

# Completing degree programmes by distance learning

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## **Abstract**

Since the birth of the University in 1966, degree programs have never been offered entirely by distance learning. The trend has been that the students would complete first and second year courses by distance learning mode. Thereafter, it is compulsory that they transfer to full time to complete their studies.

The research sought to determine students' motivation and attitudes towards completing studies entirely by distance learning mode.

The findings were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics such as tables, frequencies, percentages and mere counting. The sample of the study consisted of 27 distance education students (81.5% male and 18.5% female). Questionnaires were administered to the randomly selected students during the 2004 Residential School.

85% of the respondents expressed negative attitudes towards completion of the studies through this mode. They gave reasons like it would take too long to complete studies, degrees acquired would be inferior to those attained by full time studies etc. The few (15%) who expressed positive attitudes gave reasons like employers would not interfere in the studies, students would not lose their jobs and they would always be with their families.

The respondents, however, suggested effective strategies that would strengthen and improve the delivery of distance education by the current arrangement and/or any other like full use of university provincial centers, use of computer and the internet in the delivery of course materials, assignments, comments, etc.

It was hoped that the findings would benefit the University of Zambia administration, distance education students, employers and other stakeholders involved in the administration of distance education in Zambia.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the recommendations of the Lock Wood Commission, whose report led to the birth of the University of Zambia (UNZA), was that degree and diploma programmes should also be offered by distance study to suitably qualified candidates who might not be able to attend the University on full-time basis (Alexander 1975). The University implemented this recommendation once and since March 1967 it has offered some degree and diploma programmes by distance teaching (UNZA calendar, 1994 – 1996). However, the university has never offered these programmes entirely by distance learning mode except for a diploma program in Adult Education. The trend has been that the students would complete first and second year courses by distance learning mode. Thereafter, it is compulsory that they transfer to full-time to complete their studies.

The unit responsible for distance education at the University of Zambia has undergone transformation since 1967. It used to be called Correspondence Studies Department, but was later incorporated into a much wider configuration known as Centre for Continuing Education. Recently restructuring exercise led to the formation of the Directorate of Distance Education (DDE). Its responsibility is to organise, administer and coordinate distance-learning courses. Members of academic staff of the various schools of study give all tuition. They also prepare all study materials and assignments in accordance with approved course outlines. These are sent to students by the DDE,

which maintains direct contact with each registered student. (DDE Student Handbook 2003).

Nkossa, et al (2003) notes that the demand for university education in Zambia has been growing rapidly. In recent years, there has been increasing distance education enrolments among school leavers and young people. Many factors have contributed to this phenomenon. Among the most prominent ones are the following:

- i. the need for upgrading qualifications in response to technological and other changes;
- ii. the accessibility of distance study as opposed to its full-time or part-time on campus equivalent; and
- iii. learners are able to adapt their learning programmes to their individual needs.

### **Statement of the problem.**

In spite of the growing demand for higher education, the University of Zambia has never attempted to offer some degree programmes entirely by distance teaching although it has succeeded to do so with a diploma in Adult Education program. People now know that one way of upgrading their qualifications is to study by distance learning facility. It has come to their realisation that regardless of the mode of study preferred, students are awarded the same certification.

### **Purpose of the study.**

The study sought to determine student motivation and attitudes towards completing studies entirely by distance learning mode.

### **Objectives.**

The objectives of the study were to:

- i. establish whether or not students would prefer to complete their studies entirely by distance learning;
- ii. to find out whether or not annual one-month Residential School would be necessary when completing studies entirely by distance learning;
- iii. ascertain the role Resident Lecturers in provinces would play when studies were to be completed entirely by distance learning; and
- iv. find out from students the problems they foresaw if studies were to be completed entirely by distance learning.

### **Significance of the study.**

This study tried to bring out the motivation and attitudes of students towards completion of studies by distance learning mode. It is hoped that the findings of the study would influence the university administration and other stakeholders on how to improve the running of University distance education programmes.

### **Limitations of the study.**

The researcher was not able to cover all the distance education students due to limited funds and time.

## **LITERATURE FRAMEWORK**

Perry and Rumble (1987,p.1) state that in distance education the learner and the teacher are not face-to-face. Thus, the two-way communication must take place despite the fact that they are not in the same room together. This two-way communication can be established by using any medium that is available such as postal or e-mailing, telephone, fax, radio, television, computer, modems linkage TV or computers, interactive videodiscs etc. both of the side of teaching or learning process. Distance education in contrast to traditional classroom or campus-based education, is characterized by a clear separation in space and time of the majority of teaching and learning activities. Teaching is to a large degree mediated through various technologies

(print, audio, video, broadcasting, computers, etc.), and learning generally takes place on an individual basis through supported independent study in the student's home, or work place. The quality of the teaching materials and the level and variety support for independent study depends on the nature and resources of the institution or organization responsible for a given programme, and the available communication infrastructure (Kaye 1990, pp. 6-7).

Distance education means simply forms of instruction that rely heavily on ways of communicating other than meeting face-to-face. These forms of instruction can be called open learning if they make education accessible to more people (Daniel 1988, p.127).

Distance education can also be defined as a teaching and learning assisted by telecommunications. In this system, learning and teaching facilities are delivered from one place to one or more other places by telecommunication technologies and mail system. This definition of distance education takes us to global distance education. This is a new definition of distance education. Distance education systems can be successfully implemented at nation level in several countries. Thus, it is possible that distance education can be delivered internationally using globally interconnected telecommunication technologies, such as satellite, fiber optics, dry plain old telephone services (Isman 1995, p. 2).

Internet and teleconference systems are being used widespread as one of student support services by distance education institutions and by its learners. Including written, visual and audio elements, Internet is a favorable medium for the learners. And also, teleconference system is realized to bring together teacher and learner who are in different places. It is possible to attend the teleconference by Internet through adding sound and visual card into their computer at home.

At the beginning, Internet installation costs are high. However, Internet costs are low when compared with the publishing and distributing costs of printed materials, preparing and broadcasting costs of television and radio course production materials and costs of face-to-face counselling organization. Internet is cheaper than the other mediums of teaching.

Distance education is a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes which are rationalised by the application of division of labour and organisational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, especially for the purpose of reproducing high quality teaching materials which make it possible to instruct great numbers of students at the same time wherever they live.

## **DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES**

### **Research design**

A research design is synonymous to a paradigm. It is a program to guide the research in collecting, analysing and interpreting observed facts. It is a plan and structure of investigation used to obtain evidence to respond to research questions.

Descriptive research was conducted to collect precise information and give accurate account of the proportion of people within the population sharing certain views on the research subject.

### **Target population**

The population of the study consisted of all distance students that attended the 2004 Residential School.

### **Sample.**

The sample consisted of 27 students. 81.5%(22) of the respondents were males whilst 18.5%(5) of them were females. 78%(21) of the respondents were aged between 30 and 44 years. 15% (4) of the respondents were between 25 and 29 years. 7%(2) of the respondents were 45 years and above.

81%(22) of the respondents were married whilst 15% (4) of them were single. 4%(1) of them were widowed.

### **Method of data collection.**

Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS.**

Data analysis.

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data.

Data analysis involved classifying of questions, coding of themes and categorising of themes according to the mostly frequently used phrases or generative themes that were later tabulated into frequencies and percentages for easy interpretation of the findings.

Prefer to complete studies by distance learning mode

85% of the respondents did not prefer to complete studies by distance learning mode. 15% of the respondents were in favour of such an arrangement. However, 74% of them stated that the compulsory annual one-month residential school would still be necessary if students were to complete their studies entirely by distance learning. 19% of the respondents viewed the residential school as unnecessary.

70.37%(19) of the respondents thought that resident lecturers in provinces would play an important role in the new arrangement, whilst 22.22% (6) of the respondents did not think so.

### **Discussion of results**

#### **Profile of participants**

The results revealed that 81.5% of the respondents were males while 18.5% of them were females showing gender disparity in higher education. 78% of them were aged between 30 and 44 years, 81% of the respondents were married while 15% of them were unmarried. Only 4% of the respondents were widowed.

85% of the respondents stated that they would not wish to complete studies entirely by distance learning mode due to the following reasons:

- degree acquired would lose its value; it would be an inferior one
- it would take a long time to complete studies
- lecturers did not give adequate attention to distance students
- lectures, during residential school, were conducted in a hurry; hence not grasping certain points
- tutorials were not provided by distance mode
- there was no guidance by the lecturers
- there were no libraries in districts
- university study required extensive reading and research which was possible when studying by fulltime
- students interacted with lecturers and other students when studying by fulltime.
- course materials from DDE were not clear
- some reading materials were difficult to understand alone as a distance student.

15% of the respondents indicated that they would prefer to complete studies entirely by distance learning mode due to the following reasons:

- it was quicker to finish studies because university closures would not affect them
- a student worked at own convenient time and pace.
- some employers were not willing to give study leave to their employees

- some students did have family responsibilities to take care of
- sponsorship by employers and others would not be an obstacle

74% of the respondents stated that the compulsory annual one-month residential school would still be necessary if students were to complete their studies by distance learning. They pointed out the following:

- some issues would be to clarified by the lecturers
- there would be use of the library facilities at the university campus
- here would be face-to-face interaction with the lecturers

19% of the respondents viewed the residential school not to be necessary due to the following reasons:

- residential school delayed completion of studies. If a student missed it, it was not possible to proceed with studies
- it was expensive to attend a residential school due to costs for accommodation, travel and food.

70.3% of the respondents thought that resident lecturers in provinces would play an important role in the new arrangement because they:

- would assist students to have reading materials and other relevant information from internet services in their offices.
- would give guidance and quick feedback to students
- would co-ordinate the studies of the students
- would provide library services if well equipped with academic books and periodicals
- would facilitate a two-way communication between students in various regions and the University
- would offer tutorials in zones and catchment's areas on behalf of lecturers

Respondents foresaw difficulties students pursuing degree programs by distance learning would encounter; some of them being:

- would miss opportunity to interact with lecturers
- missing of assignments would continue
- receiving course assignments and study materials late would continue
- lack of time by students to devote to studies when they were at home and working places
- reading materials for courses in practical areas would still be difficult to understand.
- would still have no relevant books/reading materials in rural areas
- no enough study materials in DDE for all the years as it was presently

Respondents made the following comments and suggestions if the university were to offer degree programs by distance learning mode:

- degrees attained through distance mode would not be acknowledged by the community
- residential school should be conducted per semester in one academic year
- university should have audio video tapes on different courses which should be accessed in provincial centres.
- provincial centres should be connected to internet for easy access to information
- introduce libraries in the provincial centres
- improve communication network between students and DDE and the university at large
- government should be persuaded to provide loans to distance students
- courses offered per semester should be increased to three

- affiliated colleges should offer degree programs by distance learning mode
- the university library should have latest books and periodicals.

## **CONCLUSION**

Findings of the study brought a variety of factors that made the majority of students reject pursuing their studies entirely by distance learning mode. Some of the factors included the following:

- it took a long time to complete studies
- qualifications obtained by distance learning mode were inferior.
- lecturers did not give adequate attention to distance students
- tutorials were not provided by distance learning mode
- there were no library faci

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