

**Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Teacher Development: The Case of the  
University of Zambia**

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## **Abstract**

The University of Zambia has been offering distance learning courses since its inception in 1966. Distance education, which is one of the most important activities of the university, has played and continues to play a pivotal role in the development of the country's valuable human resources, especially teachers, in accordance with the original purpose of the distance education programme.

This is evidenced by a relatively bigger number of education programmes offered through ODL, namely Bachelor of Arts with Education, Bachelor of Education in primary education, Bachelor of Education in special education and Bachelor of Education in adult education in the university.

The priority given to teacher education is in line with the Ministry of Education's desire to retain highly motivated school teachers by upgrading their qualification and to subsequently improve the quality of education at all levels of the education system. It is also in accordance with the provisions of the national policy document on education: *Educating Our Future*, which, among other objectives, provides for the development of cost-effective programmes that reach large numbers for a relatively small outlay. The Policy also emphasizes the need for in-service training programmes that are school-based and are responsive to the identified needs of teachers and the education system.

The university has, therefore, embarked on initiatives aimed at expanding its capacity to better deliver ODL courses and more meaningfully contribute to teacher training and development. Therefore, this paper highlights the importance of ODL in teacher development in Zambia, in general, and at the University of Zambia, in particular. It describes the nature and scope of the provision of distance teacher education at the University, the challenges the institution faces in this area and the strategies for addressing these challenges.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education plays a very significant and crucial role in the development of human resources in any given society. The general definition of education is that it is a preparation for life. This entails that education is the preparation for every aspect of living; that is, for the satisfaction of people's material needs, the growth of their personal talents as well as their personal character. It is, above all, the vehicle to national development and prosperity.

The Zambian government is fully committed to the provision of good quality and all-encompassing education to its citizens as is reflected in the following mission statement of the Ministry of Education:

The mission of the Ministry of Education is to guide the provision of education for all Zambians so that they are able to pursue knowledge and skills, manifest excellence in performance and moral uprightness, defend democratic ideals and accept and value other persons on the basis of their personal worth and integrity, irrespective of gender, religion, ethnic origin or any other discriminatory characteristics. (*Educating Our Future*, 1996:ix).

The quality and effectiveness of an education system depends on, among other factors, the quality of its teachers. Teachers are the key persons in determining success and in meeting the system's goals. The educational and personal well being of children in schools hinges crucially on the teachers' competence, commitment and resourcefulness (*Educating Our Future* 1996, 109).

However, Zambia faces numerous challenges in realizing the ultimate potential of education in promoting and enhancing national development largely due to the economy's inability to effectively support the expansion of higher education. This lack of expansion has, in the case of the University of Zambia, meant that less than one third of prospective students who want to enter conventional (i.e. face-to-face) learning programmes are enrolled every year. This has justified the need for expansion of ODL.

The distance education unit at the University of Zambia was established in 1966 and enrolled its first students in March, 1967. The following were the original aims of distance education:

- Contributing to the development of the much needed high-level human resources.
- Meeting the educational needs of many capable adults who missed the opportunity to benefit from university education because of lack of facilities in the colonial period
- Upgrading teachers for the secondary school sub-sector.

Distance education has, and still plays, a significant role as it:

- helps the University of Zambia to reach a relatively large pool of students with little additional cost by comparison to enrolment in full-time study programmes
- opens access to university education to people who would otherwise miss the opportunity completely
- enables students with occupational and social commitments to get a degree after a shorter period of full-time study than would otherwise be possible.

Most of the ODL programmes at the University of Zambia provide professional upgrading opportunities, especially for serving teachers, thereby contributing to the enhancement of the quality of education in the Zambian education system. The programmes of study offered include Bachelor of Arts (the only non-educational programme), Bachelor of Arts with Education, Bachelor of Arts with Library and Information Studies (taken by both teachers and non-teachers), Bachelor of Education (Special Education), Bachelor of Education (Adult Education), and Bachelor of Education (Primary Education).

It should be noted that since one of the original objectives of providing ODL at the University of Zambia was to upgrade teachers for the secondary school sub-sector, the ODL teachers' study programme at this institution, just like the face-to-face ones concentrated on the training of secondary school teachers. The Bachelor of Education degree programme in primary education was only introduced in 1996. It is a three-year programme, which is intended to provide professional development to practitioners in the primary education sector. It was hoped that this degree programme would enhance the professional development of primary education practitioners, that had been neglected at the University of Zambia for three decades.

In a continued move to improve the quality of teacher education, a new programme, the Bachelor of Teacher Education (B.Ted.) will be introduced in 2009. It will be offered by the University of Zambia and will be a distance learning programme for the upgrading of all teachers currently serving in High Schools but do not possess degree qualifications. This programme was initiated by the Teacher Education and Specialised Services unit of the Ministry of Education and it is known as Fast Track. Its mandate is to train about 5000 teachers in a relatively short period.

### **STUDENT ENROLMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA**

In the early years of the University the policy was to admit 21 percent of total UNZA 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. Distance Student enrolments increased from 229 in 1966 to 1,614 students (899 male and 715 female) in 2006. The admission for the just ended academic (2007) was 1,785 students (906 male and 879 female).

Distance education enrolment constituted about 17 percent of the total UNZA enrolment in 2007. In recent years about 10 percent of distance students are below 25 years indicating a change in the profile of distance students from predominantly mature students to a mixture of older and young students. ODL has, therefore, increasingly become a convenient mode of study among many people, both old and young as they are able to work and study at the same time (The University of Zambia).

### **CHALLENGES/CONSTRAINTS**

Operating in a conventional university has created problems for ODL as it cannot adequately respond to the ever rising demand for university education. There are several structural challenges of a duo mode university. The organization, administration and coordination of distance learning courses is the responsibility of the Directorate of Distance Education but all tuition is given by members of academic staff of the three Schools of study, namely, Education, School of Humanities and Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. The members of staff of the Schools offering distance learning courses prepare all study materials and assignments in accordance with approved course outlines. These are dispatched to students by the Directorate which maintains contact with each registered distance student. The Directorate has, therefore, no direct authority over teaching staff that participate in the distance education programme as these are answerable to their Heads of Department and Deans in teaching Schools.

All distance students are required to attend the one-month long Residential School which is held every year at the University in Lusaka during one of the vacations. Exemptions from attendance at Residential School are not normally granted. Therefore, newly admitted students who fail to attend Residential School automatically lose their places while returning students have to seek to withdraw with permission for that particular academic they have missed Residential School.

Additionally, distance students cannot complete their programmes by distance learning because only first and second year courses are currently available to them. They, therefore, have to transfer to full-time studies, usually in the third year to complete their programmes. This poses a problem to a good number of students as their employers cannot release them, let alone grant them paid study leave. Even if this was possible, not all teachers can be allowed to transfer to full-time. Some have ended up stopping or suspending their studies after investing a lot of their money and time studying by distance learning. Low staffing levels in schools compound teachers' problems. The Ministry would like to see it that the teaching-learning process does not get negatively affected by the absence of many teachers who may be engaged in full-time studies for relatively long periods of time. It, therefore, tries to regulate the number of teachers leaving schools for training.

As indicated earlier, the Directorate has no lecturers of its own. The same lecturers teach full-time and distance students and this brings about a strain on their ability to deliver. They give priority to full-time students as they consider teaching on the distance education extra duties, or a burden on them. The attitude of some teaching staff to the distance education programme is rather negative. This is compounded by their lack of ODL knowledge. Sometimes the Directorate has to depend

on the benevolence of individual lecturers, Heads of Department as well as Deans in collaborating units to have the work done.

The university has offices in all the nine provincial centres which are staffed by Resident Lecturers, except for Choma, which is a secondary school and whose contact person is the Headmaster. Resident lecturers run short certificate and diploma courses under the scheme called Extension Studies under the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies of the School of Education. The Directorate does use the services of these officers for ODL activities such as administration of examinations and to, a certain extent, learner support services. However, the Directorate has no jurisdiction over them as they belong, and are answerable to the Head of the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies. Their participation in the ODL activities is like an added responsibility and the Directorate has to largely depend on the goodwill of individual Resident Lecturers. The Directorate has no staff of its own in the provincial centres.

The other challenge concerns determining enrolment figures every year. Teaching units do this. The Directorate has no say on the number of students that can be admitted to the various programmes of study. Schools in liaison with their various come up with what they deem optimum admission levels for each programme per academic year and make recommendations to the Senate Admissions Committee. The Directorate is represented by the Director but the basic admission levels are more or less already determined by departments and the admitting Schools.

Further more, there is lack of media diversity in the delivery of course materials and learner support services. The Directorate still predominantly uses printed study materials as medium of instruction. These materials are printed and sent to all students in their various locations by post. There have been cases where study materials dispatched to students are delayed or even lost along the way since large volumes have to be posted. Some students live in very remote areas where communication is very difficult due to poor road infrastructure. Vehicles transporting study and other materials can hardly reach them, especially during the rainy season.

### **ADDRESSING CHALLENGES/CONSTRAINTS**

There a number of measures and steps that have been and are being taken to address some of challenges faced by the Directorate of Distance Education in its provision of ODL; they are as follows:

- Exploring the possibility of employing part-time lecturers and tutors specifically for ODL programmes and answerable to the Directorate as opposed to the current arrangement where all teaching staff belong to Schools within the university.
- Reintroduction of third and fourth year courses to enable students complete their study programmes exclusively by distance learning.
- Revising Resident Lecturers' job description to include ODL activities as their core functions as they represent the whole university in the various centres.
- Conducting workshops and training sessions on various aspects of ODL for teaching and other staff including Resident Lecturers.
- Looking at making structural changes so that the Directorate could have more say and possibly, control over student enrolment levels to enable it increase its annual intakes.
- Transforming course materials into electronic form so that they could also be delivered on-line and CDROM

### **CONCLUSION**

The fact that about 40 percent of the approximately 10,000 students enrolled at the University of Zambia are in the School of Education attests to the Zambian Government's commitment to the

development of teachers. As indicated earlier, even in distance learning programmes, the number of students enrolled in teachers' degree courses far exceeds that of those pursuing their studies in other disciplines. Considering that there are still yawning gaps in the entire education system in terms of among other things, more investment into teacher development would address the situation. Further more, the challenges challenges which inhibit rapid expansion and smooth running of ODL programmes at UNZA, especially those which affect teachers studying at distance, ought to be attended to. There is also need to plough more resources in developing human resources for the primary sector in order to bring it to the same level as that of the secondary sector. It should also be noted that since more and more colleges of education are introducing ODL programmes, there is need for the University of Zambia, through the Directorate of Distance Education, not only to collaborate with them but also provide leadership and/or guidance in this field.

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