects (Thaanyane, 2010).

It is worth mentioning that students noted that the most important form of support in an educational transaction is the teacher, who through guidance and direction can assist the students to achieve their goals and develop control of the educational process. The importance of the role that the teacher plays in distance education systems that use LSS is unquestionable. The findings of the research reveal that the dominant feature of distance education is the physical and often temporal distance that separates the teacher and learner. Because distance students are often placed in a unique situation in which neither teachers nor fellow students are physically present to clarify, discuss, or provide feedback, effective distance education requires a sound learner support system.

These results suggest that most of the learners from the three colleges of education who participated in the study were aware of what is expected in learner support services. The findings revealed that learners were aware that in LSS a good distance education

college is supposed to provide study centers equipped with modern resources such as computers, provide study centers equipped with unlimited internet and lecturers being available on phone or email to respondent to the needs of the students. The students also expected that in LSS a good distance education college, lecturers will respond to students' emails and letters and students in distance education will receive feedback on time to help them prepare for exams in time.

From the above, it was noted that the study shows that both male and female students agreed to be aware of what to expect in LSS. On the contrary, the study has shown that most of the educators interviewed had a difference in the perception and understanding of distance education. Others understood LSS in three dimensions which included administration, social and academic. These educators with this view argued that from an administrative point of view students having challenges in paying their tuition fees and lapses in the learning progress are to be guided in line with government policies. Socially, they argued that students with many family problems which would impede their learning be helped. Additionally, these educators argued that there was need to help students' access academic materials if the true meaning of learner support services was to be achieved.

Educators also argued that learner support services are various activities which are supposed to be carried in order to make learning more meaningful and profitable to the learners. Others were of the view that LSS is helping the learners to learn in more conducive environments and also to help them complete their studies with fewer problems. Another notable argument arising from the findings is that some educators opined that learner support is some of the services that are provided to some of the learners to enhance their learning of different studies.

In light of the above contextualization, it can be strongly argued that the difference in the perception and understanding of learner support services by the educators who are supposed to know better is also an indicator that there is need to have a standard operation definition that can help these colleges benefit from the provision of these services to their distance students. The provision of effective LSS in education institutions is vital, particularly in the ever-changing landscape of distance education in the country. This is significant because colleges of education are becoming increasingly competitive, and to stay successful on the market, they should provide quality education. This can be achieved through the provision of effective learner support services to students (their customers), and if the colleges fail,



students would move to other institutions where support is given. It was disappointing to note that educators had little knowledge of what constitutes LSS, despite it being the backbone of any distance education program. The findings from the students have suggested that the implementation of the LSS program is not effective in the colleges of education. The study has indeed, shown that not all problems faced by Distance education Students are solved by Colleges of Education.

### ***Challenges of Implementing Learner Support Services***

The study findings established that the main challenges that emanated from the study included the provision of study material, communication and technological challenges and transport and financial challenges. These were affecting the provision of LSS among the three colleges. These findings are consistent with Rumble and Harry (2018) who advised that distance students need special help when they begin their studies in order to promote their study motivation. This help lies in the provision of learner support services which have to be learner friendly and helpful before the learners are frustrated and stop schools.

The study findings further revealed that it was a challenge to provide study materials for distance learners due to the fact that many are the times that modules were in short supply. As a result, the institutions could offer soft copies which would be expensive to print on the part of the students. The findings were supported by Anuwar (2008) who stated that with most of the distance students coming from the rural areas where internet is very poor that limits them accessing their course materials online. These challenges made most of the distance students working from the remote and rural areas miss important announcements and assignments from the electronic portal leading to them being frustrated with school ultimately leading to withdraw from school. In view of this, it should be appreciated that the vast Zambia is not covered by internet connectivity hence teacher educators have to use the most reliable methods of communicating to the learners if they are to be furnished with the needed information. Such challenges have to be sorted out in the right manner so that learners are motivated to continue attending lessons with the same zeal of completing their education.

The three colleges failed to provide adequate materials through learner support services because they fail to meet the basic characteristics of SLMs

which include: self-explanatory (i.e. students can understand without external support); self-contained (i.e. students may not need additional materials); self-directed (i.e. students are given necessary guidance, hints, suggestions at each stage of learning); self-motivating (i.e. materials arouse curiosity and are related to familiar situations); and self-evaluating (i.e. self-assessment questions/exercises, activities, unit-end questions, etc. for providing feedback on performance). These challenges are similar to what Siaciwena et al. (2005) who found that in colleges: (a) there was no consistent system for distributing modules and reports which frequently made it difficult for students to complete assignments on time. (b) The effectiveness of the student support and tutoring system was limited by the low frequency and short duration of contact sessions. (c) Some tutors were not conversant with the content of the modules before contact sessions. (d) District management teams were not well prepared in terms of knowledge and skills for supporting students.

Consistent with the discussion, the role of the distance education coordinator in college is to provide immediate solutions to the challenges which students face in the process of accessing education. All these challenges are not a threat to the education of the learners but are an eye opener regarding what ought to be done for LSS to be effective in the colleges. The foregoing discussion imply that LSS have challenges which can be turned into opportunities and help LSS improve their services. By the revelation of these challenges, it is an indication that the learner support services were being implemented in the various colleges and they can be improved upon if all the necessary tools for learner support services are implemented.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Overall, the study found that both students and teacher-educators are aware of LSS. The majority of the distance teacher educators and learners said that LSS was not well implemented. One wonders how these learners would be able to complete their studies without proper LSS. Others stated that giving of modules and also going to the college to revise after paying money was what constituted LSS. Some students were of the view that the modules given to them were generally not of good quality and that the revision questions were too many. Based on the findings that were arrived at through both qualitative and quantitative data, it is strongly suggested that learner support in distance teacher education programme had a number of challenges that can greatly contribute to compromising the quality of the graduate teacher. Particularly, the findings revealed

that the three colleges had different aims for the same programme.

Furthermore, the data revealed that the implementation of LSS tend to be more theoretical than the application on the ground as would be expected. Despite some of the lecturers knowing that LSS is the backbone of DE, the results revealed that their understanding of LSS was just meeting the learners and discussing what was to be written during examinations. Such lecturers did not understand the fact that LS is cardinal to DE. The study also found out that all the intakes of DE learners were not adequately given LS and as a result their responses were not in line with what LSS is all about. Thus, it was recommended that colleges should develop different support tools and strategies to augment its students' motivational, psychological, and emotional state that would contribute to their affective involvement.

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