

# Challenges of a dual mode institution: The case of the University of Zambia (UNZA)

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## **Abstract**

The University of Zambia (UNZA) established its distance education Unit in 1966, the year of its inception. Since then, distance education has played its historical role of contributing to the development of human resources, has contributed to enhancement of teacher quality in the school system and has helped to address the issues of inequalities in higher education provision in Zambia.

However, distance education has faced many challenges including varied quality of course materials, lack of relevant knowledge and skills in all aspects of distance education among lecturers, limited use of ICT and a largely centralised learner support system.

These and other challenges are being addressed and there is hope that distance education at UNZA will play a prominent role in achieving the institution's strategic objectives of enhancing the quality and relevance of undergraduate education and training, providing opportunities for life long learning and strengthening the services the University provides to the economy and to the whole Zambian society.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education in Zambia is recognized as an indispensable pre - requisite for socio - economic development, in general, and for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, in particular. In this context the national policy on education, Educating Our Future, highlights the importance of, and the need to enhance access to, and improving the participation rate in higher education as a means of contributing to the development of the high-level skills and knowledge necessary for social and economic development (Ministry of Education 1996).

However, Zambia faces many challenges in realising the potential of education in promoting socio - economic development largely because of the inability of the economy to support the expansion of the education system at all levels. This has made the provision of distance education in Zambia a necessary and important national development activity.

The University of Zambia (UNZA) has been offering some of its degree and diploma programmes through distance learning since its inception in 1966. Distance education was developed to:- (a) contribute to the development of human resources, (b) meet the educational needs of many capable adults who missed the opportunity to benefit from university education because of lack of facilities prior to 1966, and (c) widen access to university education to many adults who, for various reasons, cannot attend the university full-time.

The role of distance education should be seen in the wider context of the mandate of the university. UNZA is mandated, and expected, to help overcome the social, economic and scientific challenge of the 21 st century through the provision of "high quality, high level human resources to manage the dynamic and vibrant economy of our nation" (Mwanza 2006, p.5). It is also expected to widen participation in higher education (University of Zambia 2002; Serpell 2006).

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION PROVISION**

UNZA offers a variety of first and second year level semester courses contributing to six (6) degree programmes, namely Bachelor of Arts (B.A), Bachelor of Arts with Library

and Information Studies (B.A. LIS), and Bachelor of Arts with Education (B.A Ed), Others are Bachelor of Education (Adult Education), Bachelor of Education (Special Education), and Bachelor of Education (Primary Education).

Students complete two years of the four years of some degree programmes by distance learning and the remaining two years by full - time study. This structure has tended to frustrate serving teachers most of whom cannot easily get sponsorship for full - time study. The Ministry of Education also finds it difficult to release teachers for full - time study due to teacher shortages.

Enrolment records show that during the first semester of the 2006 academic year the total distance student enrolment was 1,586, which constituted about 20 percent of the full - time student enrolment . The proportion of young people (18 -24 age group) was about seven (7) percent. Significantly 44.5 percent of the distance students were female. This compares more favourably than the full - time student enrolment which comprised 38.06 percent female students during the same period. A notable proportion of distance students, 43 percent, lived in predominantly rural and peri - urban areas.

Printed materials are the dominant method of instructional delivery, which entails that, for most of the time, students learn on their own in isolation. This negatively affects their work. The slow postal system means that many students, especially those in remote parts of the country, receive their materials late and often have little time to write their assignments. This creates problems for students who are paced in all their academic activities.

Secondly, students lack supplementary reading materials. The library is poorly stocked and outdated although the situation has begun to improve with the acquisition of new books and journals.

Distance students do not have opportunities of face - to - face interaction with their fellow students and lecturers, except during the four week compulsory residential school held once a year. Disruptions to the academic calendar, caused by industrial action or full - time student riots, which are not uncommon, affect the timing and duration of the residential schools.

## **CONTRIBUTION TO INSTITUTIONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Distance education has helped UNZA to reach a relatively large pool of students with little additional cost by comparison to enrolment in full-time study programmes. It has also contributed positively towards the institution's policy of increasing the participation of women and rural people in university education. Thus it has served as a means of ensuring that the learning needs of young people, as well as those of adults are met.

In a broader sense distance education at UNZA is contributing to the achievement of the third Millennium Development Goal ( promoting gender equality and empowerment of women). It is also contributing to the provision of quality basic education through the upgrading of teachers, which is an important indirect contribution to the achievement of the second Millennium Development Goal ( achieving universal primary education).

Further, the distance education programme has contributed to the achievement of other national education goals particularly the enhancement of quality in the entire school system. Three degree programmes offer continuing professional development for teachers in basic and high schools. This is important because one-third of teachers in basic schools (including those teaching grades 8-9) do not have the required academic qualifications. Many teachers in high schools are drafted from basic schools and do not have the requisite academic and professional qualifications (see Ministry of Education 2004).

Despite its potential and actual contribution to institutional and national development, the growth of distance education at UNZA, has been constrained by a number of factors particularly in the areas of policy and planning, governance, academic programmes/curriculum, management, ICT application, and learner support.

## **CHALLENGES**

As Rumble and Latchem (2004, p.117) noted "dual mode institutions in theory offer courses of exactly the same standards on - and off campus, but in practice have to overcome many difficulties to do this...". The experience of UNZA shows that some challenges are inherent in this model of distance while others are related to the local context.

### **Policy and Planning**

Although UNZA's Strategic Plan: 2002 - 2006 provides some appreciable policy objectives for developing distance education, it does not provide a solid framework for promoting and supporting the development of this mode of delivery. An open and distance learning policy must define the "rationale for using distance education, the educational and human - resource development needs that are to be addressed, the costs and benefits, the necessary institutional arrangements, the qualification and quality framework for distance - education courses; and how specific policy will be integrated into other government policies" (Naidoo et al, 2006, p.7).

In this regard the institutional policy does not provide a framework for operation, an agreed set of rules that explain all participants' roles and responsibilities. It also lacks a comprehensive implementation plan. The level of commitment to the Strategic Plan as a whole and sense of ownership appears to be low. This can be attributed to the centralization of the planning process and lack of shared understanding, vision and support from key stakeholders especially with regard to the role and place of distance education in the university.

### **Governance**

A new governance structure for distance education was established in 1994 with the creation of the Directorate of Distance Education, which manages and coordinates all distance learning courses. In addition the Senate Distance Education Committee was created to consider and formulate policy on distance education and to recommend to Senate rules and regulations governing the distance education programme. The Committee receives recommendations from the Directorate of Distance Education and from Schools (faculties) that offer distance learning courses.

At operational level relevant Deans and the Director of Distance Education are responsible for enforcing academic regulations. Schools offering distance learning courses have Assistant Deans responsible for distance education matters. They work in close consultation and collaboration with the Coordinators of Course Materials and Student Services in the Directorate of Distance Education.

The problem of inadequacy of funding and the negative effect of the centralization of financial management was addressed in 1997 when the devolution of financial management was effected in the university. The Directorate of Distance Education therefore manages its budget and Bank Account, through its Budget Committee and in conformity with the University financial regulations.

The above changes have enhanced the status and visibility of distance education in the organizational and governance structure of the university. It is also evident the Directorate of Distance Education now enjoys greater autonomy and authority than before 1994.

However, more could be done to improve the participation of academic staff and students in the governance system to enable them contribute more actively and directly to policy formulation. There should be a forum for consultations/discussions with the lecturers on matters related to distance education.

### **Management**

The insufficient numbers of champions to encourage and support the development and delivery of the distance education programme in academic and administrative units tends to affect its management and coordination. The varying levels of appreciation of distance education and the shortage of trained and experienced staff is also a major challenge. Academic staff are recruited on the basis of their qualifications to teach full - time courses but find themselves offering distance learning courses, without prior, relevant experience or training in most cases

Another challenge is related to administrative/support staff who are centrally recruited and deployed to the Directorate of Distance Education without due regard to the unique management needs of distance education. Largely because of the reliance on the centralized and lengthy staff recruitment system, the Directorate of Distance Education is usually understaffed.

The dispersion of services, roles and responsibilities in various academic and administrative units, over which the Directorate of Distance education has no administrative authority, does not make coordination of distance education services easy and the levels of accountability tend to vary.

At operational level, the Directorate of Distance Education still relies heavily on the cumbersome manual record system, especially with regard to recording dispatch of materials, assignments submitted for marking, student queries and general enquiries. Records related to admissions, course registration and examinations are part of the university record management administered by the Computer Centre. The retrieval and use of these records is some times slow because of, among other reasons, the limited number of staff with knowledge of the systems , in the Directorate of Distance Education.

## **Curriculum**

The degree programmes at UNZA are highly structured. Consequently the curricula are developed to meet both the requirements of the academic/study programmes and the needs of students. However, in some cases the curricula do not sufficiently respond to the professional development needs of distance learners. For example the Bachelor of Arts with Education degree programme is not appropriately linked to the diplomas offered by the colleges of education affiliated to UNZA. Therefore , serving teachers with diplomas have to be subjected to the same duration and other academic requirements of the degree programme as school leavers.

In accordance with the concept of parity of standards and equality of treatment both full - time and distance students follow the same curriculum offered by the same lecturers. The range of study programmes and courses offered to distance students is determined more by the capacity/ability of the academic departments and other educational considerations than the needs of distance learners.

Partly as a result of this the range of study programmes and courses does not respond adequately to the diverse needs of the prospective and actual distance students. This is illustrated by the delays in introducing third and fourth year level courses that would enable students to complete their degree programmes entirely by distance learning, as provided for in the Strategic Plan.

## **Learner Support**

The learner support system is highly centralised and does not respond adequately to the increasing, more heterogeneous and widely dispersed student population. UNZA's provincial centres still lack physical facilities as well as human and material resources to respond effectively and efficiently to the diverse needs of students. The Resident Lecturers who run the provincial centres are not always adequately trained in learner support provision and their main function is to provide extension education. Learner

support provision is not their main responsibility. However, many of them are deeply committed to it.

Another weakness is the limited participation of lecturers who not only develop materials but also mark assignments and provide face- to - face teaching. Because of financial and time constraints they no longer undertake field visits to meet their learners. Not all of them provide effective correspondence tuition which should be provided through comments on the students ' assignments. Even in cases where lecturers do make useful comments on assignments their positive effect is sometimes diminished by delays in marking and returning students ' work. Heavy workloads (both full - time and distance education) make it difficult even for the most enthusiastic lecturer to mark their assignments without delays.

The distance students' access to mobile phones and e-mail facilities is a new challenge. The Directorate of Distance Education has neither the capacity nor strategy to cope with the increasing inflow of calls from students. Secondly, not all support staff is sufficiently knowledgeable about the distance education programme to offer immediate and appropriate answers to queries raised by phone. Third, the e-mail system depends on the university wide Internet system which is quite erratic. In addition responding to students' e-mails requires a substantial amount and careful management of time.

### **Quality**

Distance education at UNZA is characterised by varied quality of course materials and services provided to learners. As in the case of Massey University, in New Zealand, individual lecturers retain a high degree of control over every aspect of the planning, preparation, delivery and evaluation of their distance education courses (see Prebble, 1995, p.3). Unfortunately many of them do not always have the time, relevant knowledge and skills to provide high quality services.

Apart from inadequate training among academic and administrative/support staff, UNZA lacks a framework for quality assurance, quality control and quality enhancement specific to distance education. It has no uniform policy to provide good learning opportunities to help distance learners achieve the required levels of academic performance in this area. The institution also lacks an effective and efficient monitoring and evaluation strategy for distance education.

### **Application of ICT**

The Strategic Plan provides for the exploitation of information and communication technologies to improve the development of course materials and the provision of learner support services. Although the Directorate of Distance Education has been building its ICT capacity through the acquisition of computers and associated equipment the use of ICTs in programme delivery and management is still limited.

The university's provincial centres have Internet connectivity. However, the use of the facility is limited by the fact that it is dependent on the use of telephone lines. The system is slow, erratic and expensive. Both staff and students have not benefited much from the system.

The generally low level of ICT knowledge and skills as well as the high cost of, and limited access to ICT for students in particular diminishes the role of ICT in distance education. UNZA also lacks an ICT policy or strategy for utilizing ICT in distance education.

### **ADDRESSING CHALLENGES**

Some of the measures taken to address challenges in the provision of distance education are outlined in various sections above. Other significant measures include:

- introduction of allowances for distance education staff;
- inclusion of distance education in UNZA's submission to Government on the development of the Fifth National Development Plan;
- allocation of funds to conduct training workshop;
- acquisition of more computers for provincial centres;
- acquisition of supplementary reading materials from the Open University of the United Kingdom; and
- partnering with the African Virtual University to establish Open, Distance and e-Learning Centres.

The review of the current Strategic Plan and the development of a new (this year) provide an important opportunity for developing known and emerging challenges. Positive support from the current University Management and relevant Deans is also an important positive factor

## **CONCLUSION**

A number of organizational and management changes have been effected to improve the management of distance education since 1994. However, it is very clear that a more permanent solution lies in the development a comprehensive policy framework. This will require a thorough analysis of the labour market, the emerging needs of the learners and should build on the achievements made to date.

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