Equity and Equality Policy followed at the University of Zambia in the provision of Distance Education

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Abstract

The study was undertaken to analyse the policy of equity and equality of distance education at the University of Zambia. A descriptive survey design was used. The sample comprised 3 administrators at University of Zambia Institute of Distance Education and 35 students who were purposively selected. Data was collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides while analysis of data was done using SPSS and themes. The study revealed that distance education operates under the philosophy of providing education for all especially the less privileged. The study established challenges in the provision of distance education as regards to equity and inequalities in the provision of distance education. These were expensive charges on physical course modules, limited internet access especially to communities in rural areas, delay in receiving study materials or modules, difficulties in accessing latest updates and feedback, expensive costs attached to centralized system of examinations for post graduate students, additional internet costs and lack of a funding scheme such as student loans. The study suggests that physical modules should be provided at affordable fees or incorporated in the tuition fees to carter for the challenges of system failure or internet access, an effective courtier system should be put in place to help students access study materials promptly, decentralization of tutors to help provide feedback to students in different locations, reduction of tuition fees and decentralization of postgraduate exams to provincial centers. This study concludes that the policy of equity and equality of distance education does not favor all the students despite being implemented.

Key words: **University of Zambia, Institute of Distance Education, Policy, equity, equality, distance education**

1. Background

Like many African countries, Zambia adopted and established distance education. At the University of Zambia in particular; distance education provision commenced in 1966 when the Distance Education Unit was established. However, the first students were enrolled in March, 1967 (Nkosha and Changala, 2008; Mundende et al., 2016). The original purpose of the distance education programme at the University of Zambia was the development of the country's valuable human resources, especially teachers.

In the beginning the University of Zambia's policy in distance education provision was selective and subjective. For instance, Nkosha and Changala (2008) noted that:

…in the early years of the University the policy was to admit 21 percent of total University of Zambia admission into distance education programmes. Up to 1997 the university administered a Mature Age Examination which enabled students without acceptable formal qualifications to be admitted into both full–time and distance learning programmes. Up to the 1990s only adults of 25 years and above were admitted to distance education programmes and two thirds of them were admitted into the School of Education, reflecting priority given to teacher upgrading and development.

It is also important to note that over the years the provision of distance education at the University of Zambia became accommodative as learning was also extended to other schools and currently comprises postgraduate students in various fields. Supported by

emerging technology distance learning is becoming more recognized and increasing popularity in developing countries like Zambia, having proactive steps by higher learning institutions (both public and private) offering tertiary education introducing distance learning education (Chifwepa, 2006).

According to De Vos (1998), more current research demonstrates the advantageous of distance learning around the globe but very little to understand its equality and equity, hence the present study. With particular attention to the University of Zambia (UNZA), the genesis of distance education dates back to 1966 and the provision of open and distance learning at UNZA is governed by the policy for open and distance learning (DDE, 2009). Since then there has been a growth of student population and the provision of programmes as also increased of which the majority is for undergraduate, with Institute of Distance Education (IDE) intending to promote convenient learning by creating more opportunities for postgraduates through collaborative programmes (www.unza.zm). Most of the open distance learning programmes at the University of Zambia provides professional upgrading opportunities (Changala, 2008) with high number of students pursuing educational Art-based programmes, though expanding other programmes at present. The University of Zambia embraces the flexibility learning policy of allowing the 'working students' to pursue their education without having to leave or resign, and accessibility of education by adult members (both male and female) of the community.

Distance learning at the University can be described as an attempt to break down the traditional barriers to training (face-to- face-) in order to offer students the opportunity to be accredited and recognized for previous learning experiences through a mature age entry test, opening up opportunities for access to the training they need, and enabling students to learn at the same time, place and pace which satisfies their circumstances and requirements (Mowes, 2005)

The University also pursues a system of openness with regard to place and time of study. The geographical boundaries do not restrict admission and learning, in that learners are scattered from different geographical regions (Chifwepa, 2006). While, there is a provision of 'residential school' during the academic year, studying is wholly independent, meaning that it is been delivered through placing course materials online, e-mail and social networking such as WhatsApp (Croft et al., 2015; Simui et al., 2018).

In addition, students who find it difficult to collect learning modules or submit assignments by physical means use the technological means of accessing learning materials and submit their tasks online regardless of location, still this may not be sufficient for learning, hence more research. With regards to enrollment University showcases its flexibility by lowering restrictions unlike traditional learning were grades,
age and enrolment numbers are restricted. The learners tend to enjoy this kind of flexibility; hence it is more on the learners' needs and requirements (Willis, 2001).

Chiyongo (2010) explains that the university uses the principle of adult learning known as andragogy. Andragogy has been accepted by many adult educators as learning/ teaching theory. Adult learners are usually self-directing and highly motivated, hence, making it easier for them not to abandon distance learning. Self-directing learning help learners to establish their own learning goals and within the course activities (Blondy, 2007). In line with this principle the teaching methods employed by UNZA is adult centered, it ranges from presentations to question and answers tasks. The assumption is that each adult learner is able to present their work with minimal or no supervision. In addition, adult learners have the ability to control their patterns of behavior, making it easier for them to follow learning instructions even without attending face to face class lectures. They are quick to understand new learning techniques that may be used, which is the case of UNZA. Similarly, with emerging technology postgraduate students are also in constant contact with their supervisors in the initial stages of research project until the end. When students encounter any difficulties, they are free to visit their respective supervisors or use telephones to seek clarity (Chiyongo, 2010; Simui et al., 2017).

Reflecting on andragogy learning principle, students are freely given the chance to develop their independent thinking; they are trained to produce satisfactory independent work. However, destruction is usually experienced, as such adult learners have increased responsibilities ranging from employment related, family and individual which may impede a student achieve his/her learning goals.

As regards to assessment and certification, all students have a legitimate interest to know to what extent they are successful, and this is done through assessment. The University has a compulsory approach to prepare assignments for students, upon completion of tasks they are sent back to respective lectures for grading, once marked and comments made, they are sent again back and accessed on student portals. This implies that lecturers make extremely productive contribution to student learning, intellectual development and success by comments on their work and guidance throughout (Holmber, 2005). At the end of each academic year learners have the same opportunity to take their examinations just like students enrolled in fulltime learning programmes. This implies that there is credibility in the whole learning process as certificates are only presented upon satisfactory assessment.

In addition, examinations are designed in a way that students are able to write examinations through physical

means at the main campus or provincial centers, hence, giving them the freedom anywhere possible and this method has been replicated in other learning institutions. With the latest development of the virtual learning in the 'new normal' amidst covid-19, students will be given a chance to write on-line examinations which will be more convenient hence a consideration of equity and equality in the provision of distance education as it is imperative for all students to have a reasonable opportunity to develop their capacities and to participate fully in academic activities.

Conversely, when an opportunity is not distributed fairly there will be an underutilization of talent; some people will not develop their skills and abilities with consequent loss not only to them but to the society generally. This signifies the importance of equity and equality in education provision- it levels the playground for all people (Lewin, 2003).

In Zambia issues of equity and equality in education provision have been prioritized by the Government and the private sector. For instance, the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of Zambia states that: "the State shall endeavor to provide equal and adequate educational opportunities in all fields and at all levels for all". Meanwhile, the Education Act of 2011 identifies that "every person has a right to early childhood education, basic education and high school education" and the Act prohibits discrimination by education institutions and ensures equal access to all learners, including poor and vulnerable children. Issues of equality and equity are also strongly emphasized in the policy Educating Our Future for pupils and students from primary to higher levels of education with the view that education should be provided without discrimination (Education Our Future, 1996).

Distance education has become a convenient approach to deliver learning opportunities for students with diverse needs, abilities and interests. The provision of distance education coupled with the use of technology is provided with a view of eliminating inequalities and addressing issues of equity and equality. There are many approaches to distance education and educators will provide distance learning in manners best tailored for the population of students and meeting the individual needs of students. It is important to note that not all platforms or technologies works for all students (Moreno, 2004). Currently in Zambia, internet service is not always stable in some places and worse off some areas do not even have internet access at all.

According to Canturk (2015) equality of educational opportunities implies that educational services should be accessible to everyone respectful of their abilities and interests. It also involves administering equal treatment to students in an educational environment. Equity on the one hand, implies the fair treatment of students in the access of educational opportunity which means that students are sometimes treated differently according to their needs in order to achieve equal status. In other word, this means treating the disadvantaged differently so that they can compete at the same level with the advantaged.

Principles of acceptance for all and equal opportunities were recognized as the main goals of education during the neo-liberal era. Equity became the main normative concept within the educational system. One of the dimensions of equity is providing equal chances. This dimension defined on the basis of social justice guarantees the same treatment for everybody without any discrimination. Equity helps to compensate the hindrances of the students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds (Emese, 2017)

Seale (2020) contends that to achieve equity in distance learning educators need to focus on those populations who were already marginalized in the traditional model of education and need to pay attention to the fact that rural and low-income communities do not have the same access to high-speed internet compared to their urban, suburban, and more affluent counterparts.

Furthermore, Raymond (2014) suggests that more action should be put in place to ensure that all students do in fact get full benefit of digital resources provided in distance education or online learning. In light of this, distance education should promote an integrated learning experience. This is important because it provides new possibilities for personalizing and accommodating various students including those with disabilities. Technology, accommodation and accessibility of course materials and activities are a sure way of reducing the inequalities faced in distance education. It is further argued that distance education programme policies and practices should support student's ability to access the programmes.

According to Emese's (2017) research on equity and equality, three approaches to equity are explored as neoliberal interpretation of equity, structural approach of educational equity and the student-centered educational policy. Under the neo-liberal interpretation of equity, the concept means equal opportunities in reality the neo-liberal economy considers as priorities productivity and competitiveness rather than equity, competition often associated with inequality, injustice and individualism. The structural approach of educational equity entails that under a democratic society macro-social equity must be stated in the law while micro-social equity must be implemented in practical terms at grass root level. People from different cultures should have access to the same educational opportunities. Student-centered educational policy centers on inclusiveness in education provision where the needs of each student have to be addressed when implementing full development of human beings.

Finally, the University of Zambia embraces inclusiveness, equality and equity as the provision of distance education is open to all students regardless of location, ability, gender, social or economic status. This is so because the university works in line with Educating Our Future and other national policies on education. However, quality is also maintained as selection of students is merit based to all students (www.unza.zm). In the quest to provide distance education, the University of Zambia must have an equity and equality policy in place that guides the institution. It is for this reason that the study was undertaken to analyse the equity and equality policy followed by the University of Zambia in the provision of distance education.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on one of the major theories of distance education known as andragogy. This theory originated in Europe in the 1950's and was pioneered in the United States by Malcolm Knowles in the 1970's (Knowles, 1970). Andragogy emphasizes the value of the learning process, parity (equity and equality) between the trainer and the learner, and problem-based and collaborative approaches to learning.

Knowles identified the following six principles of adult learning with respect to andragogy: adults are internally motivated and self-directed; adults bring life experience and knowledge to learning; adults are goal oriented; adults are relevancy oriented; adults are practical; and adults desire respect. The above principles are meaningful when there is equity and equality in the provision of distance education.

Further, according to Knowles, distance education can be effective if the institution recreates an environment (both physical and psychological) that is conducive to learning based on the respect and dignity of the learner.

Therefore, it is the respect and dignity of the learner that compels institutions to adopt policies that promote equity and equality in the provision of distance education. This not only enables all prospect students but gives them a sense of satisfaction because they feel accepted and valued as equals with others despite any discriminatory or disabling circumstance.

The theory of andragogy further states that any distance programme should reflect the actual needs and interests of the learners and, be based on a clear conceptualization of learning objectives. Hence the University's provision of distance education should reflect the needs and interests of the students, and be based on clear vision or philosophy and/or objectives.

Finally, the theory encourages active participation and dialogue. The Universities apply this by allowing students to form student representative union. This union dialogues with the institution on several issues affecting students. In addition, this Union participates in the decision-making process at the University.

This theory guided the study in understanding how the university uses the equity and equality policy in the provision of distance programmes.

Objectives of the study

i. To analyse the equity and equality policy followed by the University of Zambia in the provision of distance education.

ii. To explore the University's philosophy of distance education provision.

2. Methodology

Research design

A descriptive survey design was adopted. By using this design, researchers attempted to establish the range and distribution of some social characteristics, such as distance education, occupation, and location, and to discover how these characteristics may be related to certain behavior patterns and attitudes of students (Kothari, 2004).

Study population

The study constituted the Director, assistant Director, Director quality assurance and distance students at the University of Zambia Institute of Distance Education (IDE).

Study sample and sampling techniques

The study sample comprised 38 participants. This was divided into 3 administrators and 35 Distance Students. Simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used to select participants who were better positioned to provide the information which suit the topic at hand.

Data collection instruments

Questionnaires and interview guides were used. Questionnaires were used to collect data from students because it enabled the researcher to reach some measure of objectivity, validity and reliability. Interview Guides were used to collect data from administrators. They enabled researchers to obtain detailed information about personal feelings, perceptions and opinions with regards to the policy of equity and equality followed at the university of Zambia in the provision of distance education.

Data analysis

Qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis were utilised. To be specific, thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data. Major themes drawn from the interview guides, were coded. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS to obtain descriptive statistics.

3. Findings

Equity and Equality policy followed by the University of Zambia in the provision of Distance Education.

To analyse the equity and equality policy followed by the University of Zambia in the provision of distance education, the respondents were asked on whether they knew the policy of equity and equality followed by the university in the provision of distance education; whether it was necessary for distance students to know the policy; and if there was equity and equality in the enrolment of distance students.

Knowledge of Equity and Equality Policy by Distance Students

As regards to equity and equality policy, 69% indicated 'No' whereas 31% said 'Yes' to knowing the policy of equity and equality used by the University in the provision of distance education (figure 1).
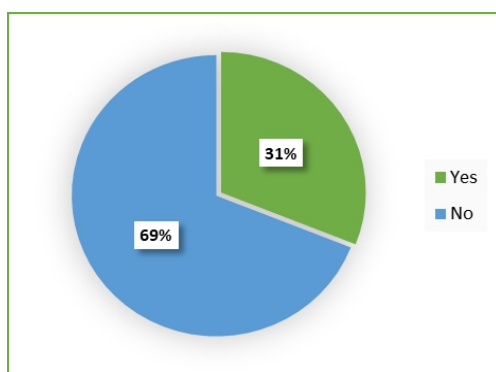

Figure 1: Knowledge of Equity and Equality Policy by Distance Students

Awareness on equity and equality of distance education policy

All respondents revealed that it was necessary for students to know the policy of equity and equality used by the University in the provision of distance education as shown in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Awareness on equity and equality distance education policy

Equity and Equality in Enrollment and Provision of Distance Education

As regards to enrolment, 85% indicated 'Yes', 9% 'I don't know' and 6% indicated 'Not sure' to whether there was equity and equality in the enrollment of distance students and provision of distance education at the University of Zambia as outlined in figure 3.

Figure 3: Equity and Equality in Enrolment and Provision of Distance Education

In addition, in the provision of distance education and how the policy promotes equity and equality learning, administrators (A1, A2, A3) revealed that the University used the 2016 Open and Distance learning policy in the provision of distance education. A1 indicated that:

There are many other supporting policies used in the provision of distance education, "the 2016 policy allows access through the provision of open and distance education to all irrespective of gender, race, religion, marital status, disabilities, age, and geographical location.

A2 mentioned that 'the policy helps to facilitate the provision of education to the less privileged individuals who for one reason or the other are unable to study on full-time.' In finding out on how the university implemented the policy of equity and equality in the provision of distance education, A1, A2 and A3 revealed that through the provision of massification of education to individuals who for one reason or another are unable to pursue university programs on full-time face to face basis.

The Philosophy of Distance Education at the University of Zambia

As regards to the philosophy of distance education at the University, respondents were asked if the philosophy of distance education was known and understood.

A1 revealed that the philosophy is based on the:

…provision of education to less privileged individuals who are unable to study on full-time basis. Regrettably not all lecturers fully understand the philosophy of distance education despite efforts of IDE to explain it. It was noted with regret that some lecturers do not appreciate the difference between full time and distance learners. And on a sad note majority of students do not seem to appreciate the difference between their situation and that of full-time face to face students.

A2 further indicated that other students understood the philosophy while others did not. However, it was expected that all lecturers familiarized and understood the philosophy in the provision of distance education. Similarly, A3 was in agreement with information revealed by A1 and A2.

The study further revealed that there has been a number of challenges in the provision of distance education which has affected the implementation of equity and equality policy in the provision of distance education.

Challenges faced by the University of Zambia in provision of Distance Education

The respondents indicated the challenges faced in the provision of distance education as expensive charges on physical course modules, limited internet access especially to communities in rural areas, delay in receiving study materials or modules, difficulties in accessing latest updates and feedback, expensive costs attached to

centralized system of examinations for post graduate students, additional internet costs, lack of a funding scheme such as student loans, IDE not having lecturers of its own, lack of study materials in some programmes, limited co-operation with lecturers and bank system failure.

One of the Students (S7) said: "Social infrastructure such as telecommunication services is poor in my area, unlike those in urban areas. As a student this is frustrating when you have an assignment to submit".

S2 indicated that it was difficult to access the online system even after making a payment of 50% as required by the university. Such situations forces students to travel to the main Lusaka campus to resolve the issue, hence, it becomes a strain on finances.

Students also mentioned that they experienced challenges in accessing modules on the online platform, astria.

As regards to the above issue, administrators mentioned that the University is of the view that physical modules are not ideal. The system of distributing hard copy modules is not convenient as IDE migrated to digital learning. With emerging technology students are encouraged to adapt and embrace the new learning system. However, S6 expressed concern on the payment fee of modules and yet the university requires students to download from the system which becomes an additional cost on internet bundles. In the same way, S30, argues that hard copy modules should be incorporated in the tuition fees to cater for the challenges that are surrounded with the system failure.

S23 revealed that the university should extend more student support services to provincial centers. S11, also argues that if undergraduate students are able to write examinations from provincial centers then the same should be done for postgraduate students. This would encourage more students to enroll and complete their studies within a studying period.

In a developing country like Zambia with high illiteracy levels, Public universities such as the university of Zambia provides financial support in form of student loans to encourage students to enroll and support the underprivileged, however, this is only advantageous to undergraduate students. S1, identified this as a challenge for postgraduate students who have no financial support in any way. There is perception that distance students could easily finance their studies, however, with economic hardships, minimal monthly pays and delayed salaries it becomes difficult to pay for tuition fees.

Among other challenges, A1 indicated that IDE does not have permanent lectures as employees, thus, corporation and coordination becomes a hindrance to both students

and the directorate. S12, revealed that students are not availed with sufficient information and sometimes delayed feedback. Further A3, noted that lack of student materials was a common problem in some programmes. He also argues that limited internet connectivity poses as a challenge in accessibility of study materials.

In addition, the study revealed that bank system failure was a challenge. S7 explained that challenges were usually faced when tuition fees were deposited in UNZA account as it was taking a long time to reflect that the money was paid hence the delay in being registered which consequently contributed to delay in accessing learning material on e-learning platform.

Responses classified above are further illustrated in figure 5 to place emphasis with regards to the number of times a theme was indicated by the respondents.

Magnitude of Challenges faced by Distance Students.

The respondents outlined the magnitude of challenges faced by distance students. 86% indicated minimal, 14% indicated many and no response for the other variable. As shown in figure 4
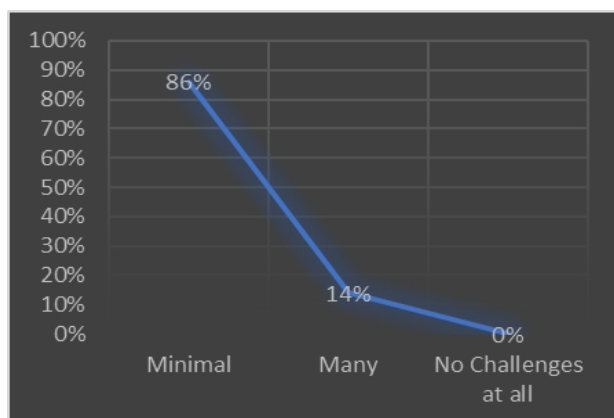

Figure 4 Magnitude of Challenges faced by Distance Students

Measures to Mitigate the Established Challenges

Respondents in the study suggested measures to mitigate the identified challenges as a way of making full use of the policy of equity and equality. 28% suggested the reduction of tuition fees, 79% mentioned that

decentralization of service delivery would help learners in different locations to access study materials, write post-graduate examinations without having to travel and receive feedback from local tutors. 53% of respondents pointed to the improvement of E-learning system and internet connectivity and 66% were supporting the view that course modules should be availed in all programmes.

Other respondents suggested the reduction of costs attached to physical modules where as others mentioned that the cost be incorporated in the tuition fees. In addition, A1 suggested that recruitment of several part-time lecturers in all programmes would help improve coordination in the provision of distance education. Responses are further illustrated in figure 5
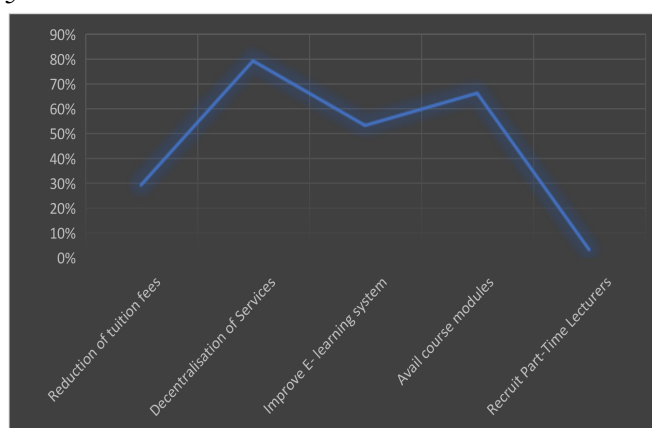

Figure 5 Measures to mitigate the established challenges

4. Discussion

Equity and equality policy followed by the University of Zambia in the provision of Distance Education

Knowledge of Equity and Equality Policy by Distance Students

According to the presented data a majority of the participants did not know the policy of equity and equality used by the University in the provision of distance education. This shows that despite distance students registering and learning, the majority of them did not know the equity and equality policy followed by the University of Zambia in the provision of Distance Education. This compliments De Vos (1998) study which highlighted that very little is understand on equality and equity issues of distance education and/or learning. For this reason, there is need to inform distance students and the general public about equity and equality policy followed by the University of Zambia in the provision of Distance Education in order for the students to understand what it implies.

Awareness on equity and equality policy of distance education policy

All participants stated that it is necessary for students to know the policy of equity and equality used by the University of Zambia in the provision of distance education. This shows evidence that it is important for students to know what is comprised in this policy and how it is implemented. Having knowledge of the policy helps in guiding the students on academic issues as they pursue their studies. Similarly, De Vos (1998) argues that it is imperative that all stakeholders are made aware of whatever is going on at an institution- whether policies or finances. It is for this reason that the University of Zambia should makes the distance education policy available to all distance students and lecturers taking part in distance teaching to enable them have sufficient guidance on the distance programme.

Equity and equality in enrolment and provision of distance education

A majority of the respondents indicated that there is equity and equality in enrolment and provision of distance education while a few indicated that they did not know if this policy existed. This implies that most students acknowledge the use of equity and equality in 2016 policy of Open and Distance Learning when enrolling students into the distance programmes. The policy has helped the institution to facilitate the provision of education to the less privileged individuals who are unable to study on full-time basis. Similar with this finding, Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) pointed out that during the 2006 UNZA academic year, young people of between 18–24 years constituted 10 percent of the total distance education enrollment at the university. This was significant when one considers that in the past university policy restricted distance learning programmes to people of 25 years and above. This is still indeed significant if we can further realise that according to CSO (2012) the country's population consists of 45.5% of people aged below 15 years. However, despite this enrollment the distance students at the university of Zambia are not given loans to cover the cost of studies making it difficult for some of them to pay tuition and other user fees. This finding is also consistent with Ndhlovu et al., (2015) who recommended that Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE) should increase funding to ODL to enable it meet its demands for quality education and increased enrolments.

The Philosophy of Distance Education at the University of Zambia

Respondents indicated that the philosophy of Distance Education at the University of Zambia is based on the provision of education to less privileged individuals regardless of gender, race and geographic location who

are unable to study on full-time basis. This is in line with the Educating Our Future, 1996 Education policy to enable every individual have access to education without any form of discrimination. This certainly shows that the philosophy promotes equity and equality for all people who intend to study under distance mode despite students and lecturers not being familiar with it. Additionally, Chifwepa, (2006) also agrees with the finding by stating that the geographical boundaries do not restrict admission and learning in ODL even when the learners are scattered from different geographical regions.

Challenges faced by the University of Zambia in provision of Distance Education

In this study, many challenges affecting implementation of equity and equality policy by the university of Zambia have been highlighted by the respondents among them being difficulties in accessing social infrastructure such as telecommunication services in rural areas thereby contributing to student's delay and failure to submit assignments via online platform. This is in agreement with Yusuf (2006) and Mukunka (2015) who indicate that successful distance education cannot be assured without the use of effective communication and technological tools (e-mail, fax, internet, television, radio, etc.). The possible explanation to this finding could be due to many towns, urban and rural areas in Zambia having fluctuation in the supply of electricity thereby preventing students from accessing telecommunication facilities. Additionally, most Zambians in rural areas do not have access to telephone and other telecommunication facilities. For this reason, the University must find the best possible ways of dealing with challenges pertaining to social infrastructure such as telecommunication services so that students are helped in submitting assignments.

The other cited challenge was difficult in accessing the online system even after making a payment of 50% as required by the university. Due to this factor, students were forced to travel to the main Lusaka campus to resolve the issue which consequently became a strain on their finances. This contrasts Mowes (2005) who argued that distance learning enables students to learn at the same time, place and pace which satisfies their circumstances and requirements. This surely indicates that it has not been the same to all students. This has affected adequate implementation of equity and equality policy of distance education at the university of Zambia.

In addition, students mentioned that they experienced challenges in accessing modules on the online platform, Astria even when the system of distributing hard copy modules is no longer convenient for IDE as it migrated to digital learning and expected all distance students to adopt and embrace the new learning system. Due to this factor, students expressed concern on the payment fee of modules when the university required them to download from the system, a process which incurred additional costs on

bundles. In contrast, Knowles (1970) andragogy emphasizes the value of the learning process, parity (equity and equality) between the trainer and the learner, and problem-based and collaborative approaches to learning.

Results revealed that the university should extend more student support services to provincial centers and allow the postgraduate students to write their exams there just like undergraduate students. This would mean encouraging more students to enroll and complete their studies within a studying period. This is in line with Peters (2009) who mentioned that the opportunity offered by the ODL system goes beyond conventional face-to-face education, reducing the obstacles posed by geographic and economic factors and (ICODE, 2009) who showed that ODL has played a significant, role in Asia, especially in providing access to higher, education to people in remote areas and for up-grading teacher, qualifications.

The other challenge to achieving equity and equality in the provision of distance education at the University of Zambia is lack of student loans to underprivileged students. There is perception that distance students can easily finance their studies. However, with economic hardships, minimal monthly pays and delayed salaries it becomes difficult to pay for tuition fees. In addition, due to COVID-19 global pandemic some students have lost employment while others running their own businesses have suffered losses due to restricted movements of people to some places with high rates of infection This has caused distance students fail to finance their studies. Due to this factor, students with limited financial support are discouraged to enroll in the distance programme. This implies that the goal to reduce the illiteracy levels in the country would not be achieved by 2030 if alternative solutions to economic hardships are not found in this era of COVID-19. In a similar study, Simuchimba and Luangala, (2007) mentioned that distance education as a means of providing education in Zambia has been instrumental in lowering illiteracy levels and according a chance to those who wish to realize their ambitions and fulfill their potential. This would not be the case if measures regarding equity and equality are not fully implemented at the university of Zambia (Siaciwena, 2000; Simui et al., 2018).

Among other challenges revealed by the findings was that IDE does not have permanent lectures as employees. Due to this factor, corporation and coordination has become a hindrance to both students and the directorate. Not having permanent lecturers has contributed to delayed feedback to students' assessments. Administrators and students expressed concern that some lecturers do not avail sufficient information on student's work and sometimes delayed feedback. Additionally, lack of student materials from lecturers was a common problem in some programmes.

Another notable challenge that affected equity and equality in the provision of distance education at the university of Zambia was bank system failure was a challenge. Students explained that challenges were usually faced when tuition fees were deposited in UNZA account as it was taking a long time to reflect that the money was paid. For this reason, there was delay in students being registered which consequently contributed to delay in accessing learning material on e-learning platform.

Measures to Mitigate the Established Challenges

With regards to the measures to mitigate the established challenges students suggested the reduction of tuition fees. This implies that more students would be given an opportunity to enroll in the distance programme and manage to pay and complete the studies on time. Similarly, Lewin (2003) alluded to the fact that when an opportunity is not distributed fairly there is underutilization of talent; some people do not develop their skills and abilities with consequent loss not only to them but to the society generally. This signifies the importance of equity and equality in education provision as it levels the playground for all people regardless of status.

In addition, another measure to mitigate the cited challenges the findings decentralization of service delivery to students. This means that learners in different locations would be helped to access study materials, write post-graduate examinations without having to travel and receive feedback from local tutors.

Another measure was to improve E-learning system and internet connectivity. This would mean that students will have access to learning materials on time and also attend to assignments and send them in good time. In support of this finding, Ndhlovu et al., (2015) argue that ODL system should be flexible in a way that it makes it possible for learners to move from one mode of learning to the other, that is, from the conventional system to distance learning and vice versa. Surely, with this flexibility, ODL provides opportunities for socio-economic transformation for Zambian students. However, other researchers have noted the presence of digital immigrants in the University of Zambia making it challenging for ICT uptake (Muleya et al., 2019).

The other cited measure was reduction of costs attached to physical modules or a consideration by the management to incorporate the cost in the tuition fees. Evidence shows that the cost of tuition and learning materials have prevented some people from enrolling in the distance programme. Conversly, Ndhlovu et al., (2015) mentioned that University of Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia gave one million people the opportunity to access higher education and contributed significantly to the country's efforts to upgrade teachers' qualifications.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the University of Zambia is guided by the 2016 ODL policy which stipulates equity and equality through provision of education to less privileged individuals who are unable to study on full-time basis. In as much as the equity and equality policy has being implemented, much has to be desired in ensuring that inequalities in the provision of distance education are minimized.

The study therefore recommends that IDE must:

i. Decentralize service delivery for post graduate students.

ii. Incorporate prices for hard and soft copy modules into tuition fees.

iii. Recruit full time lecturers.

iv. Improve the e-learning system.

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