

**COPING STRATEGIES TO LEARNING CHALLENGES
FACED BY RURAL DISTANCE STUDENTS AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA**

BY

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requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational
Administration**

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DECLARATION

I, **Margaret Mwale-Mkandawire**, declare that the work I have presented in this thesis entitled “Coping Strategies to Challenges Faced by Distance Students from Rural Areas of Zambia: A Case of the University of Zambia” is my own work. The work contains no material submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of an academic degree at this University or any other university. I have, however, acknowledged all other works.

Signed: -----

Date: -----

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late first-born son, Mizzie Mkandawire, for assisting me with some graphs in this work, just before he was called to be with the Lord. My late parents, Edinala Nyathole Mtonga and Israel-Kasilizika Mwale Chirwa, and my beloved husband, Mloyiso Jacob Mkandawire, father of our children: Mizzie, Songelo, Sunga, Chalo and Dekhani.

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APPROVAL

This Thesis of **Margaret Mwale-Mkandawire** is hereby approved as fulfilling the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Administration by the University of Zambia.

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Principle Supervisor:**Signature** **Date**

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ABSTRACT

The research problem is built around gaps in the literature and my experiences in dealing with distance students at the University of Zambia. There is dearth of literature exploring the lived experiences of rural students enrolled under the distance mode of study at the University of Zambia. To address the void in scholarly literature, this study explored how students experience the distance education space and what strategies, if any, they generate to cope with the challenges associated with this mode of study. The investigation utilized phenomenological methodology to contribute to expanded understandings of the lived experiences of the students. The researcher interviewed 10 students enrolled at UNZA from rural areas. Participants were purposively selected from three randomly identified towns that are regarded as 'rural'. The researcher then conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with students provided rich data.

While the distance learners experienced many challenges such as situational challenges, dispositional challenges, institutional challenges and epistemological challenges, this study has revealed that students cope by employing the following behaviours: a) taking direct action b) seeking social support c) denial, and, d) disengagement and acceptance.

These findings contribute to an expanded understanding of the challenges encountered by rural distance students enrolled at UNZA. The study also provides a framework of how to address the challenges through the understanding of Learners' experiences. Studies such as this one would enable distance teaching programme designers to identify and understand the needs and characteristics of learners in specific social contexts. To address all the challenges experienced by the distance students, the study recommends, among other things, that researchers should investigate how universities can better support the faculty in acquiring the knowledge, skills, pedagogical strategies, and dispositions that are needed for building more effective, interactive learning communities through the distance mode. Studies such as this would enable distance teaching programme designers to identify and understand the needs and characteristics of learners in specific social contexts.

Key words: Challenges, coping strategies, distance students, rural areas

ABBREVIATIONS

ACOT	-	Apple Classrooms of Tomorrow
AFT	-	American Federation of Teachers
ASS. EDITOR N/S-		Assistant Editor, Natural Sciences
ASS. EDITOR S/S-		Assistant Editor, Social Sciences
CSs	-	Counselling Sessions
CSO	-	Central Statistical Office
DDE	-	Directorate of Distance Education
DE	-	Distance Education
DL	-	Distance Learners
EfA	-	Education for All
FAWEZA	-	Forum for African Women Educationalists in Zambia.
FGD	-	Focus Group Discussion
GPI	-	Gender Parity Index
HEA	-	Higher Education Authority
HoD	-	Head of Department
ICTs	-	Information Communication Technologies
IDE	-	Institute of Distance Education
IPA	-	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
IT	-	Information Technology
LSS	-	Learner Support Services
MBD	-	Marketing and Business Development
MoE	-	Ministry of Education
NUEA	-	National University Extension Association
ODE	-	Open and Distance Education
OSSREA	-	Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa
PD	-	Programme Developers
PDU	-	Production and Distribution Unit
PG	-	Post-Graduate
QA	-	Quality Assurance
RCP	-	Research Consultancy and Publication
SADC	-	Southern African Development Community

SIM	-	Self Instructional Materials
UNISA	-	University of South Africa
UG	-	Under Graduate
UTH	-	University Teaching Hospital
UNZ	-	University of Zambia
US CONGRESS	-	United States Congress
ZOU	-	Zimbabwe Open University

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OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS AS USED IN THIS STUDY

This section defines the meanings of some of the words as used in this study, for clarity, even though they may have a different meaning elsewhere.

Rural Population: People living in rural areas of Zambia as defined by the Zambia National Statistical Office. It is calculated as the difference between total population and urban population.

Distance Education: A system of education in which students, tutors and their institutions of learning are separate in space and time (Keegan, 1990, 1996). Teaching and learning is mainly done electronically and through print media.

Technology: The computer industry and internet networks which have improved the global communication which has also imparted learning in a much more efficient and interactive way. Multimedia technology and internet networks have changed the whole philosophy of learning and distance learning and have provided an opportunity for close interaction between teachers and learners.

Adult Learner: Students who are 35 years old and above.

Young Learner: Students who are 34 years old and below.

Experience: The apprehension of emotion through the senses or mind. The ultimate source and justification for all knowledge which has accumulated in human memory and culture.

Coping Strategy: It is a process through which students successfully manage to learn and complete their studies by distance despite experiencing challenges. Primarily, it is a psychological

concept of a struggle with conflicts, emotions and demands.

It is also a system that individuals have worked out to deal with a social or emotional situation that would otherwise be intolerable.

Gender: The socially constructed relationships between men and women.

Non-gendered: Not relating to specific people of one particular sex.

Gender Roles: Clusters of socially or culturally defined and learned expectation about how people behave in specific situations.

Gendered Research: A term covering equality research, women's studies research, research on men and masculinities and queer studies.

Residential School: When students come and stay on the University campus to do some face to face consultations with their lecturers and the IDE staff.

Social Support: The perception and actuality that one is cared for, has assistance from other people and that is part of a supportive social network.

Cultural Constructs: A set of ideas which become one significant idea who's meaning changes according to a particular society at a particular time.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

1.1 Overview

This chapter introduces the study. This chapter provides a comprehensive context of the investigation which explored the coping strategies to challenges experienced by male and female students from the rural parts of the country as they studied by distance education at the University of Zambia. The first part of the chapter gives the background to the problem which consists of history of distance education at the University of Zambia (UNZA). This is followed by a conceptualization of distance education. This includes definitions of the concept, as well as brief discussion of various typologies, which then zooms into the discussion of distance education at UNZA. The problem at the centre of the study is then presented. The statement of the problem is followed by the research questions, objectives and the significance of the study. The chapter highlights the limitations inherent in a phenomenological study such as this one. The researcher then discusses what motivated her to carry out the study on discussion of Zambia's rural areas and open distance learning (ODL) mode. The final section of the chapter then sets up the key terms that are critical in this study.

1.2. Background of the study

The University of Zambia (UNZA) established its Distance Education Unit in 1966, the year the university commenced its operations (Siaciwena & Lubinda, 2008). Indeed, since then, distance education (DE) has played its historical role of contributing to the

development of human resources and has helped to address the issues of inequalities in higher education provision in Zambia. Key areas of human resource development include: enhancement of teacher quality in the school system; training of information managers and librarians; training of personnel in social sciences; upgrading of teacher trainers and educational administrators; training of teachers for children with special education needs; and the training of distance learning educators and community development workers.

One of the recommendations of the Lockwood Commission, whose report in 1963 led to the establishment of UNZA, was that degree programmes should be available by distance study to suitably qualified candidates, who might not be able to attend the University on full-time basis. The University set about implementing this recommendation at once, and hence from the outset, it has offered some degree programmes by distance teaching (Siaciwena, 1988). Chifwepa (2006) observes that an autonomous Department of Correspondence Studies was established in 1966 to coordinate distance learning courses, which were launched in March, 1967. These were offered by various Schools at the institution. In 1975, the Department of Correspondence Studies became part of the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), which was established by merging into one body, the Department of Extra-Mural Studies (established in 1966), the Department of Correspondence Studies (established in 1966) and the Institute of Education (established in 1967). In 1994, the Centre for Continuing Education was dissolved and the Directorate of Distance Education was created. Following the approval of the expansion project by the University of Zambia

Human Resource and Infrastructure Committee, the Directorate was later transformed into the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) in July 2009.

Since its inception, the DE unit at UNZA has been offering some of its degree, diploma and certificate programmes through distance learning for quite some time now. According to Siaciwena (2000), distance education was developed to: (i) contribute to the development of human resource; (ii) meet the educational needs of many capable distance learners who missed the opportunity to benefit from university education because of lack of facilities prior to 1966, and (iii) widen access to university education to many distance learners who, for various reasons, cannot attend the university full-time. As the human resource needs of the nation grew and as new areas were recognized, UNZA added new fields of study via the distance learning mode, such as training of nursing staff, training of laboratory diagnostics experts, health managers, sports administrators and environmental educators. In line with global developments in the arena, the DE tradition has acquired a more contemporary name of open and distance learning (henceforth ODL) mode.

The time and space restriction of the face-to-face learning system has seen growth in the distance education programmes. It is also economically advantageous to the students and preferable by working students. As a result, in Zambia and indeed in many other developing countries, distance education is becoming a more vital part of the higher education family. Distance education reaches a broader student audience, better addresses student needs, saves money, and more importantly, It uses the principles of modern learning pedagogy (Fitzpatrick, 2001).

Public as well as political interest in distance education is especially high in geographic regions where the student population is widely distributed (Sherry, 1996). In Zambia, some politicians have propagated to the people in the remote rural areas, during their campaign periods that they would put up some learning infrastructure and provide all the materials required if they voted for them. According to these politicians, the challenges faced by the students learning by the distance mode would be eased up. In fact, public policy leaders, in some places in Zambia, are recommending the use of distance education as opposed to traditional learning. This is because movement to established schools is sometimes difficult geographically, as some roads are impassable during the rainy season and that the fees are more manageable for distance programmes compared to the full-time learning.

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE), at the University of Zambia is an example of an institution where students engage in guided independent study of mostly, text-based course packages, participate in computer-mediated discussions (although not many of the students in distance education at the University of Zambia participate fully due to the unavailability of resources), submit assignments for most courses, and sit for proctored yearly examinations at various provincial centres in the country.

The University of Zambia is not the only distance education provider in Zambia. This study has dug deeper into today's rapidly changing distance education context and it

should be able to provide, insights that are going to be relevant for similar situated distance education institutions in Zambia and elsewhere.

The World

Today, political and public interest in distance education is especially high in areas where the student population is widely distributed. As such, different regions have developed their own form of distance education in accordance with local resources, target audience and philosophy of the organisations which provide the instruction. Many institutions, both public and private, offer university courses for self-motivated individuals through independent study programmes. Students work on their own, with supplied course materials, print-based media and postal communication, some form of tele-conferencing and/or electronic networking, and learner support from tutors and mentors via telephone or E-mail (US Congress, 2000).

Distance education technologies are expanding at an extremely rapid rate. Too often, instructional designers and curriculum developers have become enamoured of the latest technologies without dealing with the underlying issues of learner characteristics and needs, the influence of media upon the instructional process, equity of access to interactive delivery systems, and the new roles of teacher, site facilitator and student in the distance learning process.

Distance education systems now involve a high degree of interactivity between teacher and student, even in rural and isolated communities separated by perhaps thousands of kilometres. Distance learning allows students to hear and perhaps see teachers, as well

as allowing teachers to react to their students' comments and questions (US Congress, 2000). Moreover, virtual learning communities can be formed, in which students and researchers throughout the world, who are part of the same class or study group can contact one another at any time of the day or night to share observations, information, and expertise with each other (VanderVen, 1994; Wolfe, 1994).

Traditionally, it is thought of distance learners as adults. A whole range of institutions of higher learning, such as the United Kingdom's Open University, Vancouver's Open Learning Agency, Florida's Nova University and many others, have been dedicated to providing distance education at the post-secondary level for decades. The University of South Africa, in Pretoria, serving many international students, has had a successful distance learning programme for decades. The televised Japanese language programme, developed at North Carolina State University, provides instruction in Japanese to ten colleges and universities in five South-Eastern States (Clifford, 1990). The adult learner tradition is now changing as new programmes do involve all age groups worldwide.

1.3 Accessibility to Zambia's Rural Areas

Zambia currently lacks the physical infrastructure and human capacity to cope with the demand for post-secondary education. Further, accessibility to post-secondary education is affected by the distribution of institutions of higher learning throughout the country. Most of the registered universities are located in the central or urban regions of the country, yet the majority of the population lives in rural areas. The distribution of institutions affects the cost of access to learning facilities. Most of the students are

not able to commute from their homes to institutions located in urban areas; thus, they must live near the institution and thereby incur additional costs.

The surface area of Zambia is not very small. It does not allow people to move from one border to another in one single day; this takes many hours over sub-standard roads. The sole means of transport is by road, using buses and minibuses as few Zambians own vehicles in rural areas. The roads are mostly gravel and are in poor condition. Thus, transport facilities are a limiting factor to educational access. In Zambia, university distance education addresses this challenge, as the majority of the population lives in rural areas. The distribution of institutions affects the cost of access too. Most of the students are not able to commute from their homes to institutions located in urban areas; thus, they must live near the institution and thereby incur additional costs. The roads, even those with asphalt, are in poor conditions and do not have the street lights. Due to poor road conditions, transport is a limiting factor to educational access. However, distance education addresses these challenges.

1.4 Distance Education in Zambia

Generally, there has been a steady rise in student population among the distance education students in Zambia since 2006 compared to the conventional study mode. This could represent the high demand for university education in Zambia at present. The currently high demand for tertiary education is consistent with the Sixth National Development Plan which advocates for expansion in access to tertiary education (GRZ, 2011).

Reflecting on the level of access to education, there has been an upswing increase among distance learning students compared to the conventional students over time. As is commonly noted in Zambia, the distance education female students have consistently out-numbered their male counterparts under the distance learning mode, while the male number is higher than that of their female counterparts under the conventional study mode. Generally, there has been a high rise among students accessing university education under the distance learning than under the conventional learning mode as shown by the narrowing of the gap between the two modes of studies in studies conducted by the Ministry of Education (IDE, 2006). This is despite the many challenges distance education students face as they study at the University of Zambia (Siaciwena, 2005). This study will be of benefit to this large group of distance students who come from the rural areas in Zambia. The study directs the coping strategies to the challenges the rural university distance students face as they study.

1.5 The Establishment of the University of Zambia

At independence in 1964, Zambia had just over 100 university graduates and no public university was present. The University of Zambia, the first public university, was established on the 13th of July, 1966 and opened its doors to 310 students in its first year. By 1994, the University of Zambia and the Copperbelt University had a total enrolment of almost 6000 students, with 4 592 enrolled at the University of Zambia and 1 393 enrolled at the Copperbelt University (Siaciwema, 2005). So by 1994, then both universities had cumulatively awarded more than 16 000 degrees, diplomas and certificates (UNESCO, 2007; Bloom, Cuning and Chan, 2016).

The University of Zambia is the country's largest university with a student population of about 30 000 on its two campuses. About 28 000 are the undergraduates and about 2 000 are post graduate students. The main campus is called the Great East Road Campus and is on the Great East Road, about 7 kilometres from Lusaka's business centre. The second campus is the Ridgeway Campus in Lusaka, located at the University Teaching Hospital (UTH). This campus specifically houses students pursuing courses in medical and pharmacological fields. The University of Zambia has 13 Schools (known in some universities as Faculties). The schools are; Agricultural Sciences, Education, Engineering, Humanities and Social Sciences, Law, Medicine, Mines, Natural Sciences, Veterinary Medicine, Graduate School of Business, Nursing, Public Health and Health Sciences.

The University of Zambia is also affiliated to many organisations. Some notable ones are; Association of African Universities (AAU), Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) and the International Association of Universities (IAU).

1.6 Decentralisation of Management at the Institute of Distance Education

The concepts of centralisation and decentralisation are important to consider as they ultimately affect the effectiveness of any organisation in education like the Institute of Distance Education (IDE). Centralisation refers to the condition where the administrative authority of the institution is vested in a central body. This central body has complete power over all resources; money, information, people, technology and all other important functionalities (Thomas, 1999).

Decentralisation, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which authority has been passed down to the individual departments but the focus of power remains with the central body. Decentralisation means dispersal of authority among the lower levels of the administrative system (Marume, 2016).

However, advocates of decentralisation believe that it results in higher student performance; more efficient use of resources; increased skills and satisfaction for the administrators and lecturers (*ibid*). It is for this reason that this study recognises the importance of decentralisation of the management of the departments at the IDE in as far as better running of the Institution is concerned.

This study believes that a degree of decentralisation would empower the individual departments to adapt to changes in their external environment and be more responsive to the needs of students learning by distance. Brennen (2002), Quoting Thomas (1998) has listed the following as some of the merits of decentralisation in distance education:

- a. It is virtually impossible to manage large and complex institutions from the top. Inflated bureaucracies are extremely slow to respond to local educational needs of all the people involved in the learning processes and are not very adaptable.
- b. Centralisation does not fit in the current trends of participatory management, empowerment, and shared decision-making. Decentralisation provides local administrators with greater autonomy, thus giving scope for creativity, resourcefulness, and personal enhancement, particularly in the area of problem-solving.

- c. Decentralisation provides for persons at the scene of the action to become involved in the decision-making process. This allows for greater flexibility, and makes it possible for better decisions to be made because persons at the scene of the action are more closely-related to the problem.
- d. When individual institutions are given the opportunity to make decisions, a higher degree of morale and commitment to the organisational goals and objectives are fostered. If the director through decentralisation is given the authority to generate and disburse funds, great gains could be realised. The staff, then, would exert more effort since it would be a means by which their strategic plans for curricula and programme development could be implemented.
- e. Decentralisation also promotes the professional development of directors. Everyone has the innate tendency towards self-actualisation. Therefore, being responsible for the development of institutional goals and objectives and their implementation would encourage directors to seek various means for achieving professional growth while maximising their potentials.
- f. Decentralisation demands the establishment of accountability and evaluation mechanisms. This in itself would ensure that individual schools operate at a high level of efficiency and effectiveness in promoting student achievement.
- g. Reform is never initiated by central administration. It usually originates at the bottom and finds its way to the top because of the pressure exerted by those who are affected by unreasonable and ineffective policies.

However, while the researcher believes that certain degree of decentralisation is needed in the running of the higher learning institutions like the University of Zambia, total

decentralisation would not achieve cohesiveness among departments at the Institute of Distance Education at the University of Zambia. A mix of both centralisation and decentralisation is preferred. This is in agreement with Fullan (2006) when he postulates that neither centralisation nor decentralisation works by themselves. He further argues that decentralisation fails in the long-run because not enough attention is paid to the central administrations. Departments and the central administration need to be coordinated in order to create formidable results for the students. In this case, the IDE and the Central Administration at the University of Zambia ought to work together in order to achieve good results for the distance learning students from all places in Zambia.

It can be stated that both centralisation and decentralisation of distance learning have advantages and disadvantages, causing many to favour a hybrid approach. The recognition of local control and personal engagement of decentralisation must be blended with centralised services that are often more efficient, cost effective, and liberating (WCET, 2009).

To be able to make clear of the management of the organisation of the administration at the IDE, the researcher included all the organograms for ease of reference as shown in Appendix 11. That is from the main organogram up to all other organograms which have shown all the organisational structures for different departments. However, for the sake of emphasising the need for decentralisation, the main organogram has been included in one of the proceeding sections.

The author is in agreement with the new setup of decentralising the organisation's structures according to all the departments at the Institute of Distance Education. It is hoped that most of the challenges which most distance students face while learning, would be sorted out within the various departments.

1.7 The Institute of Distance Education

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE) at the University of Zambia has been mandated to offer their programmes exclusively by the distance learning mode, starting with programmes where study materials and modules are made available to students at all levels.

Distance education at UNZA is parallel to formal education, such that there is no direct interactive or face-to-face activity between the teacher and students but it is compensated by contact or counselling sessions (CSs) during residential school. The CSs are conducted by the course lecturers who make a few contacts with the students only during the same period.

There is a two-way communication between the lecturer and the student which is facilitated by UNZA through the IDE. The IDE, with the help of course lecturers develop self-instructional materials (SIMs) which are called modules. These materials are prepared by course lecturers and the IDE. The communication between lecturers and students is termed as indirect interaction which takes place through mails and is supplemented by some electronic medium. The media, either print or electronic, are very important; in as far as communication is concerned in DE.

One of the recommendations of the Lockwood Commission, whose report in 1963 led to the establishment of the University of Zambia, was that degree programmes should be available by distance study to suitably qualified candidates, who might not be in a position to attend the University on full-time basis. The University set about implementing this recommendation at once, and hence from the outset, it has offered some degree programmes by distance teaching (Siachiwena, 1988). Chifwepa (2006) observes that an autonomous Department of Correspondence Studies was established in 1966 to coordinate distance learning courses, which were launched in March, 1967. These were offered by various Schools at the institution. In 1975, the Department of Correspondence Studies became part of the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), which was established by merging into one body, the Department of Extra-Mural Studies (established in 1966), the Department of Correspondence Studies (established in 1966) and the Institute of Education (established in 1967). In 1994, the Centre for Continuing Education was dissolved and the Directorate of Distance Education was created. Following the approval of the expansion project by the University of Zambia Human Resource and Infrastructure Committee, the Directorate was later transformed into the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) in July 2009.

Under the old structure, the organisation, administration and coordination of distance learning courses were the responsibility of the Institute of Distance Education, but all tuition was given to members of academic staff of the various Schools of study. Members of staff of the Schools offering courses by distance teaching prepared all study materials and assignments in accordance with approved course outlines (Siachiwena,

2007). This was, however, likely to change because, following the attainment of a semi-autonomous status, the IDE was allowed to recruit its own academic and support staff. Currently, the IDE offers one (1) Doctoral degree (Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil)), sixteen (16) Master's degree programmes, four Diploma programmes and one (1) Certificate programme. All students admitted to all the programmes can now access training via Astria Online Platform from wherever they are. The new applicants can also apply via online and get instant feedback (IDE, 2016). The Institute of Distance Education has its centres in all the provinces in Zambia, where students can access these centres for various queries. For example, writing of examinations can also be done in all these centres and a student does not require to travel to Lusaka, the capital city, to write an examination for assessment.

1.7.1 The organisational structures at the Institute of Distance Education due to Decentralisation

The Institute of Distance Education (IDE) is responsible for planning, coordinating and facilitating the processes of curriculum design, material development, material distribution, online tutoring and counselling, assessment management and student database administration. (IDE Policy Document, 2016). The IDE works collaboratively with servicing Schools and departments to convert their study materials and programmes into the distance and online mode. The IDE also identifies and provides demand-driven programmes, and is responsible for providing expertise in curriculum design and material development for Distance Learning (DL) and online provision. The IDE also provides administrative support for all the learners.

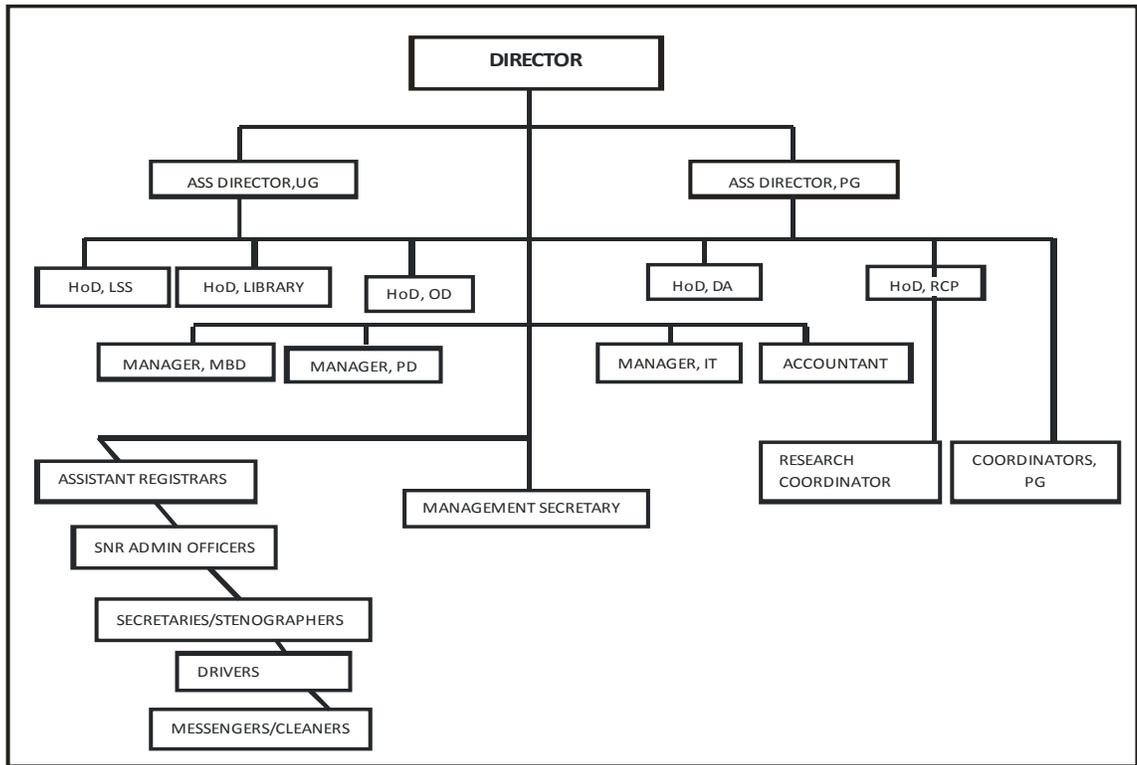


Figure 1: IDE Main Organogram showing the Management Structure of the IDE

Source: *IDE, 2016*

It is important to note the administrative and functional reporting lines at the IDE; the assistant director reports directly to the director who also has a functional responsibility to all departments and units, which is a clear indication of how the system is decentralised. Heads of department and units administratively report directly to the assistant directors and functionally to the director for functional support and guidance. Information thus flows from bottom to top, that is, from the lower offices in hierarchy, such as senior registrars through to the assistant directors and finally to the director functionally. All this was arrived at after considering the challenges as well as the needs

that distance education students faced both from rural areas and urban areas that were just far away from the University of Zambia.

The following are the Provincial Centres for the IDE of the University of Zambia (IDE, 2016)

Kitwe	-	3466, Kantanta Street, Nkana East
Solwezi	-	NAPSA Building, R30 Ground Floor
Livingstone	-	Kenyatta Street
Kasama	-	Zambia National Building Society, 1 st Floor
Chipata	-	Moth Area, Kombe Street, Parirenyatwa Road
Mongu	-	NAPSA Building, R506 Northern Wing
Mansa	-	NAPSA Building, R3404
Kabwe	-	NAPSA Building, Chitanda House, 2 nd Floor, R207
Choma	-	Choma Secondary School
Mpika	-	Zambia College of Agriculture
Lusaka	-	UNZA, Great East Road Campus



Figure 2: Map showing the provincial centres of the Institute of Distance Education

Each province has a centre for IDE due to the decentralisation of the system and this acts as an information centre. The centres help distance students because they have computer and internet connectivity, and people who can help them if they have any queries or to just cope with some of the challenges they might face as students.

1.8. Conceptualizing Distance Education

The University of Zambia Policy for Open and Distance Learning, of 2016, defines ODL as:

A way of providing learning opportunities that are characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place; learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency; the use of a variety of media, including print and electronic; two-way communication that allows learners and tutors to interact; the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings; and a specialized division of labor in the production and delivery of courses (UNZA, 2016: 7).

The policy also stipulates that open distance learning is very important because, among other reasons, it is cost-effective as it reaches many students at low cost. Additionally, ODL enables access to higher education by students who may not have the opportunity to attend full-time classes. It also offers programmes for students who are located far from the campus, and, finally, frees-up time, place, methods and pace of teaching and learning (IDE, 2016).

In 2009, UNZA attempting to position itself for the changing landscape of ODL, transformed its Directorate of Distance Education (DDE), into the Institute of Distance Education (IDE). This was in apparent preparation for the soon to be burgeoning ODL sector that promised to bring massive monetary and material returns to the university. The IDE was re-energized to tap into an emerging market by offering state of the art content tailored to student expectations. This signalled an expansion of its programmes, and it now became semi-autonomous in its operations within the University of Zambia.

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The ODL unit at UNZA currently offers thirteen (13) degree programmes and three (3) diploma programmes to undergraduate students. Furthermore, in accordance with Strategic Direction 8.3 of the University of Zambia's Strategic Plan, 2013-2017 starting from 2014/2015 academic year, UNZA, in collaboration with Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), started offering postgraduate programmes. There are four (4) Master's degree programmes (Master of Science in Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution; Master of Business Administration; Master of Science in Counselling; Master of Education in Educational Management) as well as Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programmes in various fields. For the 2016/2017 academic year, there were about 300 students registered under the UNZA-ZOU postgraduate programme. Altogether there were over 8,000 distance students studying at UNZA (IDE, 2015).

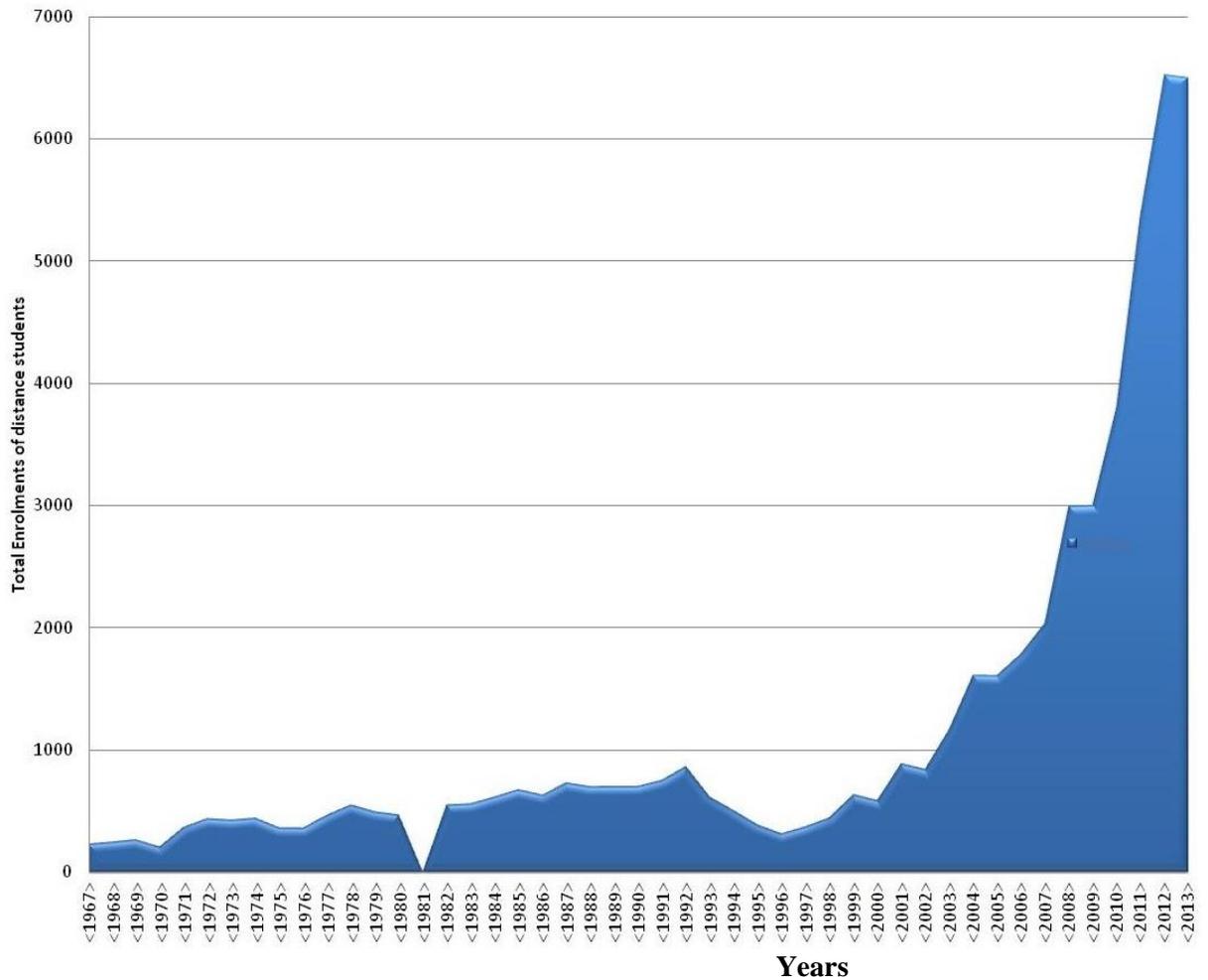


Figure 3: University of Zambia Distance Students ‘Enrolment figures 1967-2013

The last two decades has seen the unprecedented expansion in the scope and incidence of the ODL mode of learning delivery in higher education. This model has staged itself as economically advantageous to the students, because of the comparatively lower (than full-time study) fees that it attracts; and, increasingly preferable for working students, because it does not require them to forfeit their full-time employment obligations working students. The adult learner tradition has also been transformed as new programmes involve all age groups worldwide. Fitzpatrick (2001) notes that ODL tends

to reach a broader student audience, better addresses student needs, saves money, and more importantly, uses the principles of modern learning pedagogy.

In many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, ODL has become an increasingly viable and attractive business pursuit for both public and private universities. The increased importance of ODL has been predicated on the political interest, especially in geographic regions where the student population is widely distributed (Sherry, 1996). In Zambia, as in some other developing countries, politicians have tended to increasingly recommend the use of ODL as opposed to traditional learning. The adult learner tradition is now changing as new programmes do involve all age groups worldwide. This is because movement to established schools is sometimes difficult geographically, as some roads are impassable during the rainy season and that the fees are more manageable for distance programmes compared to the full-time learning. As such, different regions have developed their own form of distance education in accordance with local resources, target audience and the respective philosophies of the organisations which provide the instruction. In Zambia, both public and private, have widely embraced this new dispensation in educational delivery.

The growth in the popularity of the ODL mode of learning has not been without its dynamism. Distance education technologies have extremely rapid rate. Too often, instructional designers and curriculum developers have become enamoured of the latest technologies without dealing with the underlying issues of learner characteristics and needs, the influence of media upon the instructional process, equity of access to

interactive delivery systems, and the new roles of teacher, site facilitator and student in the distance learning process. Students in the ODL mode frequently work on their own, with supplied course materials, print-based media and postal communication, some form of tele-conferencing and/or electronic networking, and learner support from tutors and mentors via telephone or E-mail are also widely used.

Distance education systems now involve a high degree of interactivity between teacher and student, even in rural and isolated communities separated by perhaps thousands of kilometres. Distance learning allows students to hear and perhaps see teachers, as well as allowing teachers to react to their students' comments and questions (US Congress, 2000). Moreover, virtual learning communities can be formed, in which students and researchers throughout the world, who are part of the same class or study group can contact one another at any time of the day or night to share observations, information, and expertise with each other (VanderVen, 1994; and Wolfe, 1994). Institutions offering ODL mode of study have expanded rapidly throughout the university world. A description of each broad model can be instructive at this point.

1.8.1 Dedicated Open Distance Learning Institutions or Single-Mode Institutions

The first type of ODL is offered through what is known as dedicated ODL institutions or single-mode institutions. These institutions set up to offer programmes of study at a distance. Therefore, their teaching and learning are mediated by print, audio (radio, CDs, telephone or audio conference), video conferences, television and computers and, in some cases, by face-to-face teaching and learning. These institutions have been set-up almost exclusively to offer distance education or ODL programmes. They usually

have a high degree of control over their own curricula, management and administrative structures, staffing policies and choice of programmes. Examples of dedicated ODL institutions include: the United Kingdom's Open University, Vancouver's Open Learning Agency, Florida's Nova University and many others, have been dedicated to providing distance education at the post-secondary level for decades. The University of South Africa, in Pretoria, serving many international students, has had a successful ODL programme for decades. The televised Japanese language programme, developed at North Carolina State University, provides instruction in Japanese to ten colleges and universities in five South-Eastern States of the United States of America (Clifford, 1990).

1.8.2. Virtual universities

The second model manifests through the virtual universities, which are institutions based on an electronic network with no campuses and can perform the same functions as higher education institutions. They offer instructional programmes using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to connect students, teachers, researchers, funders and administrators in a flexible way. This allows students the opportunity to learn at their own pace, space and place. Virtual universities do not have campuses. Some are strictly a university that offers programmes online or a department that offers the programmes online, while others are a broker-type organization, obtaining and offering online programmes for other institutions, or an organization that awards credentials or provides other services.

1.8.3. Mixed mode (or blended) institutions

The third model of ODL is known as the mixed (or blended) or blended model. These mixed-model institutions usually divide which the curriculum, including study materials and activities, into online and face-to-face components according to the relevant strength of the available resources. For example, students can go online to engage in conceptual learning at a pace that suits them, and attend face-to-face classes for practical lessons. In this setting, face-to-face learning and technology-mediated learning can be leveraged to optimise the learning experience using the mixed mode. Students can therefore choose the learning mode that they consider most favourable for their learning needs and lifestyle. It is in this mode that most combinations of delivery formats such as face- to -face, online and distance learning are possible.

1.8.4. Dual mode institutions

The final model of ODL is known as the dual mode. Under this model, institutions offer the same programmes in both distance education and face-to-face formats. In dual-mode provision, an existing contact institution also has an ODL unit in line with its traditional learning programmes to provide support for ODL programmes or to offer programmes taught at a distance. Dual-mode programmes are usually tailor-made for two kinds of students, the ones who attend regular classes and the ones who study by distance. Sometimes these institutions do allow cross-over registrations. At UNZA, the IDE unit appears to embody elements of the dual mode of delivery, as its programmes are now available both under full-time and ODL mode of study. Thus, UNZA is a contact institution with a distance learning institute. This means that teaching and learning also occur during face-to-face at a scheduled time in the classroom (in distance education,

learning and teaching happen when students are separate from the teacher). Students have an opportunity of interacting with their lecturers and other students during the face-to-face context (in the distance education programme, the student and lecturer must depend on media and technology to interact with each other) and a lecturer teaches a group of students in the classroom (in distance education, the whole institution teaches individual students in their homes, offices or even while they might be waiting for a bus). Because of the foregoing, there are implications that arise with the expansion of access to the ODL mode.

Keegan (1986) outlines his concept of distance education as the separation of teaching acts in time and place from learning acts. Successful distance education, he believes, requires the reintegration of the two acts. Possibly, the emphasis on making learning experiences equivalent for learners would contribute to the reunification of teaching and learning as simultaneously occurring acts. The outcomes of a learning experience are those obvious, measurable and significant changes that occur cognitively and effectively in learners because of their participation in the course or unit. Outcomes consist of at least two categories, those that are instructor-determined and those determined by learners. Instructor-determined outcomes are usually stated as course goals and objectives, and identify what learners should be able to accomplish after the learning experience that they could not accomplish prior to participating in it. Learner-determined outcomes are less specific, more personal, and relate to what the learner hopes to accomplish because of participation.

In addition, Meyer (2006) explored the role of distance education in the great access to education debate. He explains, “Distance Education is the avenue for making higher education universally available” (2006: 55). Distance education has indeed increased access to education for formally underserved populations. It must be added that, “Distance Education has emerged as a significant trend in our ever-changing, knowledge-based society” (Deimann & Bastiaens, 2010:1). Online learning has allowed active military to participate in programmes while deployed; working distance learners and parents to return to school to pursue a degree or to change careers; and people in isolated regions to gain access to higher education just because they own a computer (*ibid*, 2010). Although there is a visible growth in the amounts of distance education in Zambia’s higher educational institutions, few studies have examined students’ learning experiences and coping strategies to the challenges of distance learners from rural areas of Zambia.

1.9. Statement of the Problem

Within the literature that focuses on ODL, there is a gap in what is known about the copying strategies to challenges faced by rural students enrolled in the ODL programmes at UNZA. Furthermore, there is very limited research based on the coping strategies that student might employ in the face of the challenges of ODL. With the steady rise of access to ODL mode of study at UNZA, challenges are bound to arise with regards to the management of the student body as well as the efficiency of delivery. Also, problems with quality, support services and developing new learning techniques to engage and encourage learners in a completely online setting have been a very big challenge, have frequently been cited as potential challenges for the ODL mode (IDE,

2006). This is compounded by the fact that most rural areas of Zambia (where the ODL student body is predominantly drawn from) do not have the modern facilities such as internet connectivity and electricity to be able to link themselves to the modern way of getting information. The current low level of technological provision, the high costs of equipment and the low expertise apparent in the development of cutting edge technology are among the factors which act as barriers (Mahai, 2012).

The situation in Zambia forces Tutors and Lecturers to fall back on traditional face-to-face sessions. This, in turn, puts more pressure on tutors and eventually causes a shortfall in their capacity to offer support, making fully supported study in turn far more difficult for students to access. The study by Siaciwena *et al* (2005) also uncovered the challenges encountered by ODL undergraduate students in Zambia. For instance, the study found that the students bewailed the lack of support services for distance students in the rural areas. Another study by Siaciwena (2008), found that ODL students indicated that they were given less attention than the regular students, when it comes to learning by lecturers handling them. Thus, the challenges associated with ODL mode are well established. While research generally has rendered evidence about challenges, evidence has not addressed the voices of the students and how they cope with distance learning challenges, the coping strategies that students studying under this model may face, have not been studied closely. Few studies if any, have focussed on the lived experiences of rural ODL students at UNZA. There are no major studies in Zambia that have elicited the voices of the distance learners at UNZA regarding how they experience the ODL learning space and how they formulate strategies to cope with the widely

documented challenges. Hence, this study responds to this gap in the knowledge by exploring the lived experiences of the ODL to comprehend challenges they faced and uncover their coping strategies. This study has looked at how the rural distance students cope with the many challenges mentioned above.

1.10. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate, from a phenomenological perspective, the coping strategies that are formulated to navigate the challenges rural distance students faced as they studied at the University of Zambia. This study tries to construct a rich and detailed account of the coping strategies of the students with a view to help to create new approaches to addressing the challenges and the needs of the ODL population in the rural parts of Zambia.

1.11. Research Questions

Bordering on the gaps in knowledge surrounding the coping strategies to challenges faced by distance students from the rural areas of Zambia, the following questions were couched to fill in the gap:

- a) How do the rural students experience distance learning environment at UNZA?
- b) What challenges, if any, do rural students at UNZA encounter during their studies under the ODL mode?
- c) What coping strategies emerge from the rural ODL students' encounter with the challenges of ODL?
- d) How can the study's major findings inform a model ODL system at UNZA?

1.12. The Main Objective of the Study

This study was designed to showcase what was happening on the ground and presents the coping strategies to the challenges faced by the undergraduate distance education students from the rural parts of Zambia.

1.13. Specific Objectives of the Study

The following were the specific objectives of the study:

- a) To explore how the rural students experience distance learning environment at UNZA;
- b) To identify and illuminate the challenges, that rural students at UNZA encounter during their studies under the ODL mode;
- c) To explore the coping strategies that emerge which the rural ODL students use as they face the challenges.
- d) To recommend how the findings of the study can inform a model of ODL system at UNZA.

1.14. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the development of a framework of coping strategies of ODL students, informed by the lived experiences of the students. The voices of the ODL students in this study could be used to redesign distance learning by incorporating flexibility, stimulating interaction, facilitating students' learning processes, and fostering an affective learning climate. The study also has potential to highlight some of the ideal solutions that could be applied to mediate

the negative experiences embodied in the ODL mode. In addition, the findings of this study could provide empirical evidence to inform the decisions of policy makers, the Ministries of Education, ODL institutes in Zambia and beyond, about efficient delivery of this mode of learning. The exploration of rural university students' challenges and the coping strategies in this study may assist in reflecting on the needs and the nature of the support services that distance students require and lead to recommendations that will help to improve current practices.

1.15. Limitation of the Study

There are two major limitations of this study. Firstly, this phenomenological study is focused on a limited number of participants, that is, the sample size is relatively small. The smaller sample size presents a limitation in terms of its generalizability (Merriam, 2009). However, a bigger sample size would not have been appropriate for answering the research questions at the center of this study. To explore the lived experiences of ODL students at UNZA more deeply, fewer participants, and qualitative data collection appeared more favorable. The second limitation related to the time and quantity of data. The length of the data collection process and the and corpus, that is the mass, of the narrative data generated, meant that analysis would be messy and protracted, which meant that the voices of the respondents would lose a touch of actuality as the researcher carried on with analysis.

1.16. Why the Choice of this Topic?

As one of the teaching staff and a coordinator of some courses in one School at the University of Zambia, the researcher was given an opportunity to get involved in the

teaching of students who were in the full-time programme, which is regular and parallel as well as distance education. With this involvement, the author could compare the students' performance in all the above programmes. Each group of students performed differently in the course work, examinations and the academic writing in general. Many more appeal cases for students who were studying by distance were forwarded to the author, by the supervisors, for consideration. The appeal cases from the full-time and parallel students were far less in comparison. While some students performed very well, many more distance students than the regular students did not perform well at the end of each academic year. Following this trend, it is this researcher to undertake a study on the students' experiences as they studied by distance with the aim of finding coping strategies to the negative experiences the students faced.

The interest in the field of DE expanded when it was observed that some of the students the author was teaching had come from all parts of Zambia, including the rural areas of Zambia. Some of the students who had come from the rural areas had various negative experiences which have been discussed in this thesis in the next chapters. Other students, despite the various challenges, still performed well and even better than the full-time students studying at the University of Zambia. The interest was to find out what coping strategies were used, by the distance students, to do well as they studied.

1.17. Chapter Summary

This chapter has established the problematic of the study, namely, the dearth of literature on the need to come up with the coping strategies to challenges faced by rural ODL students at UNZA. The chapter presented the background to the problem, before delving into the conceptualization of distance education. The problem at the center of the study was then articulated, followed by the purpose, research questions and objectives. The significance of the study was then discussed, followed by the limitations of the study. The researcher then highlighted the motivations that drew her to undertake a phenomenological study of rural students under the ODL mode at UNZA. The chapter concluded operationalized definitions of a few constructs and terms that are intermittently deployed in the rest of the thesis. In the chapter that follows, the researcher will attempt to situate this study in its field by mobilizing and reviewing relevant literature to amplify the gap in the body of knowledge.

1.18. Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis has shown how distance learners from rural areas of Zambia managed to learn using the distance model, amidst the many challenges they used. Chapter 1 is an introduction and background of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature by presenting the foundational theoretical literature as well as relevant scholarly research on ODL. Chapter 3 discusses the research methods and methodological issues underpinning this study. The fourth chapter has presented the findings of the study, whereas chapter 5 discusses the findings thereby pointing out the key findings and major findings of the study. Chapter 6 which is the last chapter, concludes the study and has indicated some

recommendations directed to educational planners, the policy makers in education system, the distance education providers and the would-be beneficiaries of distance education, including those from the rural and remote areas of Zambia. Lastly but not the least, Appendices I up to XI have been indicated in the last pages of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

This review of literature represents the foundational theoretical literature as well as relevant scholarly research on open and distance learning (ODL). Since the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of rural students enrolled in ODL programmes at UNZA, it is helpful to review the literature pertaining to both ODL in general and students' lived experiences in particular. To frame the literature, an overview of the field of ODL is provided. This is done by synthesizing the scholarly understandings of the term “distance education” that are currently in circulation. In this endeavor, the review seeks to obtain an aggregate understanding of distance education based on the definitions advanced by various scholars. This is followed by the theoretical framework. The review then historicizes the concept of “distance education”, by looking at its origin and development over the past several decades. The next section of the review then illuminates pertinent issues that can be credibly implicated in the lived experiences of the students. Finally, the literature is reviewed in relation to challenges associated with ODL in general.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

There are several theories that shape the content and approach in this study. In this section, the researcher highlights the theoretical underpinning that anchor the key construct in this study, “coping strategies to challenges faced by rural distance students”. Thus, the review highlights and discusses the theoretical dimensions that

informed the content and methodological approach in this study. These are basically theoretical propositions that provide the framework for understanding the idea of coping. Although the theories are two in number, they do branch out to manifest in a plethora of situations, as will be shown in the data chapters.

Firstly, one of these theories invokes a dimension of coping with something. The transactional theory of coping and stress was espoused by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) (1984). It is an extremely influential theory and underpins myriad research studies in psychological stress and coping across multiple fields. The theory asserts that a person's cognitive judgments and survival transactions are mediated interactively by personality-based and situational factors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). That is to say an individual will appraise and cope with diverse situations depending on their personal characteristics as well as the characteristics of the environment. Personal characteristics might include the belief systems of an individual, their commitments or personal traits.

The situational factors would include; how predictable the situation is; and how uncertain or ambiguous it is. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) have defined coping as the ability of an individual to persistently adjust and re-adjust their effort to conform to situational demands. The idea of coping is that such an individual would have judged the situation to far exceed the capacity or resources of that person. In other words, coping arises from an individual recognizing that the situation at hand is bigger and more complicated than usual. This then calls for an adjustment in the behavior or the effort that the person inputs into the situation.

From these theoretical formulations, researchers have gone on to generate additional dimensions of the transactional coping theory. For instance, Lazarus extended the theory in 1993 by adding categorizing the copings strategies into two broad strands. The first, he named “problem focused coping strategies” and the second, “emotion focused strategies”. Problem oriented strategies, as the name suggest, involve isolating, articulating and addressing a case-specific problem as it arises. Emotion focused strategies, Lazarus (1993) continued, refer to situations where an individual is primarily concerned with ameliorating the emotional stress that is occasioned by a given problem.

Secondly is the theory that seeks to strike a balance between avoiding the problem and attending to it. Krohne (2002) called this the “avoidant/attentive coping theory”. He called attention to what he perceived as a binary approach to confronting taxing situations. He theorized that “avoidant” coping strategies involve an individual avoiding a stressful situation by either denying it, repressing or suppressing it thereby drawing their attention away from the stress-causing stimuli. Krohne further theorized attentive coping involves directly confronting the “stressor” (Brewer, 1987) and how one reacts to the stress.

Thirdly is the Equivalent theory. This was the main theory the researcher used for the study. Central to this theoretical approach is the concept of equivalency. Simonson and Schlosser (1995) have written a lot on this theory that it should not be necessary for any group of learners to compensate for different, possibly, lesser instructional learning experiences for distance students as compared to the regular learners. The theory points

out that it is the responsibility of the distance educators to design learning events that provide learning experiences with equal value for learners. Distance students too, should have learning experiences that are tailored to the environment and situation in which they find themselves.

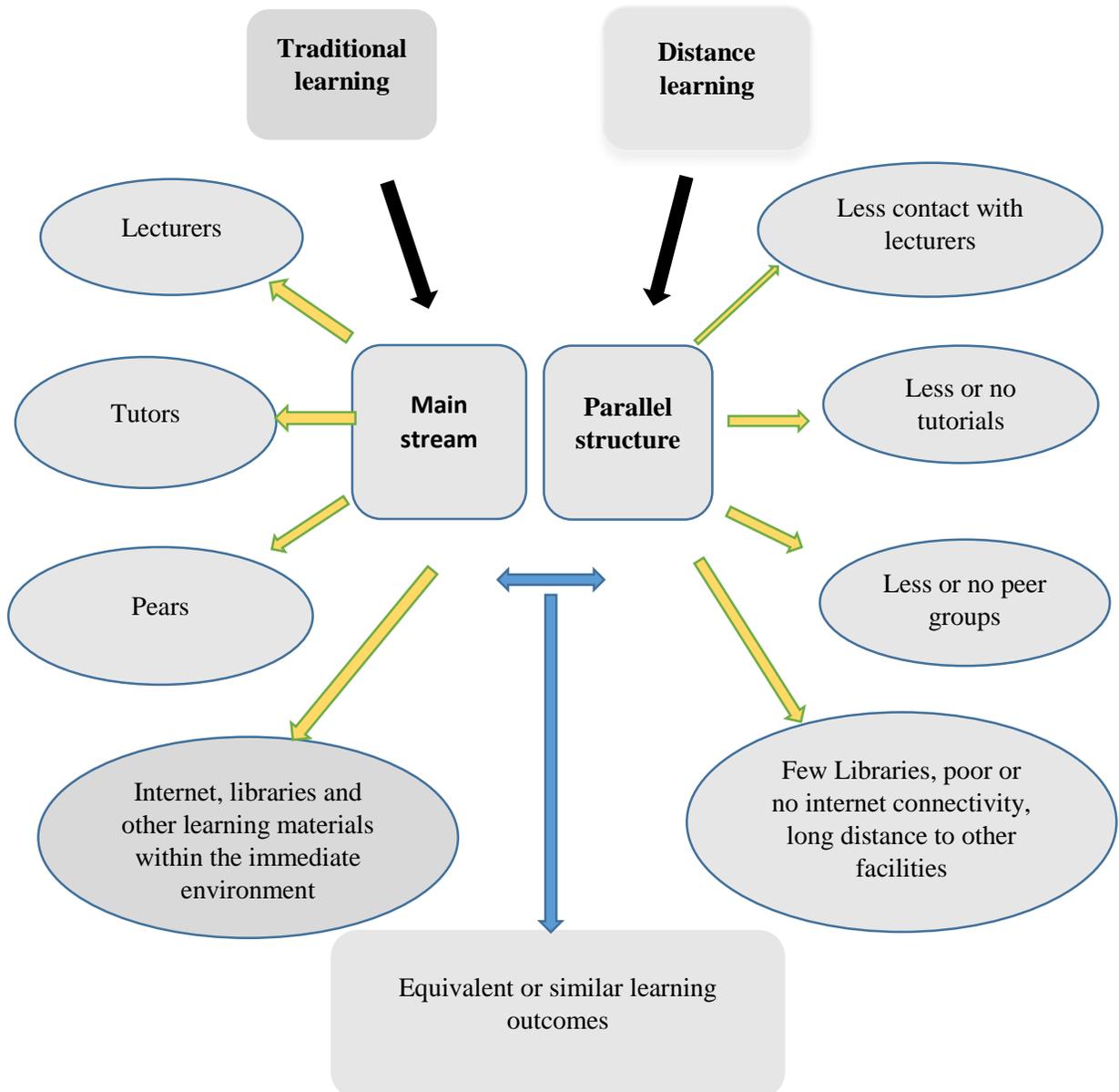


Figure 4: The Theoretical Framework of the Equivalence Theory

Adapted from: *Simonson and Schlosser (1995)*

Figure 5 shows the main theoretical framework adopted in this study and shows that traditional learning and distance education ought to achieve equivalent or similar outcomes when similar materials are used for the purpose of learning.

The figure has shown that traditional learning and distance learning are offered as parallel programmes at the University of Zambia. In traditional learning students have Lecturers to deliver lectures and tutorials. The students in traditional learning also have peers among themselves who are class-mates. Further, these students have the Libraries and internet facilities within their immediate environment. In contrast, distance learners have less contact with their Lecturers for consultations, less or no tutorials and less or no peer groups as they stayed far apart in the rural areas. The distance learners from the rural areas also had fewer or no library facilities and poor or no internet connectivity. The distance learners from the rural areas also moved long distances to reach to other learning facilities which they very much needed for their learning.

However, it is important to note that the challenges that rural distance students, at the University of Zambia, face from different localities are not the same. Even the challenges that distance education student face in urban areas are different from those faced by distance students from the rural parts of the country. As the case is with distance learners from the rural parts of Zambia, the learning experiences of these learners and their counterparts from urban areas in Zambia, therefore may not be the same. This is due to many reasons which this thesis has mentioned in the latter chapters.

The Equivalency approach is generally supported by Keegan (1995, who argued that distance education is not a distinct field of education and supports this idea and states that; “The concept of equivalency is central to the widespread acceptance of distance education.” Keegan (1995: 19) this means therefore that if teachers, learners, and the public, in general, identify learning at a distance as the equivalent of what they consider to be traditional learning, then distance learning will become mainstream, in Zambia and particularly for the students who are from the rural areas just as shown in Fig. 5. If equivalency is not what the public perceives, then distance education will continue to be less important to the field of education (Simonson, et al. 1995)

According to (Simonson *et al.* 1995), there are several key elements to Equivalency theory. These are; appropriate application, learning experiences, students and the outcomes of learning experience. (ibid).

Appropriate application

Appropriate application in distance learning implies that learning experiences suitable to the needs of the individual learner and the learning situation should be available, and that the availability of learning experiences should be proper and timely (Keega, 1995). In other words, learning experiences that are made available to either distant or local learners should allow delivery of instructional ideas that fit the expectations and facilities available to them; desktop video-conferencing should not be expected of learners accessing Web-based information by modem. Similarly, collaborative learning strategies are not appropriate when an individual learner is isolated unless an equivalent, technology-based collaboration is arranged. This also means that there must be an

equivalent portion of learner activities for the students from the rural and remote areas who are studying at UNZA by the distance mode, as the Web-based information may not be available to most of these students.

Learning Experience

A learning experience is anything that happens to the student to promote learning, including what is observed, felt, heard, or done. It is likely that different students in various locations, learning at different times, may require a different mix of learning experiences. Some may need a greater amount of observing while others require a larger dosage of doing. The goal of instructional planning is to make the sum of experiences for each learner equivalent. Instructional design procedures should attempt to anticipate and provide the collection of experiences that will be most suitable for each student or group of students. For example, if library resources are important to a course or unit, then library resources should be available to all students learning, including those learning by distance from the rural areas in Zambia. This does not mean that distant learners in a university research course will need access to a modern research library, but it does mean that the educational equivalent of the resources of the library should be as readily available to the distant learner as they are to the local learner, whether electronically, through collaborative agreements with local libraries, or through the delivery of library resources to the distant student.

Students

Students are the ones involved in the formal, institutionally-based learning activity which is the course or unit of instruction. Students should be defined by their enrolment in a course, not by their location. They necessarily seek institutionally-based education, sanctioned by a recognised and accredited organisation.

The general increase in enrolment in degree and non-degree programmes by distance at the University of Zambia necessitates concurrent increase in human resources, particularly of tutors who can contribute to the academic well-being of students. In responding to the need for more tutors, the University of Zambia has continued to increase the employment of academic staff. Some departments have been established within the Institute of Distance Education to manage some of the programmes that were already being in existence. However, the current low level of technological provision, the high costs of equipment and the low expertise apparent in the development of cutting edge technology are among the factors which act as barriers (Mahai,2012). The situation in Zambia forces Tutors and Lecturers to fall back on traditional face-to-face sessions. This, in turn, puts more pressure on tutors and eventually causes a shortfall in their capacity to offer support, making fully supported study in turn far more difficult for students to access (Mahai,2014).

Outcomes of Learning

The outcomes of a learning experience are those obvious, measurable and significant changes that occur cognitively and effectively in learners because of their participation in the course or unit. Outcomes consist of at least two categories, those that are

instructor-determined and those determined by learners. Instructor-determined outcomes are usually stated as course goals and objectives, and identify what learners should be able to accomplish after the learning experience that they could not accomplish prior to participating in it. Learner-determined outcomes are less specific, more personal, and relate to what the learner hopes to accomplish as a result of participation. Equivalent learner-determined outcomes are identified when students enrol in follow-up courses or apply newly-learned skills to job or course situations.

Keegan (1986) outlines his concept of distance education as the separation of teaching acts in time and place from learning acts. Successful distance education, he believes, requires the reintegration of the two acts. Possibly, the emphasis on making learning experiences equivalent for learners would contribute to the reunification of teaching and learning as simultaneously occurring acts. The equivalency theory should be evaluated by applying Keegan's criterion, as well as others, to determine if it is an approach to distance education that is appropriate.

2.3. A synthesis of Scholarly Understandings of Distance Education

A precise definition is important for both the teachers and students when contemplating distance education, and yet, it is not easy to do so. Defining distance education is made more difficult because the development of distance education has changed quickly from first-generation to fifth-generation correspondence education (Gatewood, 2014). Greenberg (1998: 47) defines contemporary Distance Education as, “planned teaching and learning experiences that use a wide spectrum of technologies to reach the learner at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of

learning”. However, Greenberg’s definition does not address whether the student is learning is done at the same time or they have the same period of learning or phase as all other students in the area.

According to Moore (1994), distance education is composed of two elements, each of which can be measured. The first element is the provision for a two-way communication (dialog), while some systems or programmes offer greater amounts of two-way communication than others. The second element is the extent to which a programme is responsive to the needs of the individual learner (structure). Some programmes are very structured while others are more responsive to the needs and goals of the individual student. This disparity may be one of the factors which make it very difficult for some students in the rural areas in Zambia to work as expected when learning by distance.

These are not the only definitions of DE in circulation. Simonson *et al.* (2000), describe the term “distance education” as having been applied to a tremendous variety of programmes serving numerous audiences through a wide variety of media. While the American Council on Education (ACE) defines distance education as a system and a process of connecting learners with distributed learning resources (Chute, 1999). Students in the DE system communicate with the teachers and other fellow students through several media. Dohme (1967) defines it as a systematically-organised form of self-study in which student counselling, the presentation of learning materials and the securing and supervision of students are carried out by a team of teachers by means of media which may cover long distances. Gateway (2014), surmises that a better word to define distance education is “online”. Technology has advanced a great deal such that

distance learning and online learning have for all practical purposes become synonymous, and that technology is being used to carry out distance education.

Further, distance education has been defined by Perraton (1986: 19) as “an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and time from the learner”. The link between that “someone” and the learner is provided by different means of communication and institutional support. Keegan (1995) similarly asserts that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teachers and learners, which frees the student from the necessity of travelling to a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet fixed people, in order to be trained. This study on coping strategies to challenges on experiences by students in distance education in rural areas of Zambia identifies Keegan’s definition to be the most thorough, although it does not define education as opposed to learning. According to Keegan (1982: 58), distance education includes:

- a. The separation of teacher and student which distinguishes it from the conventional ‘face-to-face’ learning.
- b. The use of technical media usually prints for writing by both the teacher and learner and so conveys the educational content.
- c. The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogues.
- d. The possibility of occasional meetings for didactic and socialisation purposes.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that scholarly conceptualization of DE converge on two major dimensions. Firstly, that it involves a spatial separation between the

learner and the instructor. As such the learner becomes immersed in the transaction by seeking to find means of receiving and appropriating learning content without being in regular contact with the instructor. Secondly, scholarly opinions are unanimous in asserting that distance education requires the learner to be internally-motivated; self-directed and possess superior time management skills to structure and complete course requirements. Distance education programmes, often heavily marketed to adult populations, provide an excellent opportunity to gain access, but only to the right type of students. Thus, establishing acceptable principles of best practices and developing standards of quality by which distance education practices can be judged is an appropriate measurement in assessing the validity of distance learning itself. The quality of a distance education programme is of the utmost importance. Distance education programmes need to possess the correct support services to meet the needs of learners, but also need to evaluate the type of learners being enrolled in the programmes. Having, thus synthesized the scholarly understandings of DE, it is worthwhile to reconstruct its origins and development over the years. In the section that follows, the researcher will seek to historicise the development of DE.

2.4 History of Distance Education

This section presents a brief history of DE. The researcher is attempting to trace the development of this mode of education over the years, globally, before zeroing-in on the Zambian context. The application of distance education processes goes back to the beginning of the 1700s, when the first, correspondence studies were advertised in local newspapers on the European mainland (Demiryürek, 1993).. These studies consisted of a plethora of vocations including poetry, carpentry and bindery. The initial motivation

of such studies appears to have been the need to service the rapidly expanding workforce in the factories of Europe, following the industrial revolution. (Cold 1992)

In 1915, the creation of the National University Extension Association (NUEA) in Colorado, USA, broadened the focus to other issues, such as necessity of new pedagogical models and new national level guidelines, such as university policies regarding acceptance of credit from correspondence courses, credit transferral, and standard quality for correspondence educators (Nasseh, 1997). Three decades after the first DE-focussed institution was established, the University Of Chicago Faculty Of Education conducted a survey on the modalities of doing ‘correspondence studies, as it was called back then. The findings of this 1933 survey, suggested that correspondence study should be justified on an experimental basis, generating innovations and research data leading to improvements in teaching methodology (Gerrity, 1976). This research study was very important for the future knowledge base in this field.

By the mid-1940s, the British Open University brought a new vision of independence for distance education as distinct from traditional education. Britain’s first Open University played a major role in the development of much of the important research in distance learning (Zigerell, 1984). Two individuals who played major roles in the advancement of the state of scholarly research in the field are Charles Wedemeyer of the University of Wisconsin and Gayle Childs of the University of Nebraska (Wright, 1991). With the advancement in technology, independent study has become more accessible for distance education students. Zigerell (1984:53) wrote, "The ease with

which modern communications technologies can link educational institutions to homes, work-sites and community centres has made adult education and life-long learning matters of national policy". At the same time, the loads and responsibilities of adults have become of interest to experts and educators in distance learning. Feasley (1983) stated that individuals who must learn at a distance have ongoing obligations such as employment, family responsibilities, handicaps, or live in geographically-isolated areas.

The research activities of Britain's Open University provided new directions and emphasis for more research in this field. Publication of research in distance education in 1989 provided great opportunity to collect information about ongoing research projects and the results of current research in the field of distance education (Moore, 1985).

The 1970s and 1980s saw the introduction of the related concept 'distance education' which posed new challenges to traditional independent study, forcing a re-examination and redefinition of the place of independent study in this new international movement (Wright, 1991). There has been a tremendous progression in the development of distance education in the whole world from then up to date (Cold 1992). Table 1 shows a time-line as distance education progressed in various parts of the World.

Table 1: Time Line Progression of Distance Education

Year	Event in the development of distance education
1728:	Shorthand correspondence courses become advertised in local newspapers in Europe.
1856:	In Europe, language courses become established through post.
1858:	The University of London offers distance-based courses, claiming to be the first of its kind.
1873:	The University of the Cape of Good Hope established as a dedicated distance-learning facility.
1900:	A home-based programme targets women in New York, over 20 000 enrol.
1922:	Pennsylvania State College broadcasts courses across radio networks.
1934:	The University of Iowa, USA, becomes the first to use television as a learning tool.
1963:	The FCC dedicates 20 television channels for university use and instruction.
1968:	'Correspondence' is changed to 'Independent study' to divide university and home schooling.
1969:	A 'University without walls' becomes established.
1986:	Pennsylvania State University offers computer-based courses with audio conferencing.
1992:	The Electronic University Network helps to develop university virtual campuses through AOL.
1995:	Regent University offers the first online PhD in communication.
1996:	Duke University offers it's Global MBA; combining online classes with campus learning.
1997:	Web CT is released.
2001:	The virtual learning environment, Moodle, is developed.
2005:	Almost 3.2 million US students were taking at least one online course at university.
2009:	YouTube EDU introduces thousands of free lectures.
2011:	Distance learning becomes a serious option for UK students hit with a tripled university fee.

Source: *Cold (1992)*

Cold (1992) identified the following reasons for the limitation of research activities in

Distance Education:

- a) Educational researchers are rarely present during the design of distance learning systems.
- b) There is no clear paradigm for research in distance learning, and it is difficult to attract funds to develop one.
- c) Some institutions are averse to defining boundaries and variables clearly.
- d) Educational researchers often ask questions of no practical or even theoretical relevance.
- e) Researchers in the distance learning test variables that are really classes of variables (such as comparisons of distance and classroom learning).

An American Federation of Teachers (AFTs) task force report stated that too little was known about the effectiveness of distance learning and that more independent research was needed (Twigg, 1996). At the same time, Clark (1996), in his paper mentioned that media forms were mere vehicles that delivered instruction, but did not influence student achievement. Clark believes that it is not media, but variables such as instructional methods that foster distance learning.

On the African continent, the University of South Africa (UNISA) was one of the institutions that pioneered distance education. The university is located in South Africa, Africa's largest economy. It is one of the oldest universities involved in the practice of distance education in the Southern African region (Ngengebule, 2008). This is because it has more than fifty years of experience and takes its place among the major universities of the world (Ngengebule, 2008). As a higher education learning institution, UNISA enrolls more than 85 per cent of the entire distance learning community of

students in South Africa (Lephalala and Makoe, 2012). Currently, several lecturers in the School of Education, at the University of Zambia, are also studying for their PhD by distance mode with UNISA.

About 60 per cent of the enrolled students at UNISA come from historically marginalised areas (Ngengebule, 2008). This asserts the role of distance education in widening access to marginalised people and to those students living in impenetrable areas. The teaching and learning processes at UNISA are facilitated through the use of face-to-face sessions, correspondence tuition, and technology and onsite facilities (*ibid*). Tutors use these facilities to contact students and they also use letters and faxes for communication purposes.

It is also worth reporting that UNISA enrolled more female students than male students in the years from 2004 to 2007.

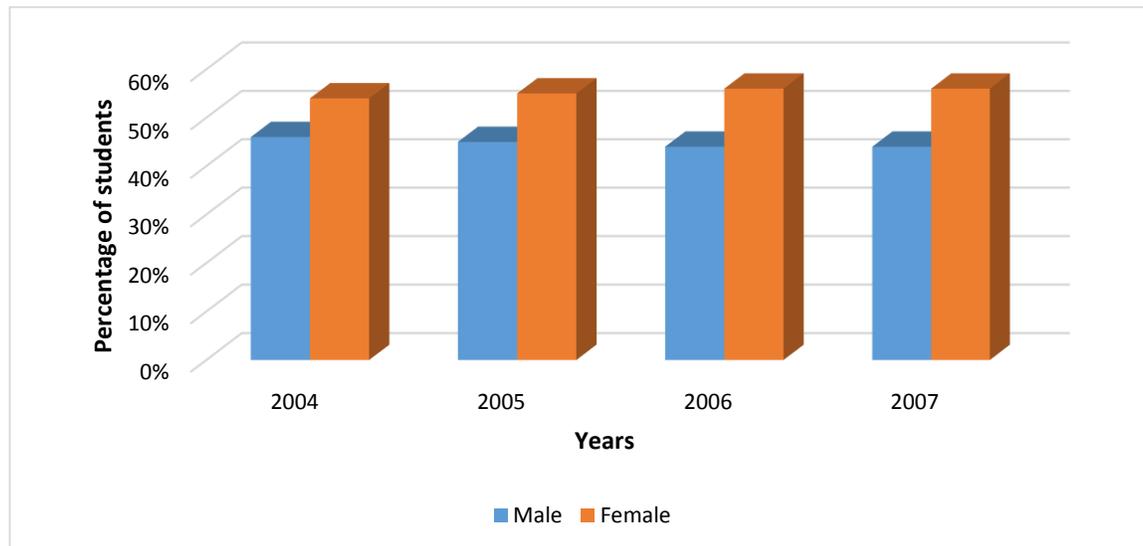


Figure 5: UNISA Formal Registration by Gender

Source: *UNISA, 2007*

2.5 History of Distance Education in Zambia

From these beginnings, Distance education has spread widely throughout the university world and, as noted in chapter one, has become an important educational activity especially for developing countries. Although there are many barriers to distance learning, Evans (1995) has proved that distance learning is very helpful in the education of those not privileged to learn at the right age and time. Calvert (1986) asserted that distance learning helped to extend the market for education to clients who had not been served with special attention. In addition, Ofoegbu (2007) suggested that one of the ways to ensure that the demand for education conformed to growth in educational facilities, was to ensure a well-organised distance education system, which should reach all the people including those from remote and rural parts of a nation. Distance education trends indicate that less effort is needed to ensure access to education for all, especially for the females who are socialised to be more domesticated and docile while boys are encouraged to learn.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training calls for harmonisation of education and training policies in the region that promote widening of provision and access to education and training as well as addressing gender equality at all levels (SADC Protocol on Education and Training, 2000). Omolewa (2008), articulates that in Open and Distance learning, there is inclusive and free of restrictions imposed by distance and space. In addition, distance learning creates opportunities for those excluded from formal education because of their gender, age or status. Distance learning makes education accessible to those who are

not able to study full-time due to their social responsibilities and commitments (SADC Gender Policy, 2008).

Distance learning has been identified as the panacea to the perennial educational challenges of equitable access to learning, equality of educational opportunities, as well as providing a second chance for females and males who drop either out from school due to various reasons or are prevented from receiving face-to-face education by their socio-economic obligation. It seems clear that distance education will be a substantial alternative for future education systems for governments in not only developed countries, but also developing countries. The emergence of new information dissemination technologies, especially the Internet and World Wide Web has significant socio-economic implications in developed countries. New forms of distance education based on these recent communication technologies seem to be more suited to people in developed countries due to their available infrastructure and human resources. On the other hand, developing countries still lack investments and infrastructure in these technologies, and where technologies are available to people (especially in rural areas), they cannot operate them due to their lack of computer literacy and skills (Demiryürek and Köprülü, 2005). Thus, television seems to be a more suitable and still substantial medium for distance education for rural people in developing countries. It is more accessible and reaches more people, usually with a minimal cost.

The experience of various distance education projects for rural people all over the world shows that multiple media approach which is the combination of television, printed

materials and group discussion is more effective in making the learners get something while at distance learning. In particular, the effectiveness of rural distance education can be increased with the support of regular extension services (Demiryürek, 2000). Rural distance education for developing countries will invariably have to be integrated whole with suitable television broadcasting, simple manuals and regular advisory services to achieve satisfactory success.

In many developing countries where distance education has been used, it has made positive impacts in the transfer of information to rural people (Perraton, 2000). Van den Ban and Hawkins (1996) make mention that there are positive impacts of distance education in rural development and stress that the effects of audio-visual media are higher when supported with printed materials and advisory services. In addition, distance education (especially with audio-visual media) relatively attracts more people's attention, supports learning and decision-making while reaching large audiences with lower cost per person reached (Leeuwis, 2004).

In Zambia, distance education has been serving as an alternative method for delivering information to those unable to attend traditional classes regularly for a long time (Siachiwena, 2005). It has a long history dating as far back as the 1940s, when many Zambians were studying for post-primary qualifications through commercial colleges in South Africa and Britain. When Zambia got its independence from the British colonial rule in 1964, there was a shortage of educated and trained personnel in both the public and the private sector. This prompted the government of Zambia to adopt

Distance and Open learning as viable strategies to enhance access to education (Siaciwena, 2005).

These strategies were particularly important because the government did not have enough money to build sufficient schools. For this reason, several programmes offering education by distance and non-formal ways were introduced. These included National Correspondence College and the University of Zambia, which also started offering small-scale distance learning programs and technical education, and vocational training. The University of Zambia has been offering some of its degree and diploma programmes through distance learning since its inception in 1966. According to Siaciwena (2007: 1) distance education was developed to:

- a) contribute to the development of human resources;
- b) meet the educational needs of many capable adults who missed 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.

Provision of education has taken centre-stage in the development processes of most developing countries, including Zambia. It is gratifying to note that, across Zambia, there is an increased seriousness in tackling the challenges to education provision in areas of enrolment, retention, quality, financing and management of education systems (Siaciwena, 2005 and Siaciwena, 2008).

2.6. Rural Population and Distance Education in Zambia

Since this case study is primarily looking at challenges and the coping strategies to experiences by students in distance education from rural areas of Zambia, it is important that rural population is defined. As such, rural population refers to people living in rural areas of Zambia. It is calculated as the difference between total population and urban population, (CSO, 2011). However, aggregation of urban and rural population may not add up to total population because of different country coverage.

In 2010, Zambia's population was 13 093 666 (CSO Report, 2012). This was an increase from 9 885 591 in 2000. The population grew at an average annual rate of 2.8 per cent during the 2000-2010 inter-censals. This annual rate was higher than 2.4 per cent recorded in the inter-censal period 1990 - 2000 (CSO Report, 2012). This ever-growing population needs a rich kind of education which should reach all the citizens, including those who live in the rural areas.

2.7. Learning Instructional Strategies in Distance Education

The pervasiveness of differences in learner performance in most instructional settings which include distance education, is evidence of the fact that there are, different ways of going about learning (Rigney, 1978). These ways of going about learning have been commonly referred to as learning strategies, cognitive strategies, study habits or approaches to studying (*ibid*). If particular learning strategies tend to be more effective for some learners and with certain kinds of subject matter, then it would seem

appropriate to investigate if better learning and retention techniques can be taught, especially to students from rural areas in Zambia.

Rigney (1978) describes a learning strategy as embodying the operations and procedures that learners use to acquire, retain, and retrieve different kinds of information. A learning strategy, therefore, may be conceptualised into two parts:

- (a) An orienting task for inducing learners to perform particular kinds of operations and which may be either prescribed by the instructional system or embedded in the instructional materials; and
- (b) One or more representational or self-directional learning capabilities which may also be either prescribed by an instructional system or generated by the learner.

Rigley, therefore, proposed that, if learning strategies can be considered as either designer-imposed or learner-generated, then there are two ways in which cognitive processes can be enhanced with the help of instructional strategies to ensure maximum benefit for learners. These are as embedded strategies and detached strategies. Embedded strategies are not explicitly identified independently of content. Instead, the instructional materials are designed to coerce learners into using particular processing resources in order to accomplish the orienting tasks that have been specified (Rigney, 1978). The underlying premise of these approaches is that it is desirable, and also possible to teach students how to be more effective as earners in the acquisition, retention, and retrieval of information, as well as in the performance of given tasks in their materials.

Distance education places greater emphasis on guided independent study on the part of the learner, without eliminating the possibility of some face-to-face contact, either between the teacher and the learners, or the learners themselves. The greatest challenge for DE institutions, therefore, is the variety of functions they must conduct which call for an equally large number of organisational styles. While running production systems and operating course materials warehouses may be best done through the rigour of industrial processes, functions such as the creation of DE course materials by course teams, as well as by individuals, require the most modern forms of project and personnel management and skill in systematic instructional materials design. In the same manner, organising the information flows necessary to support effective tutoring and counselling for DE learners is also a complex task.

2.8. Material Development for Distance Education

Since many of the instructional activities commonly associated with conventional face-to-face instruction, such as classroom discussion and immediate and direct feedback are not easy to provide in the DE context, the role of the instructional materials that are prepared in advance of the learning activity is especially important. This is because the quality of the teaching and learning process in DE is dependent on the quality of the study materials (Siaciwena, 2005). The development of high quality instructional materials for DE, is a labour-intensive and costly affair, and draws upon a wide range of expertise that is not normally found in the *repertoire* of skills of any one person. Consequently some variation of a team-approach to the process is strongly recommended and often adopted (Shaw and Taylor, 1984).

Several approaches to course teams to suit different organisational circumstances have been proposed in the DE arena, and discussed by Holmberg (1983), Mason and Goodenough (1981) and Smith (1980). The dynamics of developing study materials within the context of a team has numerous implications for its members. These range from faculty concerns about losing their control of course content to the day-to-day management of the developmental task. According to Naidu (1987, 1988), training of staff engaged in the development of DE course materials is necessary, especially to cater for students from rural areas. This is because these students are geographically-disadvantaged as the areas they are found in do not have facilities like ICTs and libraries. DE study materials replace the teacher in more than the subject matter alone (Jenkins, 1990). Therefore, the materials must be designed in such a way that they provide a substitute for a dialogue possible in the conventional classroom situation, and that it is not just a matter of possessing a good writing style. They should be able to assist the learner from the rural areas as well as those from other places. The materials, once developed, are considered self-instructional, and, upon receipt of these packages, students are expected to be able to progress with their study independently, with the least amount of additional support. This literature review has not indicated any best way in which students from the rural parts of Zambia are assisted.

2.9. Gender and Distance Education

Gender refers to the socially constructed relationships between men and women. Societies determine what resources men and women will access jointly or separately, what work men and women shall perform and for what rewards, what types of knowledge are appropriate for men and for women and how and where this knowledge

is acquired. Gender is about relationships and these relationships change over time, space and circumstances. Gender relationships are different because cultures, religions, ethnicities and classes that men and women belong to are different. Each institution has its own gender culture that is relationships between women and men, for example who holds the more powerful positions, has access to more resources and also who has the much stronger networks which they can appropriate to their own ends. Research has shown that education is one of the most effective development investments countries and their donor partners can make (Basic Education Coalition 2004). Adequate investments in education facilitate the achievement of most other development goals and increase the probability that progress will be sustained” (USAID 2005). Each year of schooling increases individual output by 4-7 percent, and countries that improve literacy rates by 20-30 percent have seen increases in gross domestic product (GDP) of 8-16 percent (Basic Education Coalition, 2004). Education builds the human capital that is needed for economic growth (USAID 2005). It also produces significant improvements in health, nutrition, and life expectancy, and countries with an educated citizenry are more likely to be democratic and politically stable. Educating girls achieves even greater results. When girls go to school, they tend to delay marriage, have fewer but healthier children, and contribute more to family income and national productivity. In fact, educating girls quite possibly yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world” (Summers 1992).

Gender sensitivity is the translation of awareness into practices, which result in changes in the perceptions, plans and activities of institutions and organizations. A gender aware institution is not necessarily a gender sensitive one because awareness might not

necessarily generate any will or resolve to act on the basis of the gender awareness. In fact, it is possible for gender awareness to generate resistance, obstruction and other practices that make gendering an institution difficult.

In attempting to make institutions more gender sensitive, gender policies are usually developed in order to guide action and ensure that the stated objectives of the policy are realised. Various stakeholders who will carry out this process need to be clearly defined and allocated specific tasks and resources to achieve desired outcomes within a specific time frame. Gender disaggregated data on education has revealed that compared to their male counterparts, women have, for the most part, attained only low levels of formal education. This is based on cultural factors and women's role in society, thus, child-bearing, child-upbringing, community commitments and societal perceptions (Kwapong, 2008). In Zambia, emphasis has not been placed on the government's policy to directly use distance learning (DL) to facilitate women's education at the higher level of learning, and it has not seen many women graduate with good degrees through distance learning programmes.

Distance learning has proven to be a sure way of widening access to education most especially for women. It is an educational philosophy that seeks to overcome or remove most of the barriers to education. Open and distance learning could simply be explained as an educational programme that is both open and offered at a distance. The emphasis is on open and distance. It is open in the sense that there are no barriers to accessing the programmes. The distance also implies that the learner and the teacher could be at different places and time but engage in an educational transaction using an appropriate

medium such as print or electronic. UNESCO (2002) has explained that open and distance learning refers to approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities. For many students, open and distance learning is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities, as they learn.

2.10. Institutional Concerns for Growth in Distance Education

It is very important that Distance Education expands to most rural parts of Zambia, as its importance is crucial to all. This is because most people live in rural parts of Zambia compared to those living in towns. However, this has not been the case due to many reasons. According to Miller and Schiffman (2006), many of the most important short-term concerns about the growth of distance education are administrative. Others are something to do with academic. Table 2 below shows the administrative challenges and academic challenges which derail the expansion of distance education:

Table 2: Administrative and Academic Challenges for Distance Education Expansion

Administrative	Academic
Funding course development	Fully recognising faculty contributions when their individually-authored content is shared by other faculties.
Supporting the new needs for technical help and other student support issues.	Championing a new pedagogy.
Ensuring a flow of resources back to academic units that take faculty from their regular teaching to reach out to online learners.	Effectively assessing and evaluating all aspects of the performance of online courses.
Deciding which services should be supported centrally and which should be supported locally.	Holding faculty members accountable for their use of online materials in a blended environment.
Managing the breakdown of traditional areas of administrative authority and turf as innovation diffuses throughout the institution	Ensuring curricular coherence across sections of a course or across campuses.

Source: *Miller and Schiffman (2006)*

Faculties that teach distance education courses need organisational and administrative support from their parent institution. Funding should be provided to create an administrative unit that is to be responsible for managing the programme. Institutional leaders must be committed to distance programmes. Mars (1995: 21) agrees when he says, "Without this support, distance education is at risk of becoming a peripheral activity, without commitment from or significance to the institution."

2.11. Assessment of Learning Outcomes in Distance Education

When assessing DE students, the learners' performance has to be appropriately assessed. A wide range of strategies may be applied as part of this process. According to Kulhavy (1977), the choice of these will vary according to the intended learning outcomes and the learning tasks that were prescribed. For example, if the nature of the learning task was more collaborative, situated and distributed in its context, conventional methods of assessment of learning outcomes would be inadequate. These will need to be replaced by cognitive tasks and assessment procedures that can focus on the processes of learning, perception, and problem-solving. In addition, assessment could no longer be viewed as an add-on to an instructional design or simply as separate stages in a linear process of pre-test, instruction, and post-test. Assessment must become an integrated, ongoing, and seamless part of the learning environment (Kulhavy, 1977).

2.12. Technology as a Component of Distance Education

While technology is a necessary component of distance education, the institutions still need to appropriately teach and facilitate learning. Schulte (2010) supports faculty-facilitated learning through technology in distance education. According to Schulte

(2010: 9), “Available distance education technology dictates the way courses are taught.” Distance education courses rely on discussion boards and chat features to expand on the knowledge presented through course material and required textbooks. However, this cannot replace the value of an experienced and qualified teacher to extend the material and help students apply this material to both professional and personal settings.

Changes in technology have accelerated the growth of distance learning. The improved access and availability of electronic technology have enabled more adult students to participate in the learning process. According to Chifwepa’s study concerning the development of a model plan for the application of information communication and technologies in distance education at UNZA, lecturers’ perceptions were that, “ICT could improve learning and that it should therefore be employed in the delivery of distance education” (Chifwepa, 2006: 3). However, inadequate computers and computer skills were major hindering constraints towards the application of the model (*ibid*:3). Students who enrol in distance learning courses do so for convenience. They are either time-bound due to work or travel schedules or location-bound due to geographic or family responsibilities.

Another important emerging technology in the realm of distance education is the utilisation of smart phones. Blackberry and iPhone now support a Blackboard application where learners can access course content and materials from their phones. The idea of carrying books and heavy materials is no longer an option. The Blackboard

application, still in its infancy, is being developed to turn smart phones into portable classrooms. Since smart phones already possess the ability to stream live video and upload multimedia, the future of higher education and distance education is lending itself to a handheld learning device further promoting access to more students than originally imagined. There is need therefore, for ICT to be integrated in the distance education curriculum for all the students and teachers in all parts of the country, including the rural areas in Zambia.

2.13. Challenges Associated with Distance Education

Simonson *et al.* (2011: 57), caution, “Teaching must remain flexible and sensitive to learners’ needs.” The primary challenge of distance education is quality. Instead of fake courses and predetermined course shells by discipline, the future of distance education requires personalised services addressing the variety of needs of a diversified population of learners, just like the learners from the rural parts of Zambia. Gokool-Ramdoe (2009) asserts that transactional distance is still the biggest challenge in devising an effective distance education experience. Instead of the initially-devised low-overhead, and high revenue programme, the future of distance education will require more fiscal resources as technology costs mount and students require more academic and social support. This is true especially for the students from rural areas studying at university level.

However, distance learning has its own problems, those connected with the peculiarities of distance education as well as with the peculiarities of the distance learners’ audience. There is a great deal of pedagogical literature dedicated to the problems, advantages and disadvantages of distance learning (Bozkurt *et al.*, 2015; Cleveland-Innes and Garrison,

2010; Galusha, 1997; Moore and Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg and Berge 2001). There are also processes of developing the rules for working with a group of distance learners (Merriam *et al.*, 2007; Kunga and Machtmes, 2009; OECD, 2013; Rubenson and Desjardins, 2009). These rules are known as Andragogical Teaching Methods in scientific world (Knowles *et al.*, 2005).

Higher education courses that operate via an off-campus or distance mode are known to have higher attrition rates than similar on-campus offerings (Angelino *et al.*, 2007; Thomas *et al.*, 2014). Research highlights that although students are initially attracted due to the convenience and flexibility of online courses, there are a number of issues students articulate as being problematic. Lee and Choi (2011) argue that these issues can be grouped into three main areas. The first area is related to psychosocial factors. For example, financial issues, family pressures, work commitments, and low levels of motivation are all influences that can impinge on individual student performance. The second area covers course- or subject-related factors. These include elements such as the non-availability of lecturers, lack of feedback, and lack of structure in the subject or course. The third area relates to issues with technology. For example, students' level of training and ability to navigate their way through the online content and technical difficulties such as access, slowness, and downloading of software. What is clear, despite the diversity of influences affecting attrition rates, is lack of interaction with lecturers and other students which is a critical component. In other words, it is a crucial, negative feature consistently cited by students when considering their satisfaction with

the online learning environment (Willging and Johnson, 2009; Gaytan, 2013; Yuan and Kim, 2014).

It is a fact that, despite adding great opportunity for interaction, technology often times is employed in a non-interactive way. For example, there is a tendency to focus on didactic delivery, such as the provision of content via e-readings or a static online lecture. Although this may be effective in terms of transmitting knowledge, subjects run the risk of having low subject satisfaction rates coupled with high attrition if it is the main strategy used in an online environment (Meloni, 2010). In view of this, it is imperative that educators design online courses creatively in order to overcome the individual, course and technological factors that impact negatively on students. Research into social presence, online communities, and learner engagement indicates that the promotion of a sense of belonging to a class/university and being connected to their educator and peers has a strong correlation with student success and intent to persist (Thomas *et al.*, 2014).

Further, distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988). These insecurities are founded in personal and school-related issues such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These pressures often result in higher drop-out rates than among traditional students (Sweet, 1986).

Another area of concern for the distance students is the perceived lack of feedback or contact with the lecturers. Students may have trouble in self-evaluation because there is no frequent or face-to-face contact. Keegan (1986) believes that the separation of student and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital 'link' of communication between the distance learners and their lecture. Citing Tinto (1975), Keegan (1986) hypothesised that students who did not receive adequate reintegration measures such as electronic or telephone communication, would be less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life. Consequently, such students would be more likely to drop out (Sheets, 1992).

Geographical isolation has been identified as one of the major problems for distance students (Meacham and Evans, 1989). In addition to the practical problems of contacting academic and administrative staff, obtaining study materials and borrowing library books, distance students suffer from the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other students, and are often denied the perception that they belong to a scholarly community. According to Wood (1996), this may lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities.

2.14. Theoretical Perspectives on Open and Distance Education

In a paper on Research in Distance Education: Past, Present and Future. Rekkedal (1994), observes that in the 1970s, it was quite common that reports from distance education research projects started with a regret for the lack of prior theory or empirical research data. Despite this observation, one could admit that progress has been made in developing a body of theory on distance learning. Keegan (1986) identifies three

historical approaches to the development of a theory of distance education. He classified them into the following categories:

- a. Theories of independence and autonomy (Wedemeyer and Moore, 1990);
- b. Theories of industrialisation of teaching (Peters, 1993); and
- c. Theories of interaction and communication (Holmberg, 1989).

Table 3: Distance Education and other Theories

Classes of Theories	Main Theme	Key Words
Theories of independence and autonomy	DE is the independence of the students	Learner's autonomy, distance between teacher and learner
Theories of industrialisation of teaching	DE is the industrialised form of teaching and learning	Mechanisation, assembly line, mass production, and standardisation
Theories of interaction and communication	Distance teaching supports student motivation, promotes learning pleasure, creates feelings of rapport between learner and the distance education institution	Motivation, learning pleasure, rapport between learner and the distance Education institution.

Source: *Keegan (1986)*

All these theories have categorised a certain approach to the development of distance education which is very beneficial to distance education by rural students at the University of Zambia.

2.15. Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, the researcher set out to review the foundational theoretical literature as well as relevant scholarly research on open and distance learning (ODL). Since the

purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of rural students enrolled in ODL programs at UNZA, it seemed helpful to review the literature pertaining to both ODL in general and students' lived experiences in particular. To frame the literature, an overview of the field of ODL was provided. This was done by synthesizing the scholarly understandings of the term "distance education" that are currently in circulation. In this endeavor, the review tried to obtain an aggregate understanding of distance education based on the definitions advanced by various scholars. This was followed by the theoretical framework. The review then historicized the concept of "distance education", by looking at its origin and development over the past several decades. The next section of the review then illuminated pertinent issues that can be credibly implicated in the lived experiences of the students. Finally, the literature was reviewed in relation to challenges associated with ODL in general.

Some different Theories have been discussed in this chapter which have helped the researcher to understand the characteristics of distance education. However, some of the theories discussed are deductive in nature and they are not applicable to qualitative inquiries as the researcher is not intending to test theoretical assumptions. Studies of students' experiences relating to gender, teaching and learning have been also part of the discussion in this chapter, by which gaps have been identified in existing knowledge to be addressed by this study. In chapter three, the researcher's design and methods of data collection has been described.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

3.1 Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to investigate, from a phenomenological perspective, the coping strategies that are formulated to navigate the challenges rural distance students faced as they studied at the University of Zambia, enrolled under the open and distance learning (ODL) mode. The selected students were typically resident in rural parts of Zambia. This chapter begins by discussing the research design used in the study. It further discusses the methodological choices that were employed in the study. This is followed by a definition of the universe or population of the study, as well as the sampling technique employed in the study. The chapter then presents the data collection procedures. This section is followed by a discussion of ethical considerations that informed the study. The chapter then concludes with an over view of the methodological issues underpinning this study.

3.2 Research Design

The social phenomenon in this study emerged from the chosen design characteristics adopted. This study utilized the research questions to help explore the coping strategies rural distance students used to navigate the challenges they faced when they studied under the ODL mode at UNZA. Using a phenomenological approach yielded descriptions that provided the basis for reflective analysis from the essence of student lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In the conceptual phenomenon, the lived

experiences of the students were critical in understanding the coping strategies that they formulated as they encountered different challenges during their educational trajectory.

In this study, a qualitative phenomenological approach, was more appropriate because the researcher sought to tell the personal stories of students through one-on-one semi-structured interview sessions guided by a set of questions. It is appropriate to use qualitative research when a “problem or issue needs to be explored” (Creswell, 2007: 51). The qualitative phenomenological approach was appropriate, as the problem was one in which, “it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007: 60). This design characteristics of phenomenology appeared appropriate to this study for two additional reasons: firstly, phenomenology is concerned with the totality of the picture or its “wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essence of phenomenon or experience is achieved (Moustakas, 1994). Secondly, this methodology seeks to generate meanings and essences through reflection of conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments and understandings.

Thus, in this study, the researcher hoped to capture understandings, reveal the students’ coping strategies, and carefully craft the participants lived experiences. The phenomenon to be examined were the coping strategies which the rural students used as they faced the many challenges in the journey of their studies under the ODL mode at UNZA. As noted by Lester (1999) Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at illustrating the individual experiences. Therefore, the phenomenological

approach employed in this study, allowed the participants to tell their stories from their individual perspectives.

3.3 Target Population and Sample

The target population for this study was ODL students as well as graduates from UNZA distance learning programmes. An essential inclusion and exclusion criteria in phenomenological studies normally involves identifying those that have experienced the phenomenon of interest and are willing to understand its nature and meanings (Moustakas, 1994). The participant must be willing to participate in a lengthy interview, must consent to being audio recorded. In the present study, the researcher ensured that each of the participants was availed full details regarding the nature of the study, its purpose and the voluntary nature of its participation. The inclusion criterion was that only learners from rural areas were to be enlisted. The potential participants were purposively selected with a deliberate way with a purpose or focus in mind (Punch, 2005).

The participants were purposively selected from a group of distance students who had come from rural parts of Zambia. In this sampling procedure, the researcher used personal judgment to choose the participants who helped to answer the research questions which made the researcher to achieve the objectives of the study.

Using purposive sampling was ideal because the data sources were usually spatial and they are temporarily non-independent. Purposive sampling usually calls for small samples of interest, which are ideal in all qualitative studies because these samples need

to be studied intensively, and each one of the sample elements, typically generates a large amount of information (Musa and Alkassim, 2015). The researcher sought participants from a variety of disciplines and study areas within the university to capture heterogeneity in participant experience and depth in our understanding of context. Thus, the sample represented the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, natural sciences medical, and professional fields. Additionally, when constructing the sample, the researcher was cognizant of gender, specifically that women do not participate equally in higher education and are not represented equally within many learning institutions (Yoo and Huang, 2013), and attempted to capture as many women's voices as possible.

Respondents were enlisted within UNZA during residential school and others were recruited by the researcher while performing routine ODL activities in three districts, Lundazi, Kabwe and Livingstone. Students who came to the distance learning centres to collect learning materials or assignments or had particular challenges were approached to enlist on the study. As for those who were in Lusaka attending distance learning, the researcher approached one or two participants as they were relaxing in the university grounds. The snowball technique was also used to recruit additional participants. Participants selected through the criteria specified above, were then requested to identify potential participants who met the criteria. Like a snowball rolling down a hill, this strategy enabled the identification of an increased number of informants familiar with the phenomena under investigation (Patton 2003). Thus, from a purposively selected sample, this phenomenological study generated rich, copious,

intensive and lengthy amounts of data with analytical focus on this one phenomenon to understand more broadly how ODL students, in similar contexts, negotiate the challenges associated with a predominantly non-contact mode of learning (Stake 1995), as well as the coping strategies that they employ.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

This was a study that enlisted 10 distance learners. 4 of the learners were from the School of Education, 2 were from Nursing Sciences, and the other 4 were from the humanities. 5 were males and another 5 were females. The mean age was 37, and the youngest was 21, whereas the oldest was 55. There were 6 diploma and degree holders who had graduated from distance learning programmes from the University of Zambia.

3.4 Sampling Techniques Employed

After receiving ethical clearance from UNZA, fieldwork commenced in July of 2016. Data was collected through oral interviews with ODL students from three schools at UNZA, observations, and documentary reviews. In order to engage with other people's experience, the researcher needed to identify and reflect upon the learners' own experiences and assumptions. This, therefore, demanded that the researcher conduct interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and where possible review the Institute of Distance Education (IDE)'s based documents. Drawing on the assumptions above, the description below is about how the researcher collected data.

3.4.1. In-depth Interviews

An interview protocol was used as the primary instrument for collecting data (Appendix 9). According to Wojnar and Swanson (2007). The meaning of a lived experience can only be captured through one-on-one communication between the researcher and the participant. This involves active listening, interaction, and observation to capture the pure representation of reality in favor of the biased, preconceived representation. The interviews in this study involved responsive and relational dialogues with students enrolled in the ODL at UNZA (Chilisa 2012). These dialogues were guided by an interview protocol, but in conducting these, the researcher was flexible enough to permit unanticipated or serendipitous moments (Simons 2009).

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and then analyzed to determine the themes/meaning units that emerged and to ultimately describe the essence of the experiences of these students (Moustakas, 1994). Conversations were driven by questions regarding the participants' encounter with the ODL mode of delivery, how they experienced their educational trajectory, how they were able to formulate strategies to cope with the challenges they faced. Fundamentally, the dialogues, as structured, placed the participants' lived experiences at the centre of the engagement, all the while the researcher sought stories, examples, and context-dependent articulations of strategy. The interview was primarily advantageous because it provided access to the participant's world. The role of an interview in a phenomenological study was excellently summed up by Patton (2002: 104) who stated that:

{...it is about} ...how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interview with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have lived experience.

Interviews were audio recorded with the written consent of each participant, and, depending on the nature and depth of the conversation, interviews were between an hour to two in length. The researcher took notes in the very rare cases that the voice recorder malfunctioned and to capture the serendipitous moments such as the non-verbal expressions of the participants such as facial expressions.

Prior to the interview dialogues, the researcher attempted to bracket her own experiences and biases from those of the participants. Creswell (2007) has surmised that the entire phenomenological interview can be summarized in terms of two broad questions: “what have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?” And “What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?” Therefore, researchers who use phenomenology are interested in understanding a person’s relatedness to the world (and to the things in it, which matter to them) through the meanings that they construct. Accordingly, in this phenomenological study, the researcher realized from the onset that the interview would not only provide direct access to the experiences of the students through their accounts, but rather through a process of inter-subjective meaning-making. Thus, the researcher desired to elicit and engage with the personal accounts of other people who worked with the Institute of Distance Education, as support staff, who were ‘always-ready’ (Patton,

2002) immersed in a linguistic, relational, cultural, and physical world of ODL learning at UNZA.

In the recruitment of members, the researcher made sure that within the group there was exogenous homogeneity (Wells, 1974). This implies similarity in such characteristics as gender, social economic class, and age when the factor is not highly correlated with response to the issue under investigation. Exogenous homogeneity is important because learners who differ greatly have such different resources, problems, experiences, and perceptions they may share and it is easy for the researcher to see variations in experiences (Krueger 1988; & Merton, 1990). Additionally, the researcher also attempted to be cognizant of gender, specifically that women do not participate equally in higher education and are not represented equally within the university in Zambia (Mwale-Mkandawire, 2019), and attempted to capture as many women's voices as possible.

3.4.2. Participant Observations

In seeking to explore the natural scene, the approach the researcher used was the participant-observation. Here, the researcher adopted a recognised role within the group of the distance students. This technique was used because it blended in with the natural activity within the areas of the study. It also gave the Researcher an access to the same places, people and events as the subjects (Hammersley, 1993). Further, it also gave the Researcher access to documents relevant to the role, including confidential reports and records in form of diaries for the students in the study. The observation technique also provided the Researcher with the personal first-hand experience of the role and thus

heightened the understanding of the lived experiences of the students (Galton and Simon, 1980).



**Figure 6: Female Students washing clothes in Lundazi by Jalawe stream bunks.
Lundazi.**

Source: *Field Work, 2016*

3.4.3. Document Review

In the provinces where data was collected. Documents are a useful source of data in qualitative research (Patton, 2015), although they have to be treated with care. This means that the documents ought to be read thoroughly to avoid misconceptions as doing this may distort the information required. Thus, the researcher used mostly the official documents from IDE. These official documents included the records that indicated students' registers, the particulars of the support staff at IDE, the specific numbers of the teaching staff for all the programmes at IDE and the organograms which indicated all the positions of the management teams at the IDE.

For this research, the researcher decided to use documents because documentation renders details which may be missed by the interviews and the observations (Cohin and

Lacey, 1976). Commenting on their research methods on Grammar Study, Cohin and Lacey (*ibid*) indicated that the most important breakthrough for them was the combination of methods which included a key use of documents. Thus, documents helped the researcher to reconstruct events and write information about social relationships among ODL students at UNZA.



Figure 7: Diaries and other documents belonging to a female distance student for review in Lundazi District.

Source: *Field Work, 2016*

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was rooted in interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). As with other qualitative approaches, IPA is concerned with meaning and processes, rather than with events and their causes. In the case of IPA, meaning-making is conceptualised at the level of the person-in-context. In this way, IPA has a commitment to an idiographic

level of analysis; which implies a focus on the particular, rather than the general (Hycner, 1985). This connects closely with IPA's engagement with hermeneutic phenomenology which is a research method used in qualitative research in the fields of education like this study. Phenomenology is aimed to transcend everyday assumptions of the community that is being researched as expressed verbatim. These ideas in form of verbatim were used in this study as they have been particularly influential on the more 'descriptive' forms of phenomenological psychology (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003).

Since the data was in textual form, this data was reduced and analysed using the NVivo software. The NVivo supported this qualitative research method which the researcher used and helped the researcher to organise, analyse and find the insights of the participants for the research. By using the NVivo to analyse the data the researcher was able to save time, worked more efficiently and did organise and store the data where it could be retrieved easily. The data reduction process involved the combinations of steps drawn from Hycner (1985), Stiles and Putnam (1992), Rhothstein (1990), Boyatzis (1998) and Gillham (2000) as set forth in Table 5.

Table 4: Steps taken during data reduction process

Steps	Process
1	Each interview recording was listened to twice in order to have a picture of the general meaning of units or substantive statements. These are words, sentences or paragraphs containing aspects related to each other through their content and context.
2	All field notes and transcribed interviews were written and arranged in textual units using the respondent's literal words (verbatim). A textual unit is an aggregation of one respondent's data resented in form of a complete thought or a sentence.
3	Each text was to be read twice by the researcher in order to gain and provide a context for the emergence of demographic characteristics such as age, education, employment status inter alia and general meaning units.
4	The text then was delineated into meaning units by going over every word, phrase, sentence and paragraph. This is the process of getting at the essence of the meaning expressed in a word or phrase or sentence or paragraph. The meaning unit had shed light on a specific explicit area of the content of this work, which the researcher had identified with little interpretation. A meaning unit was part of the text based on theoretical assumptions from the literature on challenges and coping strategies used by distance learners from the rural areas of Zambia, or parts of the text that address a specific research question or topic in an interview or observation.
5	Themes were selected inductively from raw information based on observed phenomena or deductively-generated. Phenomena had information at a minimum to describe and organise the possible observations and at a maximum, to interpret aspects of the phenomenon.
6	Headers were then selected to fit the themes. Creating themes is a way to link the underlying meanings together in categories. A theme is a recurring regularity developed within categories or that cuts across categories.
7	Sub-headers were then defined considering that headers could have more than one descriptive organised element.
8	Essentially sub-headers were linked to the questions asked.
9	From the sub-headers themes were identified and delineated and deposited into appropriate nodes. Nodes were the main categories of the research issues for this study. Categories are the core feature of qualitative content analysis. A category is a group of content that shares a commonality. Krippendorff (1980) emphasizes that categories must be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. This means that no data related to the purpose should be excluded due to lack of a suitable category. Furthermore, no data fell between two categories or fit into more than one category.

Analysis involved structural coding that captured conceptual phrases and participant-driven examples consistent with the research questions (Saldaña 2016). This was used to analyse data generated from verbal encounters (from the interviews and the focus groups). The analysis focused on understanding participant experiences and generating examples. The researcher also isolated participant stories and examples from the mass to exemplify the phenomenon. ‘Stories formed in everyday conversation, which may include those generated in research processes, are directly linked to the experience of organisational members and their desire to account for and make sense of their lives’ (Simpson 2008, 94-95). From this process, it was possible to uncover the invariant features of phenomena in order to provide a rigorous description by looking for common themes as well as individual variations to generate an idiographic theory and to write a composite summary of the coping strategies to the challenges faced by the ODL at the UNZA from the rural areas.

Thus, the researcher examined and explored narrative data during various phases of the data collection and analysis process. This was aimed at allowing the themes to emerge from the data. Constituents of the lived experiences were coded until the researcher arrived at the central themes that formed the structure of the phenomena. This way the researcher was able to make sense of the phenomenological data analysis and understand the ways in which the essential themes answered the study’s research questions.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from HHSREC (see appendix 9). The confidentiality and anonymity of participants was very critical. The researcher had to conceal the identities of the ODL students who participated in the study. This was achieved by assigning them pseudonyms. This way, it will be harder for someone to recognize these participants. Prior to each interview or FGD, the participants were given a consent form, which explained that the researcher was duty-bound to minimize any danger that might accrue to them by participating in this study. The form further explained that the potential for their harm could not be eliminated, but most of the times, the respondents responded to this by the researcher that the only danger they feared was the possibility of making politically incorrect statements.

3.7. Summary of the Chapter

This chapter of the study has mapped the methodological issues that underpinned this study. The chapter began by uncovering the design characteristics adopted in this study. This was followed by an explanation of the target population of the study, which detailed the exclusion and inclusion criteria invoked in this phenomenological account the challenges faced by ODL students at UNZA and the coping strategies which these encounters generate. The section that followed looked the procedures that were used to capture the relevant data that was needed to answer the research question. This was followed by a detailed description of the analysis of the rich textual data that was generated from the study. The final section of the chapter highlighted and discussed the

ethical dilemmas confronted by the researcher in the course of doing this phenomenological study.

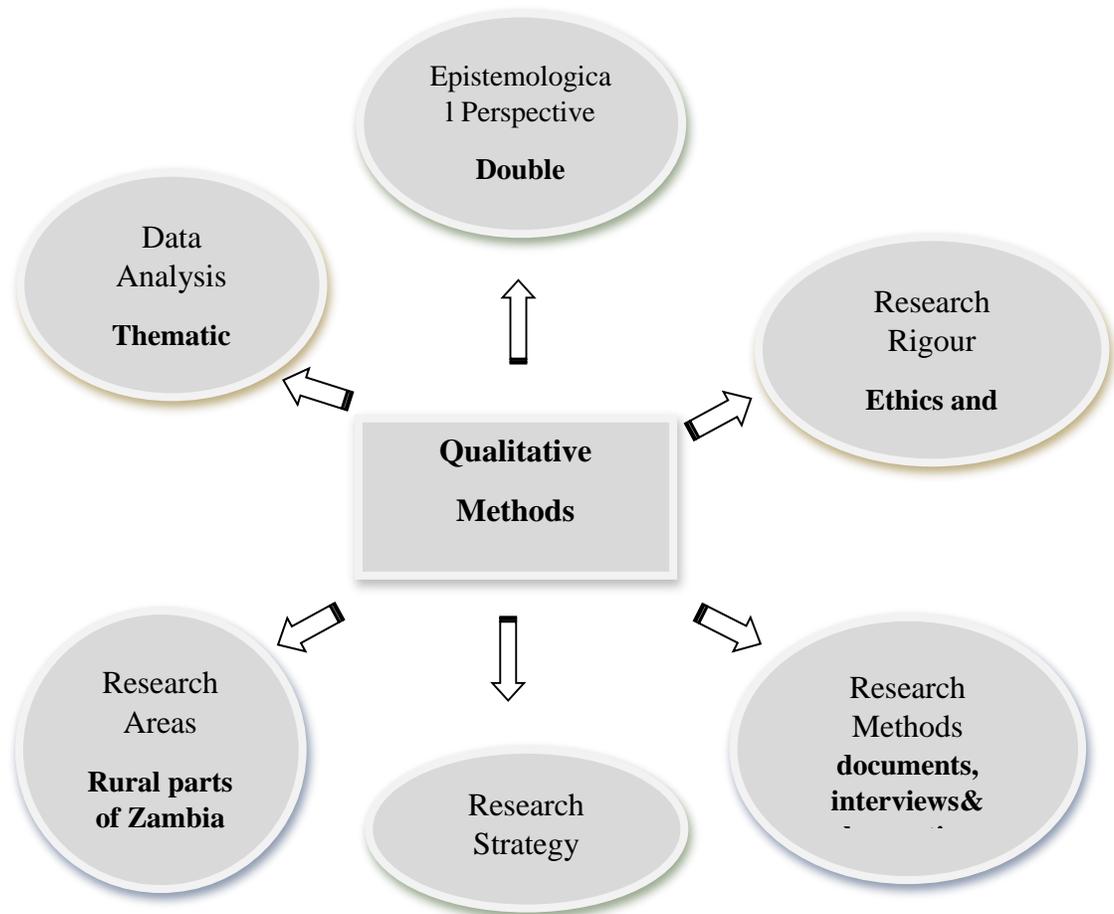


Figure 8: Summary of Qualitative Research Methods and Methods used

Adapted from: *Mahai, L.(2012)*

CHAPTER FOUR

STUDY FINDINGS

4.1 Overview

This chapter presents the findings of the study on coping strategies to challenges faced by University of Zambia distance students from rural areas. The chapter explains how participants expressed their experiences in navigating ODL mode of study and the challenges they encountered as well as formulating the strategies to cope with these challenges. For the sake of clarity in the presentation of the results of the study, the researcher has presented the voices of some participants in this study and all the names used are not the real names. They are pseudo names used for the purpose of anonymity of the people in the study.

This chapter is anchored on the themes from the objectives of the study and has answered the following research questions:

- a) How do rural students experience distance learning environment at UNZA?
- b) What challenges, do rural students at UNZA encounter during their studies under the ODL mode?
- c) How do coping strategies emerge from the rural ODL students' encounter with the challenges of ODL?
- d) How can the study's major findings inform a model ODL system at UNZA?

4.2. Students' Experiences of Distance Learning at UNZA

In this phenomenological study, the researcher was interested in how each participant from rural areas experienced the journey of learning as a distance student at UNZA. It seemed prudent to conceptualize their lives as students as journeys because of the movement imperative in their progression from first year to final year. Conrad and Donaldson (2011) assert that phenomenology allows for the exploration of phenomena from the perspectives of the participants. The first research question in the study was to explore how students experienced the ODL mode of study. The experiences conveyed by the participants, converged around intermittent upheavals alongside the equally abundant 'blessings' encountered in the journey. The participants related experiences with the ODL study, which showed numerous challenges and affordances arising from the ODL study mode. In the sections that follow, the researcher highlights the broad contours of these experiences.

4.3. Negotiating the space between work, study and home

Some of the respondents in the study, who were also in formal employment, revealed that they had to shuffle between working as full-time employees and being students in a distance mode of learning. This, many said, occasioned some interruptions in meeting university deadlines and vice versa. However, the respondents also reported that the ODL mode was much preferable to the fulltime mode of study. This helped them to side-step some of the study requirements that might otherwise conflict with work-related responsibilities. Thus, the participants' experiences converged and diverged on

several dimensions, with some participants asserting that at times the work-related interruptions were unmanageable.

Masuzyo, a 29-year old male student pursuing a Bachelor of Business studies revealed that being a full-time working citizen, he appreciated the flexibility afforded by ODL mode of study, noting however that there was a flip side to this:

The option of learning by distance has helped many of us to have a place at the university. I am able to do my work and study at the same time. But I must be quick to point out that studying and work is not rosy... You should find time to balance both.

Masuzyo went to narrate how tight work schedules had at times seriously disrupted his obligations to the university. He stated the following when prodded to say more about this:

There are many times when the perceived flexibility of the ODL mode is not entirely visible or helpful. This is the case when very tight work schedules prevent me from meeting my deadlines for assignments and at times takes away valuable study time because, whatever happens, my work responsibilities come first.

Mzumara, a 33-year old student in Education, similarly expressed his misgivings about having to shuffle work and study. He said that the most difficult or challenging situation was that he spent most of his time at work, and that he did not have enough time to do and practice working out the mathematics which he needed to do.

Martha, a female student aged 31, in the School of Education and fully employed as a teacher, had a somewhat different experience and said that learning by distance had provided them with an opportunity to learn while they continued to work. This could not be tolerated under full-time studies, as one had to go on study leave first, which was very difficult for the learners to do so unless the Government sponsored them.

Another participant, related a slightly different dimension by calling attention to the nature of her job. Anita, aged 45 and a Programme Officer at USAID and undergraduate student at UNZA, told the researcher that the nature of her job made it hard to cope with both school and work, stating that distance learning was a good arrangement for some of them who worked at the same time. However, she said that she had experienced a bit of stress...meeting deadlines.

For many of the participants in this study, shuffling work and study, often was accompanied by parenting and social responsibilities at home. It was evident that distance learning allowed participants to engage in numerous activities. Respondents could perform house chores, attend to family needs, and meet other social expectations like going to funerals and visiting the sick. While this was the case, there were moments when there were interruptions at home.

Chimanda, a male, married student aged 31 stated that studying under the ODL enabled him to minimize the disruptions to his home and work routines, and that studying under full-time study would have been comparatively less permissive of these routines.

Chimanda, further recounted how he would help with household chores, go to work full-time and still find time for independent study as is required under the ODL mode. For instance, he narrated that he often found time to walk four (4) kilometres to fetch water in a community well in a rural part of Central province.

Belinda, a third-year science student, aged 27 and still single, similarly stated that the ODL mode was very accommodating to her work which involved teaching at a primary school, and household responsibilities as she was able to effectively divide her time between the three domains: Belinda was able to learn while at home and went about the chores and had time to read the modules.

Chiyembekezo, another male respondent, aged 27 from the Central Province, echoed similar sentiments to those of Belinda, stating as follows:

Distance learning gives me ample time to study. From the time of residential to the period of examinations, I used to study all that needed to be studied without much pressure though some of my friends have been working on gun-point when it is time for exam because they tend to relax after the residential school, forgetting that they are students.

Vifukwa, a 30 year old male distance student had similar sentiments to those of Chiyembekezo and had said that Studying by distance had benefited him in the sense that it provided him an opportunity to raise the money which he paid for his school fees. He further pointed out that the period from registration to examination was adequate enough to prepare himself.

The lived experiences of the participants appeared to suggest that an additional advantage of navigating the world of work, home and study, was the mobility associated with the ODL mode. ODL learners usually have many responsibilities connected with their work or families. These responsibilities significantly reduce their opportunity to study full-time. Thus, ODL mode allowed them to solve their problems. Anita, introduced earlier had this to say about the ODL mode:

The greatest benefit I have seen by studying through distance is that I am able to do my studies and continue working at the same time. By this, it is clear that distance education offers an opportunity to people to acquire higher education which could have, otherwise, been difficult.

Thus, time management and multi-tasking appear to constitute essential elements of how participants experienced the phenomenon under study. Whilst the participants generally affirmed positive responses in this realm, there were also some experiences that suggested otherwise.

Conversation with female students suggested that women are more constrained than men in as far as when, how, and where their learning takes place. Some of the constraints appeared border around timeline for study and for parenting. Geraldine, a married mother of an infant son, complained that the timing for her school and parenting appeared to be in conflict. “I must wait until my son sleeps to study or write my assignments”. She told the researcher. She went on to say that:

The greatest challenge for me is that, I am mostly overwhelmed with so much work such as looking after my children and doing other household chores like cleaning around the home and washing for the family. This affects my studies so much.

This response contrasted sharply with a response the researcher received from Muyaloka, a 24-year-old male student who openly stated that; “At least I have time to do my assignments, and I have always submitted my work for marking in good time, although I never get feedback from most of my lecturers”. The contrasts between the two sets of response above point of the gendered dimensions of the lived experiences of ODL students. These issues are discussed in Chapter 4. The responses in the foregoing section illustrate the lived experiences of ODL students at UNZA as expressed and articulated in their own voices. In the section that follows, I seek to highlight the participants’ experience of the academic space away from home and from work.

The views of the participants were diverse and varied but all seemed to suggest that the ODL experience was eventful. Some students stated that understanding the grammar in the module, was the most serious challenge as it received greater attention from the learners. Chimanda said that she had difficulties in most writing activities and regarded writing activities as something which was not easy to do. Chimanda went on to highlight the technical difficulties in fulfilling academic requirements and this to say;

The most difficult situation is when I write a composition. I fail to find the most suitable words to express my ideas. I must find other expressions or phrases which have similar meanings to the words that I want to use. Constructing good sentences has always been a challenge on my part.

Chimanda's expressive limitations appear to have been compounded by the faulty feedback system that was in place for ODL students. Emotionally, Chimanda told me that it was important to receive formative feedback from the lecturers on the assignments and exercises. This was to highlight the weaknesses and strengths, but also provide advice, guidance and support for improvement of writing skills, just as Vifukwa commented:

The challenge is the lack of feedback when doing the writing exercises. If there is a feedback, I will be able to find the strengths and the weaknesses of the compositions that I made. The feedback is expected to give improvement or correct the mistakes (that I made)"

As noted from the excerpt above, it is clear Chimanda had difficulties in expressing himself in English as his constructions of the sentences were not very clear. Indeed, the literature sympathised with Chimanda's plight. Scholars have stated that early feedback on surveys or informal discussions is helpful in getting students to provide feedback on what is working well in a course, and solicit suggestions and ideas on what might help them have a better course experience.

Chimanda's plight was echoed by other participants who appeared to suggest that notable technical issues posed challenges in relation to service delivery and use. Geraldine expressed similar sentiments about the same when she stated that:

I cannot ask the lecturer directly that I cannot access the portal because the lecturer is not online...and I cannot have a discussion with other students on the portal who are taking the same courses as I do...You will also notice that other students have not been invited on the portal or the lecturer is missing.

In Anita's case, the isolation inherent in the ODL mode was evidently very hard to contend with. She further stated that the lecturers were hardly available online and could not be reached as and when needed: "I found it hard to communicate with our lecturers to consult on the assignments; and it was difficult to access the required materials from the rural areas."

These sentiments show that the experiences of ODL students were somewhat mixed. The researcher was compelled to explore the nature of the challenges that the participants encountered during their ODL studies. Thus, in the section that follows, the challenges expressed by the students are discussed in more detail.

4.4. Challenges Faced by Rural Distance Students at UNZA

The previous section was anchored on how the students experienced ODL studies at UNZA. This was in line with the first research question of the study which stated the rural distance learners' experiences at UNZA. In the present section, the researcher focusses on the second objective which answered the second question of the study and specifically sought to document the challenges ODL students faced at UNZA. The responses of the participants showcase numerous challenges, ranging from institutionally situated ones to socially constructed ones as well as personal challenges.

Despite the expanding growth of distance learning and its benefits, numerous challenges are evident related to individual, institutional and instructional matters. The study identified distinct categories of challenges. Institutional-related challenges included poor logistics system or a lack of appropriate advising. Dispositional challenges were related to learners' own attitudes and feelings. Others were situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and/or cultural related challenges. Noted as well were costs, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns and poor technical assistance. Other challenges addressed inadequate feedback and poor teacher contact, alienation and isolation, and poor student support services.

4.5. Situational Challenges

Situational challenges are those challenges which are associated with a student's own life circumstances. Galusha (2012) points out that situational challenges are often associated with a student's own life circumstances. These may include changing employment situations or family obligations. The realms that might be implicated include: the student's age; their type of work; and their marital status. These situated challenges were expressed under several aspects following the responses of the students. The first of these aspects, was related to the financial and material costs that would accrue to students whose academic pursuits tended to occur in the ODL mode.

The respondents in this phenomenological study related a plethora of challenges including lack adequate money to cover the costs. Some female participants who were in employment but were married to unemployed men, and were thus, unable to access

the much-needed financial support from these kinds of partners who were unable to support them financially. Martha as one of the respondents stated as follows;

When a woman wants to upgrade her educational levels through distance mode, she is bound to fail to mobilize the resources due to acute family financial obligations arising from the employment status of the husband. Being solitary family bread-winners, meant that their perks were too little to meet all the needs, hence failing to pay for the cost of attending school.

This participant went on to state that the level of one's salary, might prevent access to loan facilities and the desire to improve one's academic credentials for a better future may be seriously affected. These sentiments conveyed challenges that were fairly widespread. Some of the participants reported that they always got disturbed a lot from their children. This was compounded by the fact that some male partners did not seem interested in supporting their wives going for residential school for fear of assuming the roles played by their wives in their houses. The anonymous participant, quoted above, also said that she found it difficult to study and concentrate on her education at her home because the family responsibilities such as taking care of the children and the husbands presented insurmountable challenges. She spent much of her time taking care of house-related chores. In most cases, her husband did not spare any time to assist her with other house chores so that she could have a breathing space to concentrate on her studies.

This lack of support from partners in this process was a major challenge to women pursuing studies through distance learning. This posed a financial challenge on their part as they desperately needed support from their spouse.

The responses in the foregoing section, have highlighted the situated challenges encountered by participants in the study. However, these sentiments do not represent the finality of their experiences. In the section that follows, the researcher will showcase what have been appropriately themes as dispositional challenges, because they border on how the participants deal with personal problems that influence their persistence behaviour, such as motivation.

4.6. Dispositional Challenges

Dispositional challenges are those challenges that deal with personal problems that influence the student's persistence behaviour, such as motivation. This challenge is commonly associated with Isolation and not belonging to an academic community, support services, lack of proper guidance and advice, availability and timeliness of appropriate learning support psychological needs, geographical distance and attending face-to-face interaction and laboratory practical.

The first of these dispositional challenges bordered on the isolation that the ODL students at UNZA faced, due to the fact that they were coming from rural and remote areas. Some participants reported that, due to the cultural norms that shaped the rural landscape, they were uncomfortable to do any group work with their counterparts from

UNZA during residential school from a different sex or age group. The potential for isolation in distance learning was thus a well-documented phenomenon.

The second dispositional challenge is related to the psychological issues confronted by the study participants. One illustrative case involved Belinda, a 33-year-old 4th year student who hailed from Lundazi. Belinda narrated that she was given a divorce letter by her husband while she had camped in a provincial town to write the end of year examinations, for the 2016/ 2017 academic year. Belinda recounts her pain: “I was so heartbroken that the world around me was crumbling. I did not understand why my husband chose to divorce me. At that point, I felt that life did not mean anything to me and the only way out.” Fortunately, the resident lecturer and the chief invigilator were engaged to counsel Belinda. Belinda’s predicament illustrates the need for psychology services that ODL students might face.

A third dispositional challenge underscored by this phenomenological study was the experience of being geographically distant from the site where support services for learning purposes were found, which further alienated one from critical support networks that were ordinarily available during residential sessions. Chiyembekezo, a 33-year old third year student in the sciences, stated thus:

Being far away or rather geographically distant from my tutors and my cohort mates, presented studying problems as I often found myself in need of encouragement to meet my learning needs. Due to the distance, I failed to have face-to-face interactions with Lecturers and Tutors who would have advised me on course-related issues. We also failed to have access to facilities like libraries.

Predicaments like Chiyembekezo's could be exacerbated, if the student is enrolled in practical subjects, such as nursing, chemistry, biology and others. Some study participants indicated that the absence of direct contact with the lecturers who are expected to demonstrate to their students in science laboratories. Vifukwa, a 33-year old nursing student stated that:

Due to distance and other reasons, for example, due to family obligations, I may fail to make it to the laboratories for practical subjects and experiments. The only chance I have is when we go for residential school. However, residential days also are not enough for us to have meaningful laboratory interactions. This failure has affected my acquisition of skills.

For distance students, establishing satisfactory contact with academic staff is one of the major difficulties of life in a distance student (Bullen, 2003). However, some of the participants reported that when they went for their residential school, they usually have little time but are expected to cover a lot of work. Chimanda for example said that it was hard to meet the Lecturers when clarifications were needed on certain matters that could not be addressed during a few contact hours which were set for us.

In addition, some participants reiterated the importance of contact with their faculty members how they faced challenges with Masuzyo intimated as follows:

I have personally seen the importance of interaction between lecturer, student, and peer. This has been emphasised in our distance learning class sessions when we come for residential courses... The involvement, interaction or engagement of students in this online Astria programme...

Chiyembekezo, similarly spoke positively about the facilitation and the online Platform and said that they did affirm the importance of the facilitation of the new online learning community where they were given assignments as a group and then they worked in a group but found in different geographical locations. In this way they managed to and achieve their expected learning outcomes

A fourth dispositional challenge encountered by some of the study participants involved their interaction with their respective study courses. Participants reported that at times, they received instructional materials late; and in other cases, they did not get the materials at all. In addition, the collection of the materials followed very tedious procedures. Anita, stated that she had a tough time getting access to the materials, even when these were available. “I had to queue for a long time”, she said. Such experience could inevitably pose a challenge, for example, to students who are pregnant and are expected to go through harsh conditions. Therefore, in most cases, students may fail to collect the materials due to their conditions, and the failure affects their studying.

Accommodation was another notable challenge among the distance students, especially during residential school. When students go for residential school, they are accommodated by schools or indeed universities. Belinda, a mother of four (4) narrates that it was hard being a mother and student at the same time:

Student mothers are not allowed to be in hostels when they have infant babies. Therefore, such students are left with no option but to look for accommodation elsewhere. Usually boarding houses charge exorbitant accommodation fees which become a

big burden to the student who is already struggling to pay the tuition fees. The accommodation they pick on, lack certain facilities like WIFI which are found in the institutional hostels. In the boarding houses, students' property is lost through theft and this causes students to suffer more.

A final dispositional challenge is related to the provision of learner support at UNZA. The participants reported that at UNZA, learner support was usually offered in a variety of forms, including preparatory programmes and semester-based support or term-based. The participants reported that the level of learning support available to them at UNZA was highly variable. "at times we are left to develop academic skills such as essay writing by trial-and-error" said one student, while another said that: "if you fail to develop the skills quickly enough you may become dispirited, and develop the imposter syndrome, where you begin to suspect that perhaps you are not able succeed."

One participant boldly told the researcher that she knew of people, especially female students, to engage other people to write academic essays on their behalf. Thus, this causes students to face a lot of plagiarism and copying cases as the people who do the work on their behalf keep on reproducing the same work for others. Plagiarism and copying cases lead students to failing their courses. Failure discourages the students from continuing with the courses.

In addition, some of the participants confessed that their knowledge of ICT was fairly. For example, Chiyembekezo opined that some of the relatively older students lacked computer literacy skills:

This hinders them from accessing the internet and use computers for assignments on their own. Nowadays, a student in a higher institution cannot do without basic knowledge in information, communication and technology. So, lack of knowledge in ICT is a challenge to some students because we cannot access information quickly and do their assignments in the same way.

Chiyembekezo's sentiments were echoed by Chimanda who similarly felt female students did not contribute fully to the school work. They usually asked their male folk to do school work on their behalf. Thus, this affected their credentials as they came out of the institution half-baked, having not learnt enough. Some of the female students lacked commitment to course work, and lacked confidence in themselves. Geraldine was also inclined to agree with Chimanda:

Most of my fellow female students I know, have serious difficulties in trying to do anything with the computers. They did not know how to use the internet and failed to communicate with their lectures at UNZA. But in the spirit of fellowship, when one encounters such a colleague, it is only natural that you try to assist. Personally, I have helped some of my colleagues by teaching them how to write on their computers.

As the demand for academic courses offered by distance teaching from traditional university campuses grows, there will be a need to increase the number of faculty members required to teach at a distance. There is need, therefore, for the distance education lecturers to be motivated further for them to continue to work for the Institute of Distance Education at the University of Zambia. In independent African States, the University of Zambia was probably the first conventional University to establish a

distance teaching wing, at the end of 1966 (Siachiwena, 2005). It operates an integrated system of distance education in which identical courses are offered to both internal and distance students by the same regular teaching staff. Thus, distance teaching activities are integrated into the normal academic functions of the teaching departments. This model was adopted from the University of New England in Australia.

Nevertheless, observations by this researcher appeared to suggest that the picture at UNZA was not entirely gloomy. Evidently there was one form of support service or another that were available for ODL students at UNZA. For instance, independent investigations by the researcher revealed that there were support services provided by the University of Zambia and government through the Institute of Distance Education (IDE), Provincial, and District Education offices, respectively. Table 8 below shows the support services which distance students receive from various stakeholders in Zambia. The information was obtained from direct observation.

Although the general feeling of the students was that they did not get enough support from IDE, some of the staff said they had assisted the distance students for most of the time. To provide support to distance students, the Institute of Distance Education has developed modules in most of the courses offered. This provides the foundation on which students base their study before they can look for other related materials.

The foregoing section has addressed the second research question of this study. I have shown cases of the challenges that emerge from student narratives. The challenges have

been articulated in line with the broad contours as articulated by the participants themselves. The section was bookended by the researchers' own observations. Having thus established a general cartography of the challenges, it seemed imperative to explore how the students deal with these challenges. The section that follows, therefore seeks to interrogate the coping strategies deployed by the students to deal with the challenges that they face during the ODL studies.

4.7. Coping Strategies to the Challenges faced by Rural Distance Students at UNZA

While distance learners employed the four coping strategies, that is, taking direct action, seeking social support, denial and disengagement and acceptance, there were very distinctive background factors for the selected coping mechanism. For instance, those who took direct action and sought social support seemed to do so by virtue of length of challenge and the desire for active confrontation and resolution of problems. The theme social support, turns out that this is directly influenced by the request for help, and stress perception. The themes, denial and disengagement and acceptance are directly influenced by internal/external control of problems and internalised/externalised strategies for the control of emotions.

There were marked differences in terms of coping behaviours among the learners. There were stable or repetitive coping "styles" or "dispositions" that learners brought with them to the stressful situations that they encountered. Looking at the results, the distance one would infer that learners do not approach each coping context anew, but rather bring to bear a preferred set of coping strategies that remains relatively fixed across time and circumstances. There were also moments when coping was a dynamic process that

shifted in nature from stage to stage of a stressful transaction. Specifically, it might be argued that preferred ways of coping with stress derive from more traditional personality dimensions. That is, perhaps certain personality characteristics predispose people to cope in certain ways when they confront adversity.

4.7.1 Taking Direct Action

The participants intimated that they were often compelled to take their own initiatives to deal with the challenges they faced while pursuing their studies. This way, they acted to overcome the challenges by acting to overcome their challenges. For instance, Muyaloka, one of the participants, stated that there was actually-very little one could do with the modules. He simply read novels and other simple books to help him improve his English writing skills, because he believed that those who wrote well were those who read more books.

Other participants indicated that the use of mobile phones had helped them a lot during their study. They communicated easily with their friends using their mobile phones for consultations on their course work. This was mainly in places which did not have the internet connectivity like some parts of Lundazi district, instead cell phones were used as the students consulted their course lecturers and their fellow ODL students. Anita further had this to say during the interview:

Personally, I find the cell phone to be the main mode of communication with the University lecturers and other distance learners, without which it was going to be very difficult to overcome this challenge of communicating with my fellow students in our locality and my lecturers in town. We always try

to do what is required for our school work by calling some of the people concerned. When one is lucky they can respond and then you get what you want as a student. Cell phones have helped us a lot because it is not very expensive to own one and nearly all of us have cell phone.

Geraldine, Mzumara, Belinda and Anita, who were part of the participants in this research, reported that although they had used mostly the Post Office for communication, the posted materials did not reach their Lecturers in good time. In some cases, the materials in question did not even reach their lecturers at all. But according to all the four participants above, the Post Office was the only available mode of communication in their areas. Therefore, in the often likely event that the materials did not reach their Lecturers, they were often compelled to travel to Lusaka to hand in their assignments in person. In this case, the coping strategy for the challenge of missing assignments was for the students to travel to the centres or to Lusaka to hand in the assignments to the IDE itself. They took direct action to face the challenge of posting the assignment to their respective Lecturers at IDE.

Another challenge, besides the unreliability or lack of postal services, was the unavailability or inaccessibility of study materials such as modules, books and other reading materials. Chiyembekezo and Muyaloka indicated that they managed to overcome these challenges by merely photocopying most of the reading materials which they needed for their school work.

Chiyembekezo had this to say concerning the study materials:

Most of the modules for my courses were not readily available.
They were not posted to me by any means. This continued until

I came to the University campus for residential school. Even when I came for the residential school, it was still very difficult to access the modules and all other reading materials from IDE and even from my lecturers. The only way I could access these materials was when I got hold of some of these materials from my fellow students and photocopied all of them for my own use.

Other participants in the study said that they had used persuasive tactics in order to get financial assistance from their spouses for school fees, while their male counterparts had said that they paid for their education on their own. They were initially reluctant to divulge further the nature of the persuasion, until upon further probing and prompting by the researcher, Anonymous II, stated that persuasion did not exclude withholding conjugal rights from their spouse.

Belinda and Geraldine, on the other hand, intimated that reliance on loans and salary advance were their strategies for coping with financial constraints: “I had gotten a loan from my employers to get going. Otherwise, I was not going to continue with my studies.” A few other female students said they raised the money for their school fees from selling some crops which they cultivated within their localities. More male distance students of the respondents said that they raised the money for their school fees by growing some cash crops which they sold: “In this place, you just have to be a farmer...I have been selling crops to enable me pay for my fees.” (Geraldine).

Female breast-feeding participant mothers stated that they overcame the challenge of how to care for their babies while doing their residential school by bringing along to school nurse-maids to look after their babies while they attended classes. Others came

along with their older female children to help them with baby care. The section that follows, transitions the conversation into how the participants drew on social capital to stock up their fortunes as they came across different challenges.

4.7.2 Seeking Social Support

When confronted with myriad challenges, the ODL students in this study reported that they would go to great lengths just to break even with their circumstances. Chimanda, one of the participants, reported that he and some of his colleagues went to the length of organizing lectures in rural outposts where they then invited academics from UNZA to tutor them at a fee. This sort of networking ensured that the students shared the cost of paying for the lecturers' passage, their upkeep as well as their allowances. He explained as follows:

Although this meant that we spent extra money for these extra tuitions, it was a coping strategy as we experienced some challenges with the courses we were studying due to lack of meaningful orientation. When things are bad, we try as much as possible to arrange for support from tutors and lecturers to come. This has however helped us greatly.

Geraldine also narrated that when faced with varying challenges, together with the colleagues, they energized themselves by seeking social support by contacting other people. The people they contacted were often those with whom they had shared similar networks and problems. These included peers acquaintances and other students who took the same courses as themselves.

In this way they managed to tackle recurring challenges as they studied in their courses. Belinda stated that whenever she had challenges with assignments, she sought help from friends:

I try to discuss a topic I do not understand in a study group. This helps me and I can also help other students in the same way. Having friends who always remind me to complete the assignments, for example, means that I have friends who care. I do not want to waste this chance.

The catchment for such networking strategies seldom excluded the alumni on the programs which these students were currently studying, particularly those who were residing in the same locality as the current students. These former University of Zambia graduates were consulted on many issues concerning their studies, including how to overcome some of the challenges they faced as they learnt as distance students. According to these students their main challenge was that they did not get enough assistance from the University staff on how to go about with their learning process as distance students at the University of Zambia.

The views of this group of students was excellently summed up by Mzumara who had this to say about social support:

After receiving my acceptance letter, as a new student I did not know what to do next. I wish they can be calling us to the campus to orient us in a special way and show us how to prepare even for the residential school. It is just my friends in the locality who keep helping me with my school work. I look like I cannot do university work on my own without my friends who were once at UNZA. These guys have also guided me on how

to write the assignments. I don't know how my performance would have been without these former UNZA students.

The foregoing quote illustrate the ways in which the participants in this phenomenological study leveraged social support as a means of coping with the challenges of ODL. Social support, therefore, is an appropriate theme to describe this coping strategy as it captures how students enlist the counterparts in their support system to energize themselves.

4.7.3 Denial and Disengagement

This section presents results of students that felt that at times the challenges were not worth paying attention to, as doing so could lead to severer risks of a particular student not being able to complete the studies thereof.

This themes captured the tendency by some students to inadvertently disengage or deny the challenges they were encountering. This strategy involved employing avoidance strategies including denial that the problem had not occurred, or even avoiding thinking about it, or even giving up trying to deal with the problem. One of the most common problem which led to this coping behaviour was the non-reception of feedback, especially in the form of continuous assessment (CA) results. Students desired to know what their results were before committing to study for their final examinations. Muyaloka, a participant, stated that he once felt overwhelmed when he repeatedly “hit into a wall” regarding CA results: “As for me, I took it that my CA was okay and I needed not to worry about the final grade...I just kept on reading you know.” This was

despite not having actually seen the said CA results. Thus, denial and /or disengagement is evident in Muyaloka's resignation to face the challenge.

Meanwhile, when confronted with a similar situation in her second year of study, Martha stated that she, having waited for her CA: "for months on end, I gave up, as I did not receive any. Thus, in the run up to writing the final examinations, I just thought that I had a 'B' for my continuous assessment." These illustrative sentiments, clearly correspond to the theme denial and disengagement. One can see how employing either strategy would take of the pressure from the concerned student. This strategy, is closely related to the final theme on how ODL students cope with their challenges, which is discussed in the next section

4.7.4. Acceptance

Mzumara, one of the participants, provided the solitary glimpse into how the students coped with the challenges by simply accepting the challenges. He narrates how he accepted the challenge in accessibility of materials by learning to live with the situation.

He had this to say;

I had numerous challenges with accessing materials related to mathematics, from the time I was in my first year at UNZA. I have called the resident tutor and IDE Office to inquire as to when I will receive the modules but I have received no response. I have just come to accept the problem and go on with other studies. Sometimes I simply photocopy some of the reading materials. This makes me not to bother about not received materials.

In accepting the situation, distance students took pressure away from themselves by learning to live with the situation of deficiency. The findings of this phenomenological study prompted the proposal of a framework or model for ODL education at UNZA. In so doing the researcher has answered the fourth and final research question, which is on how the study's major findings can inform a model of ODL system at UNZA and any other learning institution, by synthesizing the challenges in tabular form and proposing a model for the running of distance mode of learning at UNZA.

4.8. Towards a Model of ODL at UNZA: A Proposal

In this final section of the chapter, the researcher attempts to piece together a model of ODL that is anchored on and informed profoundly by the experiences and strategies expressed by the respondents in this study. The model is presented in tabular form and thematically aligns the dominant coping strategies for the elicited challenges shown in this chapter.

Figure 11 model has indicated that the coping behaviour and strategies that rural distance education students use as they face the learning challenges. Rural distance students cope by tolerating the stress that the challenges bring to the students and preventing psychological distress. In this case stress tolerance and preventing psychological distress is the ability to be relaxed and composed when faced with challenges when learning as a student from rural areas at UNZA, so that one has a positive stress. Having positive stress is being able to stay calm without getting carried away by strong emotions of helplessness and hopelessness (Guest, 2016).

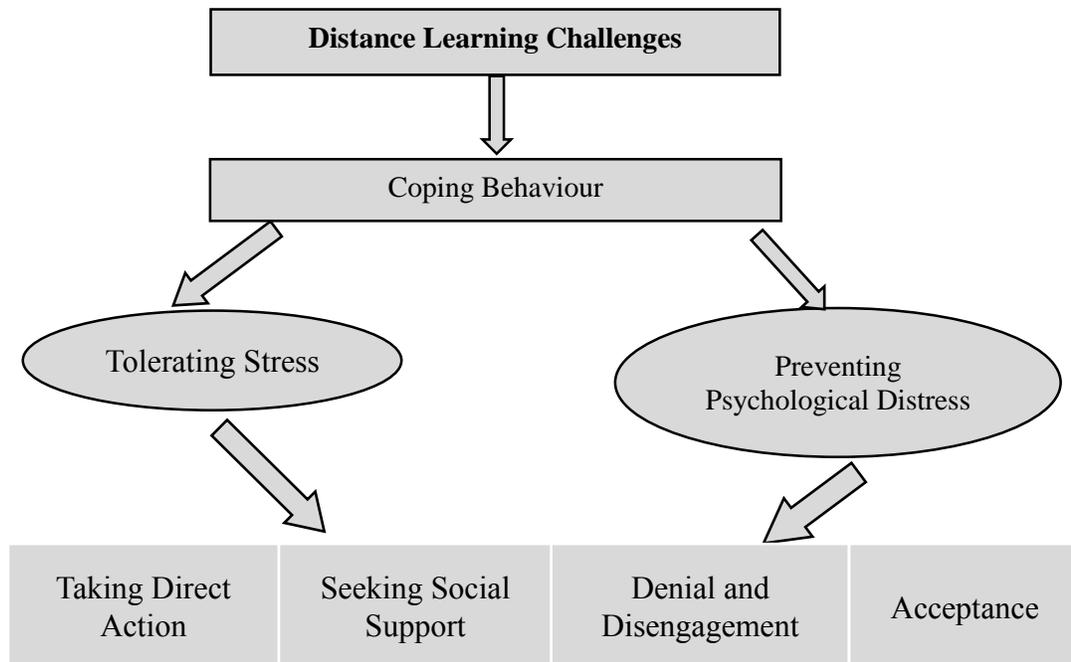


Figure 11: Model on coping strategies to Challenges faced by ODL students from rural areas of Zambia.

The proactive approaches to preventing psychological distress are an establishment of employee support programmes, training managers to recognise signs of distress, putting the right people in the right departments, offering the right learning materials for all the distance learners and creating a forum where rural distance learners can always go to consult and talk about their challenges (Guest 2016).

Having positive stress on the part of rural distance learners would make the students cope with the challenges they face by taking direct action, seeking social support, using denial and disengagement mechanisms and accepting the challenges while still achieving their learning objectives.

Table 6 is showing the summary of categories of challenges that students from the rural areas at UNZA faced as they were learning. These are; situational challenges, dispositional challenges, institutional challenges and epistemological challenges. The coping strategies have also been stated below each category of the challenges in italics.

Table 5: Summary of Categories of Challenges and Coping Strategies*

Situational Challenges	Dispositional Challenges	Institutional Challenges	Epistemological Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial strain on families: <i>*Seeking social support and, Denial and Disengagement.</i> Support from partners especially from male to female: <i>*Seeking social support.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Isolation and not belonging to an academic community: <i>*Denial and disengagement, and Acceptance.</i> Support services that go beyond the production of study materials and support the learning process: <i>*Seeking social support.</i> Lack of proper guidance and advice. Availability and timeliness of appropriate learning support: <i>*Taking direct action, Seeking social support, Denial and disengagement and Acceptance.</i> Psychological needs that distract learners from learning: <i>*Denial and disengagement and Acceptance.</i> Geographical distance that inhibits learners from learning, taking direct action: <i>*Seeking social support, and Acceptance.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study materials not being available to all students: <i>*Taking direct action, seeking social support, Acceptance.</i> Ease of contact being made difficult by lecturers and support staff during residential school: <i>*Seeking social support, Denial and disengagement, and Acceptance.</i> Approachability of academic staff with some members of academic not accommodating students during residential school: <i>*Acceptance, Taking direct action, Social support.</i> Accommodation issues; students with babies not liking to be accommodated within campus and Cooperation between the support staff and distance students: <i>*Seeking social support.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of knowledge on information, technology, and communication: <i>*Taking direct action, seeking social support.</i> Inability to comprehend and deal with assessment requirements that inhibit accessibility to learning centres: <i>*Taking direct action, seeking social support.</i>

Table 6: A Summary of Challenges faced by ODL Students and Proposed Recommendations for Ameliorating the Challenge

Challenge	Proposed Recommendations for Dealing
Lack of meaningful orientation of study materials to new students.	Careful consideration be given to the special needs of students undertaking distance education. Content can be the same for all learners but the examples, activities and experiences should be included according to the students' needs.
Lack of Multi-media Instructions: Most distance students from rural areas in Zambia faced more challenges when sending printed materials to their lecturers.	Multi-sensory instructions need to be used to cater for all students including those from rural areas.
Insecurities about Learning: Personal and school-related issues such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from their employers and close family members.	Planning and cooperation on the part of all those associated with distance learners should be properly done.
Lack of Feedback or Contact with the Lecturers: This caused challenges in self-evaluation. A vital link of communication was not maintained by the distance between Lecturers and distance students from rural areas.	Enhance the technological methods of communication such as email, telecommunication and postal mail and integrate these in the delivery. The link should be restored through overt institutional efforts so that teaching-learning transactions reintegrated.
Lack of Support and Services: Less or no provisions of student services such as library services, financial aid and internet connectivity.	Provision of tutors, academic planners and technical assistance for distance learning programmes.
Lack of Student Training: Most adult distance learners are not well versed in the use of new technology like computers and the internet. This excludes most distance learners who lack modern writing skills.	Distance learning students who are undertaking distance courses that require knowledge of computers must first of all be taught, at a minimum, the fundamentals of operating the systems of choice of the distance-taught course.
Lack of Social Interaction and Geographical Isolation and not belonging to an Academic Community: The distance aspect of distance learning takes away much of the social interactions, especially for those from the rural areas. Distance learning students have a challenge of being unable to interact with other students.	Involvement of tutors that would communicate with students electronically on a regular basis as students believe that having a good tutor is the best thing to happen for better grades. There must be personal involvement between the student and the institution. Forming study groups of 3 to 4 students from the same area.
Accommodation challenges: Students with babies are not accommodated.	Renting substandard bed spaces from nearby compounds.

Source: *Field Work; 2016*

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGSS

5.1 Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate, from a phenomenological perspective, the coping strategies that are formulated to navigate the challenges rural distance students faced as they studied at the University of Zambia under the ODL mode of study. This study also was designed to make a proposition towards the development of an ODL model or framework at UNZA. This study also provided rich insight into patterns in the experiences and coping strategies of ODL students at UNZA, including what challenges and coping strategies may inform the development of an ODL model at UNZA.

This Chapter discusses the key findings of the study. It starts by stating the main findings of the study. It further discusses the challenges distance students faced and the coping strategies they used as they studied at UNZA. The findings of the study are then situated into specific areas which are related to distance learning. A contextual analysis is presented by referring to previous research. The implications of the study findings are then discussed.

5.2 The Key Findings of the Study

Previous research on this topic has primarily focused on the general challenges faced by ODL students in universities and colleges. The present study findings support the proposition there are variations in how rural ODL students at UNZA experience during

their studies under that mode; in the challenges, they face; and in the novel strategies they employ to way lay such challenges. This suggests that it is possible to synthesize the individual lived experiences and to attempt to formulate a model for the running of the ODL mode at UNZA.

The key findings of this study presented in the previous chapter, can be synthesized into four broad categorizations:

- a) Regarding the challenges distance students experienced were that; they had limited time to study, they experienced the feelings of isolation and that they received less assistance from the Lecturers, Tutors and some Support Staff throughout their learning period.
- b) The key findings of this study regarding coping strategies to the challenges rural students faced at UNZA were; taking direct action, seeking social support, denial and disengagement and acceptance.
- c) This study informs the ODL system at UNZA that there is need for UNZA itself to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said by the distance learners themselves, as indicated from what the rural distance learners have said during the oral interviews. This will make the ODL system at UNZA to be able to provide and choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular learning contexts.
- d) Findings of this study suggest that the extent of ODL learning support influenced Students' overall perception of their distance learning experience. Rural students experienced difficulties in movements to meet their peers and to reach to the

distance education centres. The extreme distances that exist between the rural areas, where the students lived, and the urban located regional centres function as an expression and perpetuation of the rural–urban divide. Further, this made the rural students to incur high economic costs in pursuing their education, many of which were unexpected. This experience hindered the rural distance students to get the relevant support service, at the right time, as these play a vital role in the education of rural students.

In the rest of the chapter, the researcher discussed these findings by placing them into context, and connecting them to the literatures on the subject.

5.3 Challenges Experienced by UNZA Distance Students from Rural Areas in Zambia

Despite the expanding growth of Open Distance Learning and its benefits, students who enrol with Open Distance Learning have been shown to face many challenges related to individual, institutional and instructional (Bhalalusesa, 1998a, b; 1999a, b; Cosmas and Mbwette, 2009; Mbukusa, 2009; Mushi, 2001). Cross (1981) identified like this study, four distinct categories of challenges facing Distance Learning students, situational, institutional, epistemological and dispositional. According to Cross, situational challenges include job and home responsibilities that reduce time for study. Institutional-related challenges include poor logistics system or a lack of appropriate advising (Kruger and Casey, 2000). Dispositional challenges are related to learners' own attitudes and feelings. Berge *et al.* (2002) classified challenges to distance learners as situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and/or cultural-related challenges. Zirnkle (2001) identified specific challenges

facing distance learners as programme costs, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns and poor technical assistance. Other challenges documented by Zirnkle are inadequate feedback and poor teacher contact, alienation and isolation, and poor student support services.

Like this study, Garland (2007) identified some situational challenges for students to be persistence in distance learning. These included inadequate learning support to facilitate distance learning and lack of enough time to get assistance from Lecturers and Tutors. For example, students indicated that the course took more time than anticipated because they failed to judge the demands of work, home and school. Kember (1989) argued that poor time management led to challenges such as learners' inability to integrate the demands of off campus study with family, work and social commitments. Ukpo (2005) found that teachers who enrolled in the Open Distance Learning faced challenges related to failure of trainees to receive training materials on time, students' engagement in other economic activities to supplement their family incomes, and poor learner support services especially where study centres are under-resourced and overstretched. Kamau (2007) found that, without an effective learners' support service system that provides on-site face-to-face, timely feedback on student performance and access to library services, student achievement will be undermined and drop-out rates and procrastination will increase.

The rural ODL students at UNZA also revealed new challenges in information dissemination, especially in developing countries. Most adult students noted lack of

technical competences regarding ICT. This finding is similar to studies by Mossberger *et al.* (2003), who observe that technical competence needed in order to have effective access to contemporary ICT is a challenge to distance learners. Technical competence refers to the skills needed to operate the hardware and software of ICT, including the skills of using networked systems to access and share information (Warschauner, 2003). Lack of these skills is a critical challenge as learners may fail to use the various physical, digital and human resources involved in ICT like the use of the Astria learning platform which was being used at the IDE.

The challenges highlighted provide a comprehensive picture of the circumstances that the students face, and the need for educational institutions in general, and UNZA in particular, to organise and structure good teaching and learning practices for them. For example, the emphasis on the use of interactive media is critical for dialogic purposes. In addition, the art of designing courses to suit the requirements of distance students, and to ensure the adequate availability of support services are among the key roles of distance educators, and are central to the enhancement of effective learning strategies. These considerations informed the model that the researcher proposed at the end of the previous chapter.

5.4 Coping Strategies to Challenges faced by Rural ODL Students in Zambia

While the participants in this study employed several coping strategies, including taking the bull by its horns; invoking social capital; denial and engagement; and outright acceptance of unpleasant situations, there appear to have been very distinctive background factors for the selected coping mechanism. For instance, those who took

direct action and sought social support seemed to be compelled to do so because of prolonged exposure to the problem that provided stimuli to that particular response, as well as the desire for active confrontation and resolution of problems. Invoking social capital also appears to have been directly influenced by the urgency of the problem as well as the extent to which the student needed help. Denial and disengagement and acceptance were similarly influenced by internal/external control of problems and internalised/externalised strategies for the control of emotions.

There were marked differences in terms of coping behaviours among the participants. There were stable or repetitive coping "styles" or "dispositions" that learners brought with them to the stressful situations that they encountered. Looking at the results, the distance one would infer that learners do not approach each coping context anew, but rather bring to bear a preferred set of coping strategies that remains relatively fixed across time and circumstances. There were also moments when coping was a dynamic process that shifted in nature from stage to stage of a stressful transaction. Specifically, it might be argued that preferred ways of coping with stress derive from more traditional personality dimensions. That is, perhaps certain personality characteristics predispose people to cope in certain ways when they confront adversity.

In spite of the challenges showcased in this phenomenological study, and the coping strategies generated by them, research on student-centred learning suggests that student engagement is highly indicative of student success. The importance of interaction between the lecturer, a student and peer has been emphasised in earlier work (Conrad

and Donaldson, 2004; Angelino *et al.*, 2007). In particular, the involvement, interaction, or engagement of students in online subjects is crucial if it is to be anything more than just a content-driven subject (Chen *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, the importance of the facilitation of a distance learning community where a group works together via technology to construct knowledge and achieve learning outcomes cannot be underestimated. It is advocated that a central focus when delivering online subjects should be the development of activities that result in engagement with the content, lecturer, and other students (Palloff and Pratt, 2007; Conrad and Donaldson, 2012: 6).

More recently, Marume,(2016) argue that not only does the degree of student engagement in the online environment have a significant effect on a student's learning experience, it is the facilitator's responsibility to sustain and drive this relationship. This can be achieved by designing interactive activities that promote students' engagement and collaboration with their peers as well as the instructor.

In recognising the importance of student engagement and interaction on improving student satisfaction and attrition rates, how can we formulate a way forward in connecting learners online? In addition, we can do it quickly and painlessly while attaining the pedagogical standards expected of us. For those educators attracted to the notion of enhancing student engagement in the online milieu, the researcher proposes three simple steps to developing and maintaining a learning community and these are:

- a) Establishing the community;
- b) Scaffolding students into activities;
- c) Maintaining communication throughout and during the sessions of learning

5.5 Building Theory through the Findings of this study

Building theory is a critical part of a doctoral dissertation. In this section, the researcher attempted to lay the theoretical grounds from which theory on ODL can be built. To achieve this goal, it is imperative that the gaps in the body of knowledge regarding this subject matter are illuminated. The review of the literature revealed some prior empirical studies that could be used to contextualise the facts. For instance, the exhibited challenges of distance learners are not only peculiar to those who are enrolled at the University of Zambia, but could help build understanding about ODL in similar contexts. Research elsewhere has shown that there are common and peculiar challenges and varying coping strategies as has been shown in the previous chapter.

5.5.1. Theorizing Age as a Factor in ODL

One of the things that emerged from this phenomenological study was that age appeared to be a critical factor in terms of the challenges that were experienced. Older learners self-reported a lesser time commitment for distance learning participation, including the time spent on posting and message reading, and the frequency of accessing course materials and on the Astria website. A possibility is that older learners, in comparison with their younger peers, may have spent less time or effort addressing challenges.

Another possible interpretation is that older learners may not be as efficient as their younger peers in performing online learning interactions. It may have taken older learners more time to perform the similar tasks. This possibility is in line with the report of cognitive aging research on the decline in efficiency of filtering of irrelevant

information and attention control in normal aging (Fabiani *et al.*, 2006 & Jones *et al.* (2004), after a longitudinal interaction analysis of distance learners new groups, reported that online users adopted different strategies for coping with “information overload” in an online interaction space. These strategies have an observable impact on users’ dynamic performance of online interactions, such as the messages chosen to contribute, the responses generated, and the degree of participation. Thus, in the light of the findings of the present study and the synthesis of the literature, one theoretical speculation that can be advanced is that the strategies used by older learners to cope with the information overload may not be as efficient as those used by younger ones. Below are the specific areas related to open distance learning.

5.5.2 Support Services Available for ODL Students: Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have highlighted a critical concern by the study participants about the dearth of learner support extended by UNZA to them. There is no single way of defining support services; however, a common goal attributed to them is to sustain and assist students to learn within their geographical locations (Dzakiria, 2008; Sharma, 2011; Krishnan, 2012). In fact, support services are often aligned with guidance, advice and counselling (Simpson, 2000; 2012). However, this to some extent distorts and narrows the meaning of what support services constitute in students’ learning. It is, therefore, important to clarify what ‘support services’ mean for the purposes of this study. Support services can be defined as constituting all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. The separation of course production and distribution from support services is an important move, because quite often institutions fail to strike a balance between these

two activities (Simpson, 2000, 2002), over-emphasising issues of course design, development and materials distribution.

Melofi (1998) similarly defines learner support as being organised, purposeful activities that influence the smooth facilitation of teaching and learning in distance education, while Krishnan (2012: 460) viewed support services as being inclusive of facilities and activities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more interesting to the learner.

The findings of my study reveal that support systems should go further than just the production of materials and teaching. Instead aspects of pre-arranged activities and facilities that assist effective teaching and learning should be incorporated, while ensuring that learning is simplified and made more interesting for students. The researcher thinks this is significant, especially if we take into consideration the multiple roles that students have, at home, at work and of course in their studies, and how far away they are from their institutions. However, other factors such as students' characteristics, their needs, geographical locations, and the use of technology also need to be considered in order to effectively facilitate learning at a distance.

Thus, learner support services, include all the resources that enable students to learn effectively. Both human and non-human resources are important in enhancing learning at a distance. This implicates aspects of human, physical and material resources which

are central to any educational system. Indeed, adequate access to relevant resources may be a decisive factor in improving the learning experiences of distance students.

The support services unearthed in this study, as per student responses can be synthesised into two broad theoretical generalizations, namely, academic and non-academic support. These forms of support are provided through a range of media and by a range of people, and they are also accessible to individuals and groups (Mills and Tait, 1996; Rumble, 2000; Mills, 2003). It is also understood that academic and non-academic support services from an institutional context may be incomplete without support from employers, friends, peers and family (Lockwood, 1995; Asbee and Simpson, 1998; Simpson, 2000, 2012).

By nature, distance learning requires that the institutions responsible should assist the students in one way or the other, to enable them cope with the challenges that come with the distance learning process. This research established several support services provided by the University of Zambia through the Institute of Distance Education and its provincial centres; and the Ministry of Education from which most of the students who study by distance come from. More importantly, the study reveals that there exists the possibility of formulating theory in the arena of learner support under ODL, as the researcher attempted at the close of chapter four.

Since lack of support and services to distance students constitutes a major challenge, a genuine need exists for the formulation of support in the form of interactive activities and services that are meant to support and facilitate the learning process. As already

indicated, support is essential because of the separation between the learner and the educational provider. Broadly, such services could include teaching, tutoring, counselling, advising and administrative services. They could also take the form of social infrastructure and technology. The fact that the bulk of distance education students are workers from the various sectors and regions of the country, which are in different levels of development in terms of infrastructure, makes the challenges and solutions varied. Institutional support in this context should encompass counselling services, study centre locations and learning facilities available at those centres. They could also include the provision of study materials in form of modules, organising of the residential school programmes, creation of a website for communication and organising the multi-media technology for distance learning.

Based on the foregoing, the researcher proposes that the following student support services and activities should be integrated into the ODL mode at UNZA:

- a) Student enquiry about the programme.
- b) Registration, admission and pre-study advisory services.
- c) Assessment of prior learning and credit transfer.
- d) Counselling and guidance.
- e) In-text support in the study material.
- f) Student-centred feedback on assignments.
- g) Face-to-face facilitation of learning.
- h) Practical and laboratory work.
- i) Work-based placements and internships.

- j) Study and examination centers.
- k) Library services.
- l) Record-keeping, information management, and other administrative systems.
- m) Materials that support the development of study skills programme planning or career development.

Study modules should help students to have the background information on the courses they are studying. These modules should be prepared with a distant learner in mind, so that they are as interactive as possible. They should give the students the opportunity to understand the various courses they are undertaking, and most of the content and instructional works for the student must be included.

Table 7: Support Services Provided to Learners

Institution	Support service provided
Institute of Distance Education (UNZA)	Development of study materials (modules) Organising residential school programmes Setting up website for communication Organising multi-media technology
UNZA provincial centres	Organising examination centres for distance students Receiving of assignments on behalf of students Linking the University to students by disseminating reported information
Provincial/district education offices	Permission to go for residential school Opening resource centres for study materials Teaching practice environment for student teachers

5.5.3 Cost Implications

The ODL programme under study was reportedly offered at a cost to the students. However, several of the participants in this study pursuing ODL lacked adequate money

to cover the costs. For example, some of the participants were in employment and but married to non-working spouses, who were unable to support them financially.

Some of these participants wanted to upgrade their educational levels through the ODL mode. But they reported insurmountable challenges especially due to family obligations. They said they were the family bread-winners. Their salaries were not enough to meet all their needs; hence it was not uncommon to abandon their studies midway. The level of one's salary, access to loan and the desire to improve one's self for a better future may determine the urge to go for a loan to pursue further education (Barney, 2008). Unfortunately, most participants in this study were not able to access loans to upgrade themselves. The implication of this is that the ODL institutions such as UNZA, should consider long term debt management strategies to enable citizens who wish to upgrade themselves to pay their debt to the institution in a sustainable long term arrangement.

5.5.4. On Communication: the bedrock of the ODL Mode

This study has revealed serious challenges with communication between the student and the system. Yet communication is an important aspect in distance education. It is the only way by which students and lecturers can interact. From the findings, it was clear that communication remained a challenge in rural areas where Post offices were only found in town centres. The Post offices were the main mode by which students could send and receive communication to and from their lecturers and University management, accordingly.

According to Ohene *et al.* (2014), it is worth noting that due to the distance between the tutor and the learner, there is need to keep the line of communication and interaction

always open. More importantly, learners' assignment feedback, other learning needs and motivation, all have to be addressed at this Unit. With learners being geographically distant from tutors, they are most times saddled with studying problems and need encouragement to meet their learning needs.

Keegan (1986) and Tinto (1975) believe that the lack of feedback on performance or contact with teachers also constitutes a barrier to distance students. Keegan (1986) argues that the link between the teacher and the student constitutes a vital link in teaching-learning transaction, and that the link, which is broken by distance, must be restored one way or the other. This particular barrier creates the problem of evaluation for the student. It is suggested that the barrier created by the absence of a teacher could be mitigated through technological methods. However, Braimoh and Osiki (2008) raise concern about this approach of restoring the teaching learning transaction in Africa because of the low development of the ICT sector. It is further argued that the use of ICT in distance education poses a lot of challenges due to uneven and unequal access to computers and the internet, and most importantly the fact that power supply is unstable.

Institutional barriers are those barriers caused by organisational set-up. These barriers may be both physical and non-physical. The physical barriers may include such things as nearness to classroom, road network and other academic resources such as the library. Stringent admission requirements, high tuition fees and the mode of paying these fees constitute some of the non-physical barriers. Other barriers, which come under this

category, are non-interesting courses, inadequate textbooks, poor library facilities and poor organisation of classes and examinations (Cross, 1981). Some respondents actually stated that distance education provided enough time for them to raise the necessary resources for their education. This was agreed by Galusha (2012), that most distance students from rural areas had difficulties in raising their school fees generally.

Communication is generally the most vital means of enhancing smooth delivery of distance education. The improvement of communication using e-mail, telecommunication and postal services would go a long way in helping the students from rural areas in Zambia. For communication to be complete, feedback is essential or very important for the distance education students, because feedback is central to the whole learning process. The concept of feedback is often linked to assessment. This is usually given after the assessment has taken place and is summative in nature. However, feedback is not necessarily related to assessment. Interaction and communication with students within the learning process prior to assessment (often referred to as teaching), and the completion of activities that require students to engage with, and synthesise the teaching material (often referred to as learning). Advances in science and communication technology offer robust opportunities for ODL institutions such as UNZA to deal with communication bottle necks in an increasingly creative and dynamic way. This study thus proposes that all avenues of communication be fully harnessed to shorten the distance between the ODL students and the institution.

5.5.5. Building theory on Coping Strategies ODL Students

From the findings of this study, distance students from rural areas faced many challenges in pursuit of their education, which were more serious compared to their counterparts who had come from urban areas. Highlighting these challenges has helped to expand understanding and to build conceptual links to other theoretical and empirical studies that are studying the ODL mode.

The use of information, communication and technology (ICT) such as cell phones, was one way by which some students managed to deal with the challenge of communication and access to study materials. The use of ICT made distance education easy. The challenge, however, was that in most rural areas, network was not readily available, forcing students to move some distances from their localities to access the mobile services such as internet to download materials and communicate with lecturers when necessary. This had helped them greatly although it also posed another challenge of financial resources for such a movement to be made.

Most rural students relied much on the postal services. Before the use of ICT became popular, distance education made use of postal services to send and receive information between students and lecturers. The challenges with the postal services, however, were delays which led to some students failing to meet deadlines on their assignments and examinations. Those who stayed closer to colleagues who had graduated, could consult them on issues they needed assistance. As earlier mentioned, distance education relies much more on consultation either electronically or by way of verbal consultations.

The four types of coping strategies point to a real problem in distance learning. While at a general level, coping strategies are those mechanisms that people use to avoid being harmed by stressors (Pearl in and Schooler, 1978), the researcher did not find coping research that has focused on the coping strategies for individuals. Although individual coping is an appropriate concept in the study of people's reactions to stressors linked to distance learning, the work family interface, for instance is more complex, reflecting all the demands, resources, and behaviours in the family unit (Middleton, 2004). This is especially true in the case of single-earner men and women, who often face the challenges of balancing the jobs with family demands as well as distance learning.

Although there is great variation in coping strategies, four coping strategies are worth noting; through taking direct action, seeking social support, denial and disengagement, and acceptance, broad categories can be identified. Taking direct action coping for instance, is aimed at acting or altering cognitions to affect the nature of the person-environment transaction. In the context of family coping, taking direct action strategies might include restructuring family roles to accommodate distance learning demands (Elman and Gilbert, 1984; Skinner and McCubbin, 1987; Wiersma, 1994), restructuring work roles to accommodate distance learning demands (Elman and Gilbert, 1984; Hall, 1972; Middleton, 2004; Skinner and McCubbin, 1987), and/or hiring outside help (Havlovic and Keenan, 1991; Middleton, 2004; Wiersma, 1994). Acceptance and denial and disengagement, however, are aimed at reactively regulating one's emotions in the face of a stressful situation (Kahn *et al.*, 1964; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Middleton,

2004). Such coping strategies among learners have been noted to include avoiding the problem or engaging in escapism (Havlovic and Keenan, 1991), thinking positively (Havlovic and Keenan, 1991), and managing psychological strains by working less hard and sacrificing academic well-being (Hall, 1972; Skinner and McCubbin, 1987).

5.5.6. Using Technology to Reduce Distance in ODL

Provision of necessary study materials is the corner-stone of any form of education. Per Kumar (2012), if distance learning institutions are serious about providing equity of educational opportunity to all, then careful consideration must be given to the special needs of students undertaking distance education for the first time. Of importance is the design of study materials for distance students. Thus, ODL institutions should strive to attain similar learning experiences for all students. As such, the content for all learners should be same, in terms of activities and experiences to be included in learning materials per their needs, learning experiences and expectations.

Distance students normally face the challenge of not interacting with the Lecturers or Tutors directly. As such, alternative modes of interaction, such as the use of video records of lectures, can provide distance students with an opportunity to interact with their Lecturers. This move was started by the IDE in collaboration with MUVI Television and had progressed very well. Some distance students at UNZA said that they had benefited a great deal from the lessons which were broadcast in that way. But this initiative was also stopped and the reasons for this have not been documented.

The geographical distance aspect of distance learning takes away much of the social interactions that would be present in traditional learning environments (Kamau, 2007). Due to distance, students face practical problems of contacting academic and administrative staff, obtaining study materials and borrowing library books. Furthermore, distance students suffer from the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other students and are often denied the perception that they belong to a scholarly community. This may lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities (Wood, 1996). This problem must be moderated by institutions providing a sense of personal involvement between the student and the institution. One way to solve this problem is through the use of tutors that communicate with students electronically, by phone or personally at personal contact programmes (Bullen, 2003). Students feel that having a good rapport with tutors is very important during the course, as this can accelerate their progression.

In some places where there is poor telephone network, this poses a challenge for students to be contacted by phone. In most cases, distance students are parents with responsibilities of sponsoring their children and dependants. Personal problems for students on distance education programmes require that institutions offering distance education courses are flexible, not flexible in giving those free passes, but flexible in providing flexible learning opportunities (Saint, 1999). Telephone and other communication infrastructure outside of major cities remain inadequate. Connectivity beyond major capital cities poses a potential problem in creating a national distance education strategy. Therefore students can suggest the use of audio compact discs.

Audio recorded lectures can sort out this problem and enhance effective learning. For example, audio recorded lectures can be written on compact discs and distributed to students through the Post Office. This can cut short the hustles of distance covered by students. Sometimes even during residential school, there could be need to ask all students to attend all contact sessions, and the institution could just package some of the lectures on audio compact discs. The students can then use various gadgets to listen to the lectures at their own time. This can assist the mothers taking care of babies in school as they cannot remain behind.

5.5.7. Theorizing the Psychological Needs of ODL Students

The coping strategies of the participants in this study point to critical psychological dimensions of the ODL mode of study. It is evident that the students confront situations that implicate their psychological wellbeing. Inevitably, this calls attention to the need for counselling. Counselling consists of one of the major non-academic support facility for distance education students, where advising, exploring problems and offering directions take place (Anyona, 2009). Therefore, students learning through distance can suggest calling for the establishment of counselling centres in all the provincial study centres. Furthermore, students can propose on the engagement, on the issue of engaging professional counsellors to attend to the needs of the students. If this is done, psychological needs of students suffering in various issues can be dealt with. Eventually, the performance can be good and this would result in the nation being developed. This could be so because the country will have the qualified people in offices doing the right things.

5.5.8. Aligning Course Offerings to identified Student Needs

Assessment is the most important aspect of the learning process. UNESCO (2004) explains that for adult students with fears regarding their abilities to succeed, assessment tasks become major 'hot spots' in their progress. As such, something can be done to get rid of the fears. One thing students can do is to suggest to the institutions to introduce mandatory courses for students to equip them with research and writing skills before they tackle any other course work or assignments. This is what can for example; assist students to know what American Psychological Association (APA) style of writing is. This can save the female students from falling prey to those people who write assignments for them (Lipinski, 2005). Such a move can bring down cheating and copying amongst students. Introduction of research and writing skills amongst students can make them become confident and develop commitment to course work.

If the University of Zambia is to provide equity of education opportunity to all the learners, then careful consideration must be given to the specific needs of students undertaking distance education for the first time. Of importance, is the design of study materials for distance students. Similar learning experiences must always be attained for all the learners. Additionally, content for all learners should be equivalent to all other modes of education as Simonson (2011) has indicated, as he explains the main expectations in his equivalent theory.

However, most rural distance students at UNZA indicated that they depended on photocopying most of the much-needed materials for their school work. This was done

mostly during their residential school at UNZA. This had helped the distance students from rural areas in Zambia to cope with the challenge of lack of appropriate learning materials, regardless of the geographical standing.

5.5.9. Creating Synergy between Feedback from Lecturers as well as Learners

The first and the foremost criticism of the system of distance education is that it lacks the presence of a teacher (Keegan, 1996). According to Keegan (*ibid*), education is a Tripler Process-teacher, students and curriculum, out of which the important pole, that is, the teacher is almost missing or behind the scene. Therefore the solution to such a problem was to provide feedback on the part of distance educators and authority regarding admission, and thus, assignments, examinations and projects should be provided to the distance learners from time to time.

According to Mahai (2014), students often used social capital in the form of networking, friendship and interaction in order to exchange knowledge, and in the sharing of social and learning resources. This interaction took place among students, tutors and available graduates in the rural fields. Such interactions relieved students' feelings of isolation, frustration and distance from their tutors and institutions.

Students also used their economic capital (money) to access physical and human support systems that were inadequate or unavailable in their fields. The ability to access and use such capital enabled students to position themselves in the field, and to accommodate the practices they required.

The use of cultural capital was also apparent among students. One would say students invested or exchanged all forms of capital that were available in the fields in order to look for the required cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is available in three forms, embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Knowing how to access and apply these forms of capital influence their possession. For instance, the findings in this study have shown that students shared their embodied capital (knowledge) with others in group discussions. They also accessed information from their private tutors and graduates in the rural field. This contributed to the broadening of their knowledge base, and helped them to develop confidence in understanding the course materials.

Moreover, students applied objectified capital in the form of laptops, computers, library resources, personal books, printed study materials, and modems to search for knowledge. Students require exposure to material searching skills, reading, and understanding. Students also look forward to obtaining institutionalised capital towards the end of their studies in the form of a degree certificate.

The forms of capital that students use and access in fields seem to operate in a circular form; at first one form is accessed, and then its application leads to the accessing of another. Indeed, the acquisitions of skills that can gain access to these forms of capital are essential components if students are to achieve successful outcomes.

The coping strategies adopted by these students were largely successful in enabling students to learn within their localities. However, the strategies were unevenly applied among students, limiting the extent to which these students were able to develop the relevant competencies, knowledge, and skills suitable to fulfil their socioeconomic goals.

Research indicates that good learning is achieved when students are effectively supported in their learning (Lentell, 1994). If this is really the case, it is necessary to properly integrate support services such as academic and non-academic provision within the teaching and learning practices of the IDE's academic field. This would help to improve learning experiences of rural students in Zambia.

This study has established that institutional policy and the role of management are very important in the establishment of an effective learning support, to enhance learning by distance. The learning support needs to be as supportive and non-judgmental as possible. Additionally, all teaching staff and the support staff need constant training in all issues regarding education. This is true because the University, through IDE is constantly bringing in new staff to help with the running of the programmes. In order to support the distance learners from rural areas, this study has revealed that it is imperative that distance teachers must not only acquire teaching skills to facilitate learning, but also must have skills and experience to facilitate the learning process through the building and designing a learning support system that encourages learning.

There were numerous problems with distance learning, which needed to be interpreted as challenges with the necessary exploration of interventions in order for the learning support to be addressed. In order to support the distance learners from rural areas, this study has revealed that it is imperative that distance teachers must not only acquire learning skills to facilitate learning, but also must have skills and experience to facilitate the learning process through building and designing a learning support that encourages learning.

It is interesting that the distance learners expressed dissatisfaction with their learning experiences at UNZA. However, based on the emerging themes of this study, it can be concluded that distance lecturers at UNZA have not provided adequate learning support to facilitate distance learning. Although numerous efforts have been made, the lecturers needed to adopt a wide variety of initiatives in order to assist distance students from rural areas appropriately. Distance teachers very often become catalysts, and as such are very crucial in enabling learners to liberate their understanding. They have a special role in providing learning support.

Based on the findings, the researcher could conclude that there are three main issues that practitioners of distance learning pedagogy need to contend with when they work in a distance education setting. Firstly, there is need to decontextualize the conception of distance learning pedagogy to include the virtual classroom. As noted in the research discussed in this study, gender, race, and class inequalities are reproduced in many

distance learning environments. Educators need to be aware of and monitor this trend constantly.

Secondly, distance learning research and pedagogical practices should provide necessary and much needed strategies and frameworks to ensure that policies and practices take into consideration the special needs of students across vast ethnic, cultural, class, and educational backgrounds. Of course, the support and cooperation of university administrators is a crucial ingredient if changes are to be made for the long term.

Finally, although there had been much debate amongst distance learning practitioners and researchers regarding the increasing use, reliance, and visibility of computer-mediated learning, and although many of these arguments contribute valid insights, ultimately it is the men and women who use these technologies, who should have the final say in their implementation and use. Constant feedback from students will be a necessary element in the growth and creation of future feminist distance education research and development. Their feedback will ensure that this work stays firmly grounded within the everyday practices and experiences of both male and female learners. Clearly, as the creative and insightful literature has shown in this study, distance learning educators at the University of Zambia are up to the challenge, proving that the advancement of men and women in distance education is not just a question of pedagogy, it is one of equality and social justice.

As for the tools of our trade, it seems vitally important for us to stay on top of technological changes in distance learning because they expand our educational options and remind us not to become complacent with our pedagogical practices. Indeed, teaching women's studies within a distance education model offers insight and challenges about how we do, teach, and learn feminism. Finally, it is imperative that feminist scholars continue to research and debate distance education for the benefit of both the discipline and the broader study of distance education.

UNZA, like any other dual mode institution, aims to be an effective distance learning provider in Zambia. If UNZA, or for that matter, any ODL providers and institutions wish to promote distance learning, issues pertaining to learning support must be addressed effectively. Apparent neglect of learning support which clearly links the learning environment, physical and social aspects to student engagement and learning outcomes, inappropriate ways of measuring ODL, satisfaction and reassessment of the role of the distance teachers, not just as knowledge providers but learning support providers, need attention and revision. The task is to design and offer distance educational experience that encourages learning. ODL providers need to understand that their educational products and services are to service the learner and provide an encouraging educational experience to all, despite the geographical setting the students are found in. There must be consciously and actively, development and maintenance of approaches which enable learners to have their voices heard, as well as for distance teachers and educators. Further, UNZA itself should be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said. The learners should never be perceived

as the problem, but should be perceived and integrated as part of the solution. Such approach and attitude might benefit all stakeholders in DE in Zambia.

In designing the learning support while looking at some good strategies to challenges rural distance learners experience, this thesis wishes to encourage the DE providers to choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular learning contexts. It is important to note that the recommendations that this research proposes for UNZA, are certainly not the ideal solution to learning support concerns in distance learning, nor do they necessarily provide optimal advice pertaining to components within the learning support. They are however, made in an earnest effort to, firstly, sensitise distance teachers of the importance of their role in providing learning support in distance learning, and more importantly, to stimulate thought, dialogue, and future research in providing learning support to all DLs and in all programmes and courses.

To think seriously about the future, it is important to, “first find out what is happening now that has lasting importance” (Cornish, 2004: 80). Higher education is currently at cross-roads and technology is expanding at a pace difficult for institutions steeped in tradition and decades of focus on traditional classrooms in brick and mortar institutions to manage the pace.

As distance education, or open learning moves forward into the future, educators will need to recognise how to integrate technology, move away from the traditional lecture towards self-directed learning, and forecast how emerging technology and globalisation

will complement the educational experience and be integrated into the mission and vision statements of universities in Zambia. The future of distance education requires personalised services addressing the variety of needs of a diversified population of learners.

Instead of the initially devised low-overhead, high revenue programme, the future of distance education at the University of Zambia will require more fiscal resources as technology costs mount and students require more academic and social support. As Simonson *et al.* (2011: 57) caution, “Teaching must remain flexible and sensitive to learners’ needs”. A delicate balance between autonomy and personalised support must be reached if distance education wants to remain loyal to the marketing *mantra* of school on one’s terms but still deliver a quality education to learners.

While technology is a necessary component of distance education, a faculty still needs to appropriately teach and facilitate learning as shown in some studies on distance learning (Graham *et al.*, 2005; Schulte, 2010). Available distance education technology dictates the way courses are taught” (*ibid*, 2010: 9). Distance education courses rely on discussion boards and chat features to expand on the knowledge presented through course material and required textbooks. This cannot replace the value of an experienced and qualified professor to extend the material and help students apply this material to both professional and personal settings.

The study has revealed that the development of distance education is constrained by a variety of factors. These include; (a) type of available forms of support services for

distance students in the rural areas, (b) the gendered experiences, and (c) how distance students from the rural areas in Zambia cope with distance learning challenges. In general, the design of distance programmes at UNZA does not sufficiently provide for effective learning and support. One may ask a question: Have we been sensitive to needs of distance learners? The answer is that, not so much.

5.6 Limitations of a Phenomenological Study

This was a qualitative study and it has limitations inherent of qualitative designs. Like all research, this study has several notable limitations and these are presented below. The first limitation is that, gender-related differences in stress and coping in distance learning were not documented and this has led to a failure to outline when men and women tended to employ coping strategies and with greater absolute frequency. This is not surprising, as it was not part of the research questions.

The second is that while both men and women tend to have differing care-giving roles, with more of the roles which tend to be assigned to women and carry with them strains related to time demands, worry, and loss of social interaction (Worters, 1994), it would have been very beneficial to see how this role performance impacted learning outcomes.

The third limitation has to do with gendered coping behaviours. The study did not examine the gendered coping strategies. Previous research and not linked to distance learning has attempted to explore this aspect. In terms of the type of coping strategy that was issued, other research indicates that men are more likely to engage in problem-focused coping (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978; Ptacek, Smith, and Zanas, 1992), whereas women are more likely to employ emotion-focused

coping (Billings and Moos, 1981; Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Tamres *et al.*, 2002) and to seek social support (Thoits, 1991).

Such an inclusion could have illuminated interesting findings and particularly with arguments that gender differences in coping behaviours result from differences in the roles that men and women assume in society and in the number and kinds of stressful situations that men and women typically encounter, an argument referred to in quantitative literature as the situational hypothesis (Anderson and Leslie, 1991; Billings and Moos, 1981). However, further studies would be required to examine the aforementioned speculations. Future research and practice of distance learning should explore whether the information on coping and digesting processes and strategies differ among learners of different age groups engaged in distance learning. The other limitation is that the sample which was used in this study was rather limiting as it was based on non-probability sampling and as such, the findings are not generalizable to the whole distance students' community at the University of Zambia.

However, despite this small sample, these findings are revealing. Institutional support, instructional challenges and financial challenges for instance constitute the pillars of any distance education programme. Even though this study is quite an exploratory one, the observations and results are real and need to be considered with all seriousness, especially the institutional financial support.

5.7 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has shown a framework of challenges and coping behaviours that is based on the evidence adduced, and could be used in the redesigning of distance learning by incorporating flexibility, stimulating interaction, facilitating students' learning processes, and fostering an affective learning climate. The chapter has provided evidence supporting the assumption that even though students have different experiences, both positive and negative, while learning by distance, solutions to some of the negative experiences may be found in education as education is a mechanism for sustainable development in Zambia and anywhere else globally. Based on the emerging themes of this study, it can be concluded that Lecturers at the University of Zambia have not adequately provided learning support to facilitate distance learning. Although numerous efforts have been made, the Lecturers needed to adopt a wide variety of initiatives to assist distance students from rural areas appropriately.

The next chapter (Chapter 6) has indicated the major findings of the study in detail.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Overview

This Chapter indicates the major findings of the study. The Chapter also offers some recommendations directed to educational planners, the policy makers in the education system, the distance education providers and the would-be beneficiaries of distance education, including those from the rural and remote areas in Zambia.

6.2 Major Findings of the Study

The following are the major findings of this study;

- a) Students had limited time to get guidance from the Lecturers and the Tutors. Some students preferred to receive the tutorials and some lectures privately from their localities even when it was at a fee. This helped them to gather confidence within themselves and to prepare for any examination. The practice of using part-time tutorials or lectures would not be a new practice with distance students at the University of Zambia as it is widely used in many Distance Education universities such as UNISA.
- b) The study has revealed that although most of distance students, from the rural areas, at UNZA had experienced challenges while studying, it was the female distance students who experienced more challenges than the male distance students.
- c) Time management and multitasking for especially female students who were also breast feeding mothers, as they were learning by distance at UNZA, was a serious challenge which was very difficult to cope.

- d) Feelings of isolation due to geographical distance made students face practical challenges of contacting academic and administrative staff, not able to interact with other students. Students are often denied the perception that they belong to a scholarly community.
- e) Distance Students from rural areas, studying at the University of Zambia incurred higher economic costs in pursuing their education, many of which were quite unexpected to them. In principle, when compared to the conventional system of education, distance education is expected to be affordable. However, the costs incurred by rural distance students in this study were inflated by the distance between the rural areas and the urban setting of the regional centres at which it was necessary for students to attend. This meant that students had often to pay for accommodation and transport costs on the occasions they had to attend face-to-face sessions, tests, examinations or practical sessions.
- f) The government's inability to prioritise improvements to the rural technology infrastructure is holding back the rural potential that distance education could offer to Zambia. This is because the government does not fund the institute of distance education adequately to be able to provide the needed support services for all the students including those from the rural areas. Relevant support services play a very important role in the education of rural students. It should not be accepted that these services should be inaccessible and unavailable.
- g) This study also established that the much-appreciated private tutorials offered by some subject lectures were discontinued for unknown reasons. According to students in the study, these tutorials, although they posed another challenge as they

were very expensive for most of the students, they helped them largely and students benefited from such tutorials and lectures.

- h) Although quite several students indicated that they had used certain coping strategies to the challenges they experienced, as indicated in Chapter 5, some distance learning students did not manage to complete their education. Some of the women who had come with their babies for residential school, for example, could not continue to learn. This was because they could not afford to pay extra money for the rentals at nearby homes and to be able to feed together with their maids, which were turned into hostels for students, as the University of Zambia did not allow students with their babies to reside in the university hostels. This showed some discrimination tendency as by nature, only female students had come for residential school with the babies.

6.3 Conclusions

The present study examined the challenges of distance learning and coping strategies of distance learners from their perspective. This study reveals that there are several challenges faced by distance learning students. The challenges are categorised as situational challenges, dispositional challenges, institutional challenges, and epistemological challenges. While learners experience these challenges, they cope by employing the following behaviours; taking direct action, seeking social support, denial and disengagement and acceptance.

This study has offered research potential regarding learning support in distance education, especially for rural students in Zambia. The challenge however, is to ensure that learning support in DE is sufficiently addressed in striving towards a better distance

learning experience for all. Instead of the initially-devised low-overhead, high revenue programme, the future of distance education will require more fiscal resources as technology costs mount and students require more academic and social support.

The findings of this study contribute to the realisation of distance learning that it has challenges which can be addressed, only through the understanding of Learners' experiences. In this case, the Learners are the students who study at the University of Zambia by distance mode and are coming from the rural areas in Zambia. Studies such as this one would enable distance teaching programme designers to identify and understand the needs and characteristics of learners in specific social contexts. In order to address all the challenges experienced by the distance students, further research of this kind is required.

6.4 Recommendations

Given the research findings and the limitations, there are policy and research implications arising from this study. Therefore, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

6.4.1 Policy Practice and Research Recommendations

In the light of the findings of this phenomenological study, there is need to consider:

- a) Providing training in all aspects of open and distance learning through short courses especially in ICT to orient all the incoming students to new ideas regarding distance education. This can be regarded as a prerequisite to registration.

- b) Developing human and infrastructure resource capacity to plan, design, develop, manage, and evaluate open and distance learning systems and programmes as frequent as possible.
- c) Periodically evaluate open and distance learning programmes to improve their quality and ensure that they are responsive to emerging needs.
- d) Continually review the organisational arrangement and management of open and distance learning programmes in educational institutions to improve coordination, inter-institutional collaboration, operational efficiency and effectiveness.
- e) Developing quality assurance framework and strategies for open and distance learning at all levels of learning.
- f) Establishing and maintaining relationships and partnerships with relevant private and public non-educational institutions involved in open and distance learning, and information and communication technology development in order to sharpen the abilities to see things differently.
- g) Developing human resource and institutional capacity to develop and produce quality open and distance learning materials.
- h) Establishing a national consortium for joint course development and sharing of the national open and distance learning networks and facilitating organisation of open and distance learning programmes countrywide (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005).
- i) Researchers might investigate how universities can better support the faculty in acquiring the knowledge, skills, pedagogical strategies, and dispositions that are needed for building more effective, interactive learning communities.

- j) Government should develop a policy framework to facilitate national awareness orientation and therefore creating a reliable and equitable environmental avenue for the delivery of distance education to all parts of the country, including rural areas.
- k) Formulating national policy guidelines for Open Distance Learning is necessary, and providing basic facilities and amenities including electricity, which constitute adverse effects on the programme, should be addressed with urgency.

It is therefore recommended that for DE to make meaningful impact on access to education government should make adequate provision for power as some communities in Zambia and some sub-Saharan countries are yet to have electricity in their rural communities, and also some of the urban areas suffer epileptic power supply too.

- l) Qualified and experienced educational managers should be appointed and employed to manage Open and Distance Learning programmes. Workshops, seminars and conferences should be organised on regular basis to exchange and share ideas on how to improve the management of DE.
- m) The IDE can also facilitate future research on an exploration of multi-site and intergenerational instructional distance learning design strategies that could limit the challenges faced by distance learners.

6.4.2 At the Institution Level

The development of distance education, is constrained by a variety of factors. In general, the design of distance programmes at UNZA does not sufficiently provide for effective monitoring of students' progression, and general evaluation of all activities at the Institute. Another conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that institutional

policy and the role of management is crucial in the establishment of an effective learning Support to facilitate distance learning.

Therefore, I recommend, among other things, the following to be put in place at the IDE and at the UNZA itself:

- a) Provide training in all aspects of open and distance learning through short courses especially in ICT to orient all the incoming students to new ideas regarding distance education. This can be regarded as a prerequisite to registration.
- b) Develop human and infrastructure resource capacity to plan, design, develop, manage, and evaluate open and distance learning systems and programmes as frequent as possible at institution level.
- c) Periodically evaluate open and distance learning programmes to improve their quality and ensure that they are responsive to emerging needs.
- d) Continually review the organisational arrangement and management of open and distance learning programmes in educational institutions to improve coordination, inter-institutional collaboration, operational efficiency and effectiveness.
- e) Develop quality assurance framework and strategies for open and distance learning at all levels of learning.
- f) Establish and maintain relationships and partnerships with relevant private and public non-educational institutions involved in open and distance learning, and information and communication technology development to sharpen the abilities to see things differently.
- g) Develop human resource and institutional capacity to develop and produce quality open and distance learning materials.

- h) Establish a national consortium for joint course development and sharing of the national open and distance learning networks and facilitating organisation of open and distance teaching programmes countrywide (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005).
- i) Establish women's affairs desk for female distance students at the university level. This will help and direct some students who may be facing some challenges while on compass, which concerns the female students.
- j) Produce a manual which should contain all the course outlines, assessment criteria and all other guidelines for all the courses provided at the Institute.
- k) Establish Women's affairs desk for the female distance students. This will help most students for further directions as they learn.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I

Interview Guide: Students

Section A: Biographic Data

Gender: Male [] Female []

Age: []

Qualification/Designation.....

Course Studied.....

Years of Experience.....

Section B: Pedagogical questions related to distance education students' experiences from rural areas of Zambia

- 1) How long has your institution been in existence?
- 2) As a training institution, what type of training do you offer?
- 3) What levels of training do you offer?
- 4) Who are responsible for the designing of your curricular?
- 5) What are the entry points?
- 6) What is your target group?
- 7) Who are more in numbers; students from rural areas or from urban areas? In your opinion, why is it so?
- 8) What is the total number of students registered this academic year? How many females and males?
- 9) Do you have any students that fail to complete their programmes once they have started? If the answer is yes; how many females and how many males have failed to complete the programmes in the past academic year?
- 10) In your opinion, what do you think is the reason for the delay?

- 11) Around what pedagogical and instructional principles is distance education organised at UNZA?
- 12) Do you have a system of getting feedback from the students' performance in all programmes? How effective is the system? Any improvements needed?
- 13) Have you received any negative/positive comments about the kind of education being offered by the institution?
- 14) Any other suggestions, observations and comments from those being interviewed on the subject at hand?
- 15) As you may know my name already, let me know about yourself also.
- 16) Ok that is wonderful. Now let us begin our discussion.
 - a) From your own understanding and experiences please describe for me what distance learning means?
 - b) What would you say about your experiences of undergraduate distance education?
Probe for benefits if not mentioned spontaneously.
 - c) There are challenges you have been experiencing with regard to distance learning. Let us discuss your experiences. Probe for :
 - Personal challenges if not mentioned spontaneously.
 - Institutional challenges if not mentioned spontaneously.

Given the challenges, how have you been coping?

Appendix II

Demographic Survey of Distance Learning Students and former Graduates

SECTION A: Biographical Information

1. Age? { }
2. Gender?
 - a) Female { }
 - b) Male { }
3. Number of family members under your care{ }
4. School engaged in:
 - a) Education
 - b) Humanities
 - c) Nursing Sciences
5. What qualifications do you hold at the moment?
 - a) Grade 12 Certificate { }
 - b) College Certificate { }
 - c) College Diploma { }
 - d) UNZA Degree by distance { }

Appendix III

UNZAREC FORM 1b

THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA



DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSENT FORM

(Translated into vernacular if necessary)

TITLE OF RESEARCH: Copying Strategies to Challenges Experienced by Distance Education Students from Rural Areas of Zambia: A Case of University of Zambia.

REFERENCE TO PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:

1. Make sure that you read the Information Sheet carefully, or that it has been explained to you to your satisfaction.
2. Your permission is required if tape or audio recording is being used.
3. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, i.e. you do not have to participate if you do not wish to.
4. Refusal to take part will involve no penalty or loss of services to which you are otherwise entitled.
5. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of services and without giving a reason for your withdrawal.
6. You may choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. If there is anything that you would prefer not to discuss, please feel free to say so.
7. The information collected in this interview will be kept strictly confidential.
8. If you choose to participate in this research study, your signed consent is required below before I proceed with the interview with you.

.....
.....

VOLUNTARY CONSENT

I have read (or have had explained to me) the information about this research as contained in the Participant Information Sheet. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I now consent voluntarily to be a participant in this project and understand that I have the right to end the interview at any time, and to choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

My signature below says that I am willing to participate in this research:

Participant's name (Printed):
.....
.....

Participant's signature:

Consent Date:

Researcher Conducting Informed Consent (Printed) ...Margaret Mwale Mkandawire
.....

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

Signature of Parent/Guardian:

Date:

Appendix IV

HSSREC FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA



**DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
(HSSREC)**

Telephone: +260-211-290258/293937

P.O. Box 32379

Fax: +260-211-290258/293937

Lusaka, Zambia

E-mail: drgs@unza.zm

Your Ref :

Our Ref:

**APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSED RESEARCH
INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**

**1. TITLE OF STUDY: Coping Strategies to learning Challenges faced by Rural
Distance Students at the University of Zambia**

2. Principal Investigator:

Name: Margaret Mwale-Mkandawire Qualifications: MA [Gender Studies]

Present Appointment/Affiliations: Lecturer II - UNZA

3a. OTHER INVESTIGATORS:

Name: Qualifications:

Present Appointment/Affiliations:

3b. SUPERVISORS:

Name: Prof. Mubiana Macwang'i: Qualifications: Professor, PhD

Present Appointment/Affiliations: Research Professor

Institute of Economic and Social Research, UNZA

Name: Dr Dennis Banda: Qualifications: PhD

Present Appointment/Affiliations: Lecturer 1, UNZA

3c. Co-Supervisor/Mentor in Zambia (This section is for all researchers outside Zambia)

Name: Qualifications:

Present Appointments/Affiliations:

Name: Qualifications:

Present Appointments/Affiliations:

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED RESEARCH

A summary of the project proposal should include background to the study, aims and objectives, participants to be studied and research methods to be used. Technical terminology should be avoided as much as possible.

Background to the Study: Aims:

The aim of this study was to identify and explore coping strategies to challenges experienced by distance students at The University of Zambia from rural parts of Zambia.

4. ARE THE PARTICIPANTS DEPENDENT ON ANY OF THE INVESTIGATORS

✓ As students: Yes No As employees: Yes No
As patients: Yes No In other ways: Yes No

If 'Yes' to any of the above, give details

As students, participants will be distance students and distance students graduates from UNZA. Other participants will be some employees at the Institute of Distance Education and some officers in the Ministry of Education at Province and District levels.

5. POSSIBLE BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS:

Participants may learn the experiences of others and will be able to attain some hope of better delivery of distance mode of learning.

6. POSSIBLE RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS

There are no risks involved.

7. POSSIBLE BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

More members from the rural communities will be motivated to learn by distance mode at university level.

8. BUDGET

(a) Financial support (requested or granted):

Yes No

SPONSOR: University of Zambia

(b) Are there costs which will be carried by other institutions

Yes No

(c) Are there costs which will be carried by the participants involved (e.g. travel, accommodation, meals, treatment)?

Yes No

Appendix V

HSSREC FORM 1a



THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA

DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Telephone: +260-211-290258/293937

P.O. Box 32379

Fax: +260-211-290258/293937

Lusaka, Zambia

E-mail drgs@unza.zm

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

TITLE OF RESEARCH: Coping Strategies to learning Challenges faced by Rural Distance Students at the University of Zambia

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study is to identify and explore coping strategies to experiences of male and female students at The University of Zambia from rural parts of Zambia as they learn by distance mode.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT:

The study is for academic purposes and it intends to add to knowledge as it highlights the experiences of distance education students from rural areas of Zambia. You are required to respond to the interview as outlined.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Please note that information provided will be strictly for academic purposes and will be treated as highly confidential.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw anytime you wish to do so.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

There are no foreseen risks. Benefits are that the findings of this study may be of assistance to policy makers and implementers at the Ministry of Education and other Institutes of Distance Education in Zambia, to ensure increased access to, and participation by men and women in the distance learning programmes.

CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS (Names, addresses and phone numbers of the following):

1. Principal Investigator: Margaret Mwale-Mkandawire
School of Education
University of Zambia
P.O. Box 32379.
LUSAKA
Email: margaret.mwale@unza.zm, _Cell : +260 976754580

2. D. Kapungwe, Professor
Chairperson, Humanities and Social Sciences, Research Ethics Committee,
University of Zambia
P.O. Box 32379
LUSAKA

3. Prof. I.A. Nyambe
Director, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies
University of Zambia
P.O. Box 32379
LUSAKA

Appendix VI

University of Zambia

School of Education

Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies

P.O. Box 32379

LUSAKA.

12th August, 2015

The Director

Institute of Distance Education

University of Zambia

P.O. Box 32379

LUSAKA

Dear Sir,

**RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH FOR DOCTORAL DEGREE
IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION**

My name is Margaret Mwale-Mkandawire; I am a PhD Research Fellow in Educational Administration Programme at the University of Zambia. The purpose of my study is to identify and explore coping strategies to experiences of male and female distance education students from rural Zambia, at university level.

In accordance with the requirements for this degree, I am conducting a study to assess the experiences of university distance education students from rural areas of Zambia. The views about experiences of students and the coping strategies to these experiences will make a significant contribution both to this research and to the management of distance education in Zambia.

Kindly allow me to conduct this research in the Institute of Distance Education.

Yours faithfully,

Margaret Mwale-Mkandawire[Man No. 9937]

Student Number: 514703106

Contact details:

Emails : margaret.mwale@unza.zm

: mloyisom@yahoo.co.uk

Cell No. : +260 976 754 580

Appendix VII

Ethical Approval Letter



THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAMBIA
DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Telephone: 290258/291777
Fax: +260-1-290258/253952
E-mail: drgs@unza.zm
IRB: 00006464
IORG: 00005376

P O Box 32379
Lusaka, Zambia
Your Ref:
Our Ref:

15th December 2014

Margaret Mwale-Mkandawire
University of Zambia
School of Education
LUSAKA

Dear Mrs. Mkandawire

Re: **APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE**

Reference is made to your application for ethical clearance for your proposed study entitled "*Experiences of Distance Education Students in Rural Areas of Zambia: A Case of the University of Zambia*".

As your research project does not contain any ethical concerns, you are hereby given an exemption from full clearance to proceed with your research.

ACTION: APPROVED
DECISION DATE: 15th December 2014
EXPIRATION DATE: 14th December 2015

Please note that you are expected to submit to the Secretariat a Progress Report and a copy of the full report on completion of the project.

Finally, and more importantly, take note that notwithstanding ethical clearance given by the HSSREC, you must also obtain express authority from the Permanent Secretary Ministry of Health, before conducting your research. The address is: Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health, Ndeke House, P O Box 30205, Lusaka. Tel:260-211-253040/5; Fax +260-211-253344.

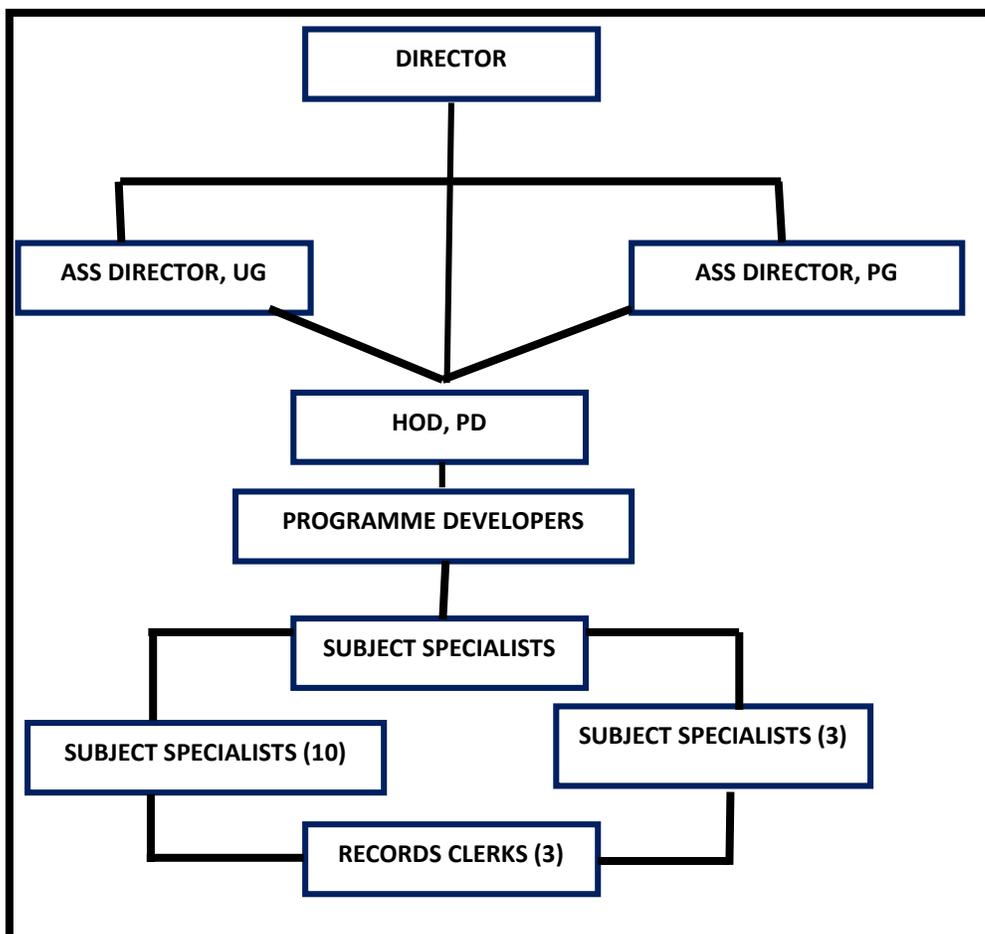
Dr. Augustus Kapungwe

CHAIRPERSON, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

cc Director, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies
Assistant Director, Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies
Assistant Registrar (Research), Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies

Appendix VIII

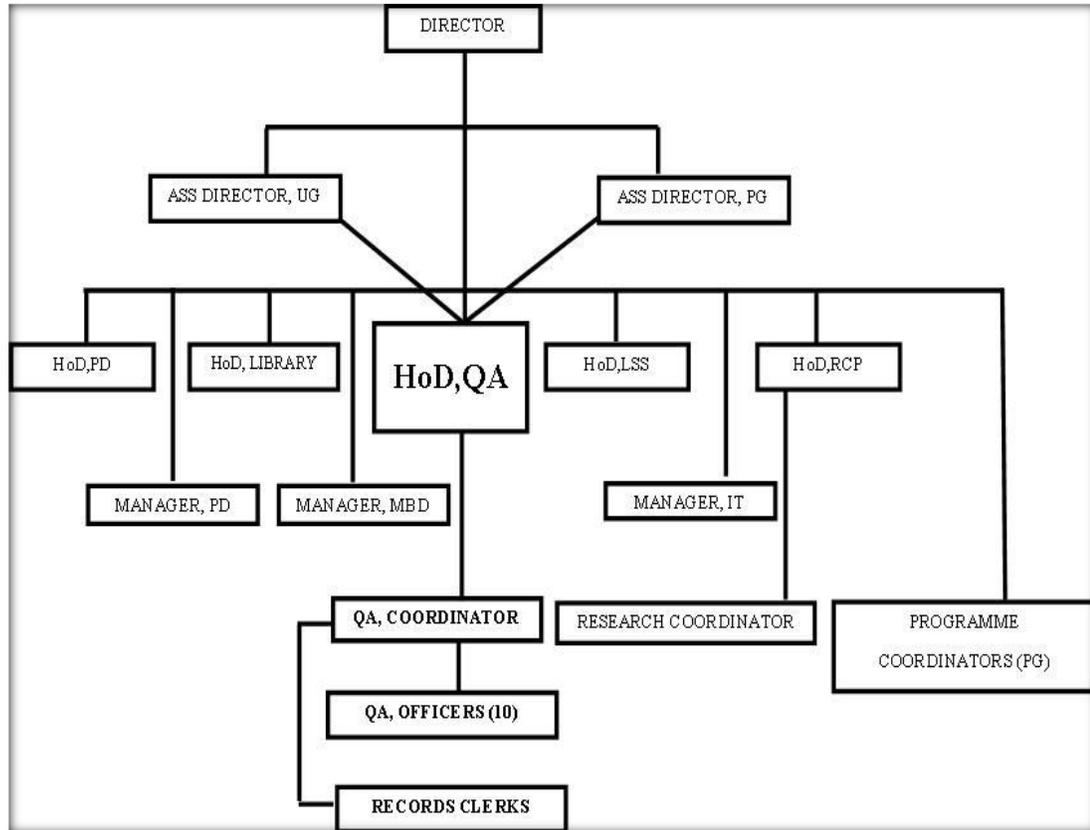
Organisation of Programmes Development Department



The organisation of the programme development has specialists in subjects as well as the records clerks who report to the programme developers at large, and these functionally report to the heads of department. The head of department reports to the assistant directors and ultimately to the director just as is shown above. Therefore, the subject specialists for distance education should consider the challenges that distance students face as far as course contents are concerned, as such they make sure that the contents are not different from these of the full-time students so that distance students can also benefit fully from education. Thus, all the discussions on the quality of distance education being offered go through the channels that are mentioned, either going up or down for reference's sake.

The Department of Quality Assurance also reports to the director as shown below.

Department of Quality Assurance for Life-Long Learning at IDE

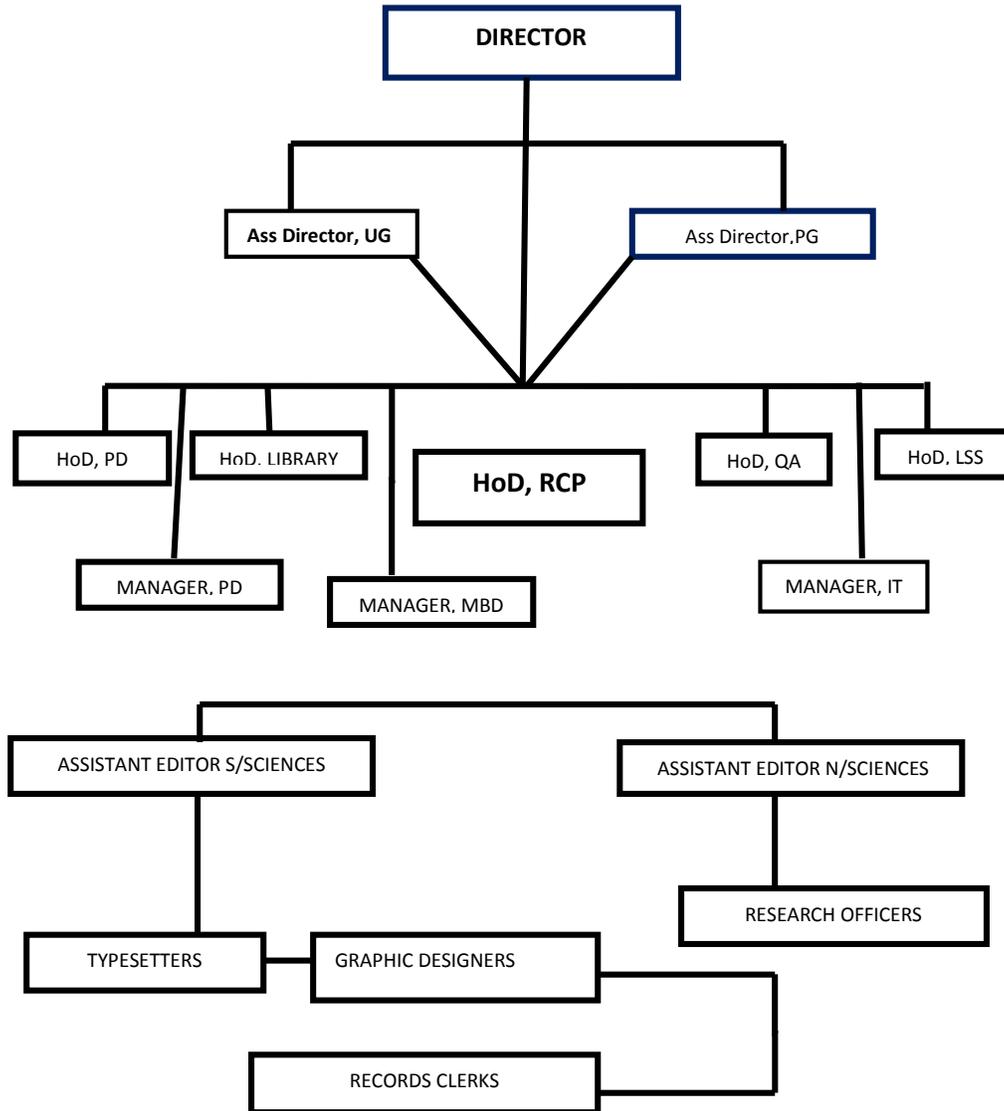


Distance education has faced many challenges, including varied quality of course materials, lack of relevant knowledge and skills in all aspects of distance education among lecturers, limited use of ICT and a largely centralised learner support system. These and other challenges are being addressed and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

Thus, the Department of Quality Assurance for the distance education programme has three coordinators, and these include the programme coordinator, research coordinator as well as quality assurance coordinator and all the three report to the head of

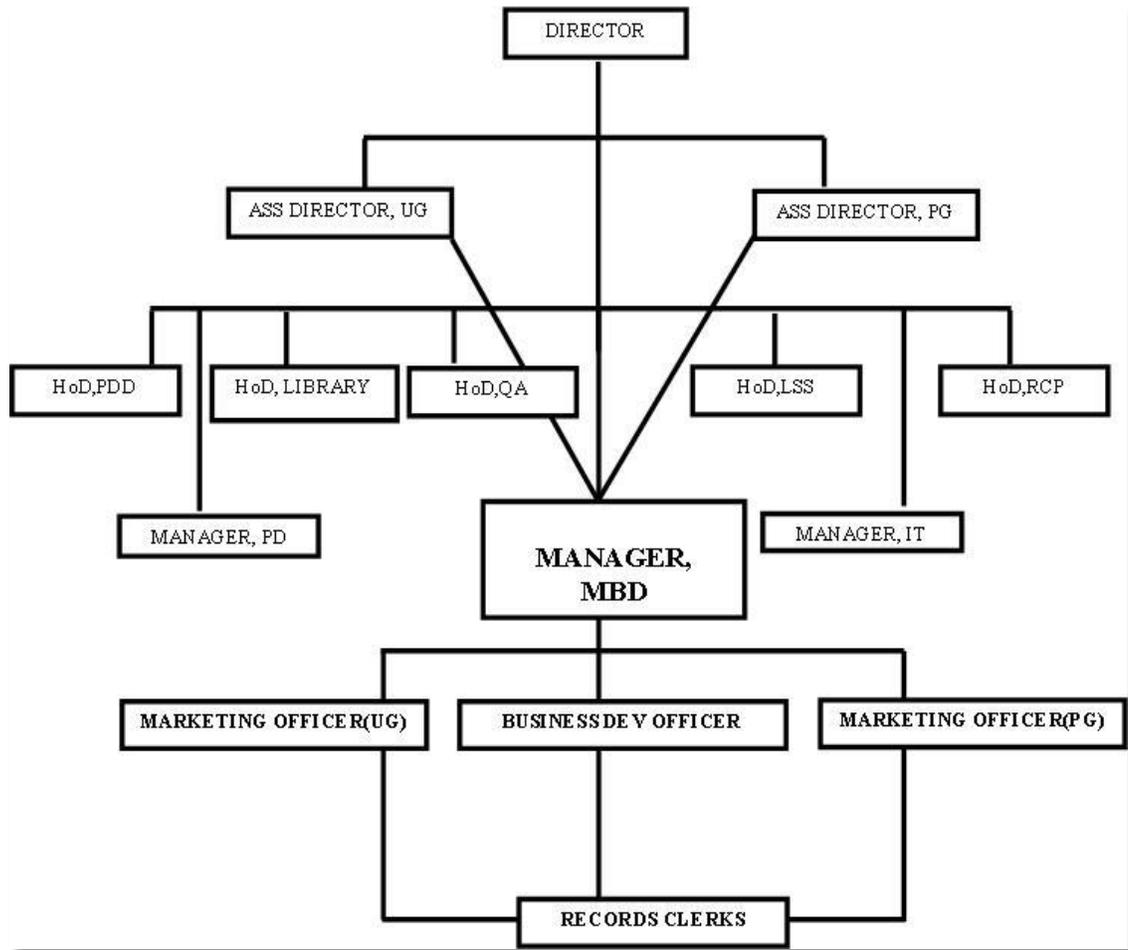
department for quality assurance. The head of department for quality assurance then reports to the assistant directors and functionally reports to the director.

Department of Research Consultancy and Publication at IDE



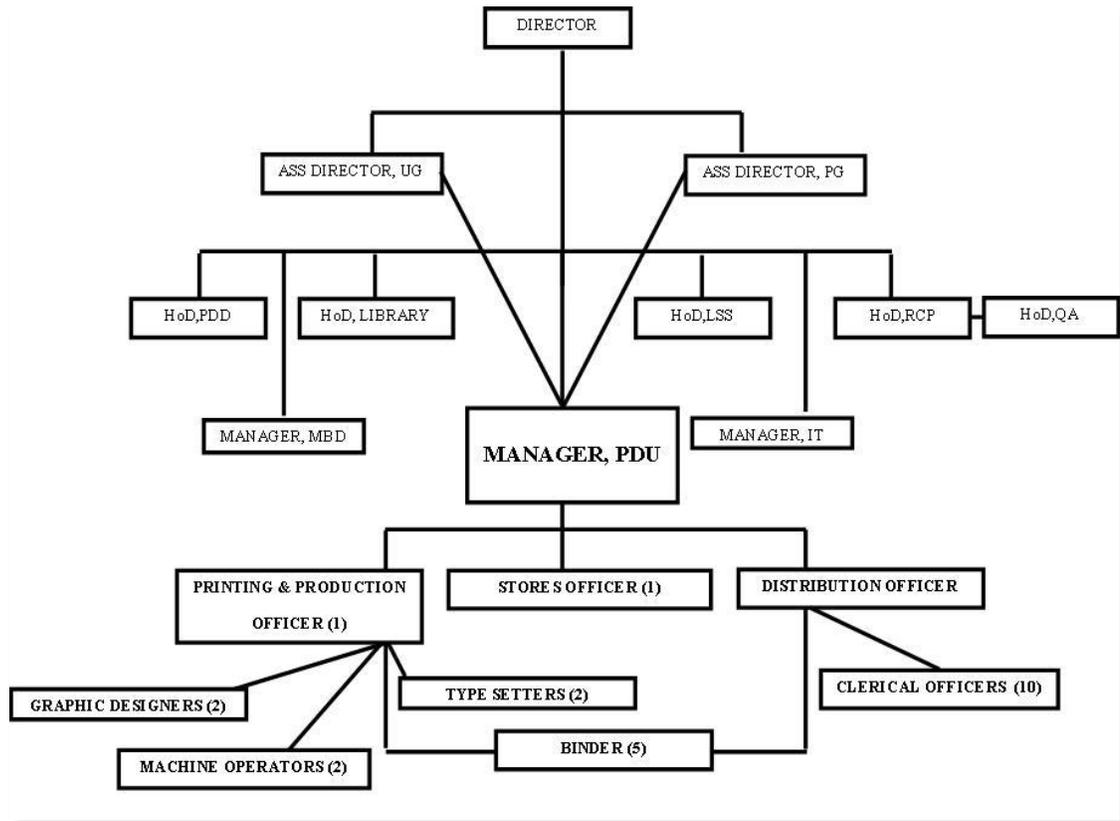
The above also shows the organisation of the Department of Research Consultancy and Publication. It shows that from the records clerk, research officers, graphic designers, assistant editors’ information or reports flow to the head of department who then reports to the assistant directors. These assistant directors report to the director directly.

Marketing and Business Development Unit for Marketing at IDE



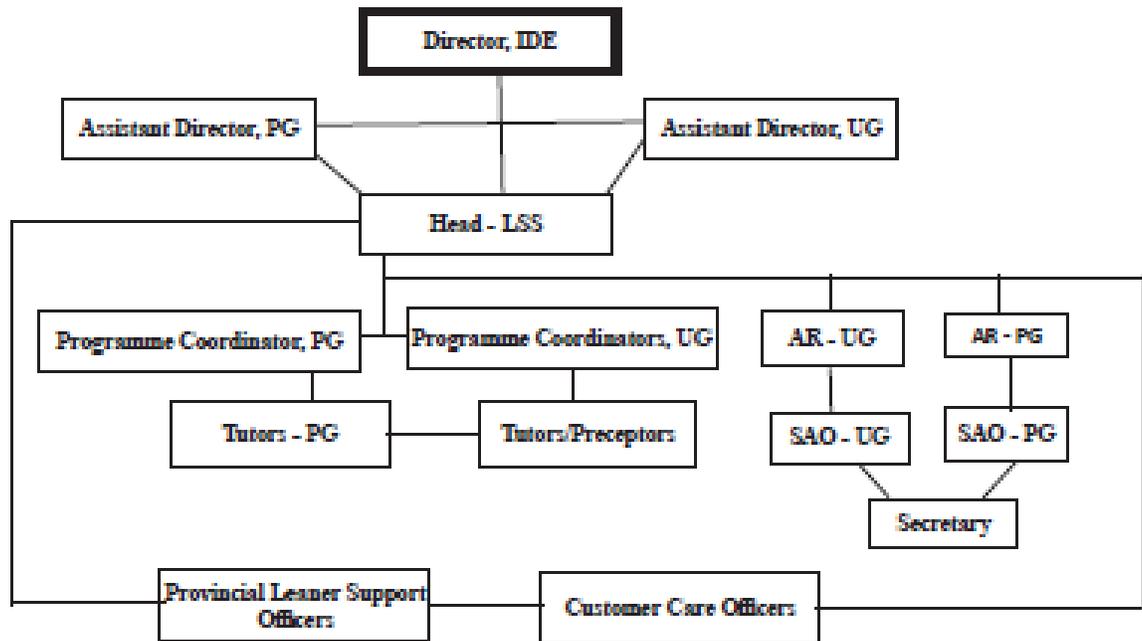
For this Unit, there are marketing officers involved, who work with the business development officer. The business development officer, then reports to the manager for marketing and business development. From this point, the manager reports to the assistant directors who then report directly to the director like in all the departments.

Production and Distribution Unit of Materials at IDE



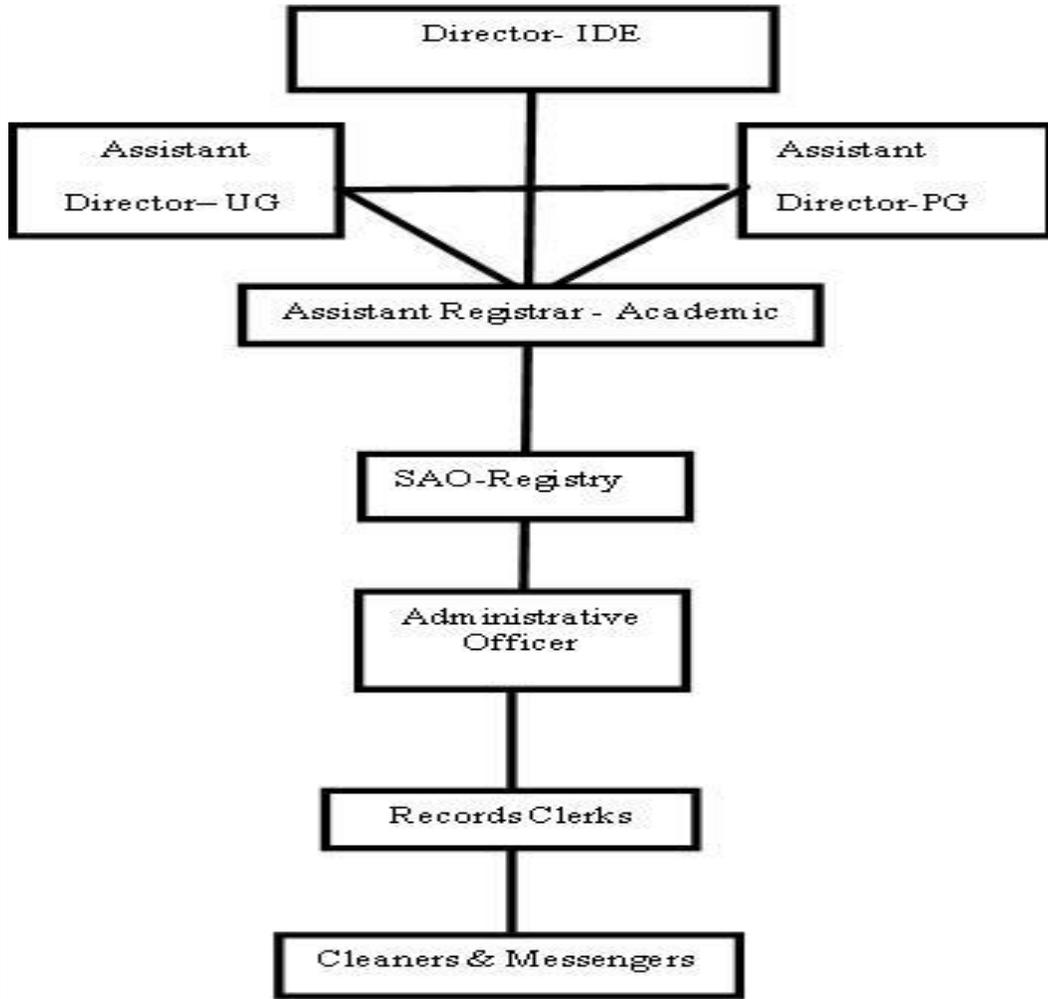
In the Production and Distribution Unit is where printing and production as well as distribution of materials are done. The printing and production officer works along with the machine operator and graphic designers. These two report to the printing and production officer, and on the other side as shown on the diagram, is the clerical officer who reports to the distribution officer through to the production manager who reports directly to the assistant directors. The assistant directors report to the director.

Support Services for Constant Communication at IDE



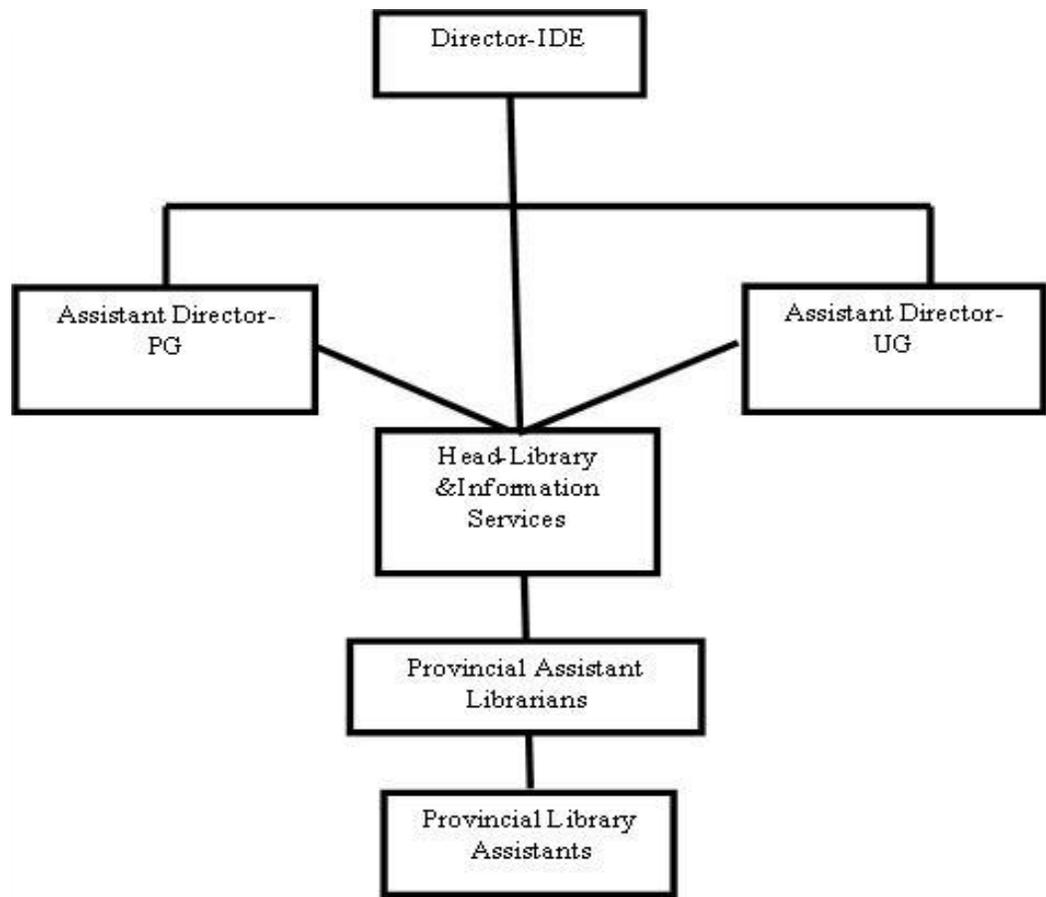
The distance students are supposed to be in touch with the Institute as well as their respective schools. They are also supposed to be supported by the institution. The system has the customer care officers, provincial learner support services, who report to the head of learners support services. The others who report to the head of learners support services are the tutors through the coordinators. The head of learners support services reports to the assistant directors who then report directly to the director.

Registry Unit for Records Keeping and Registration Information at IDE



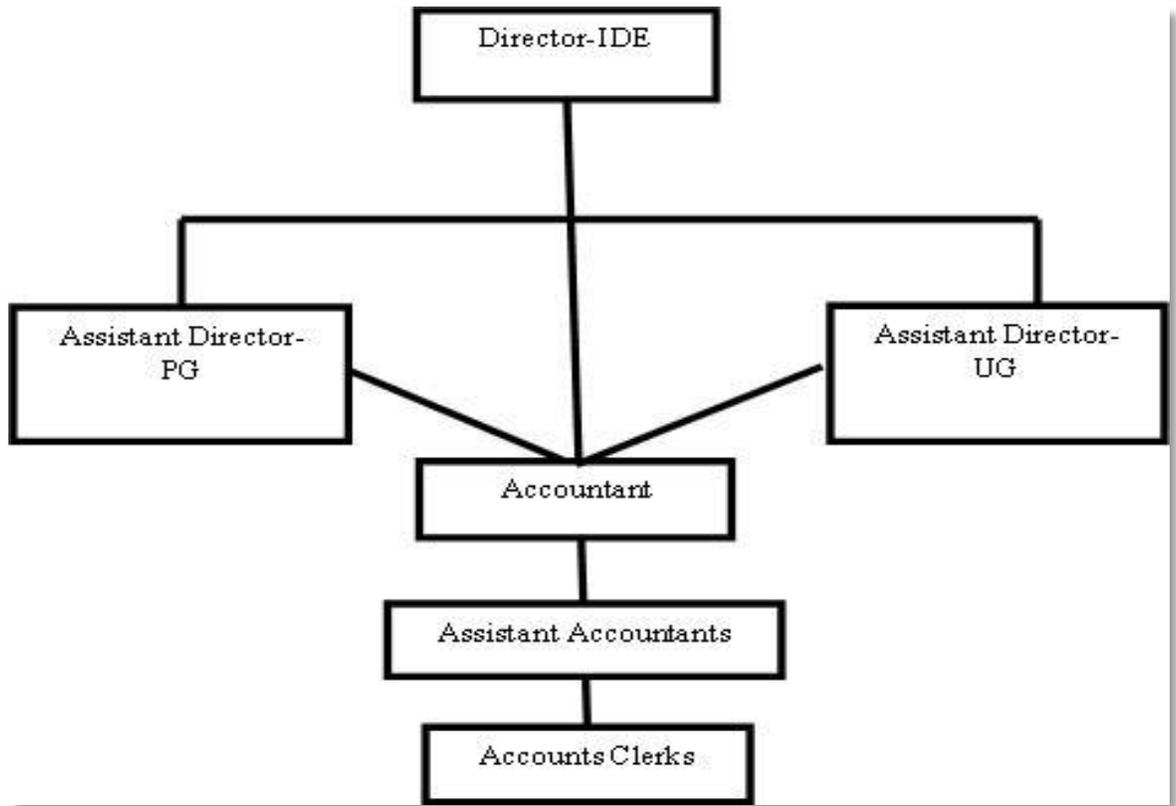
At the Registry Unit is where the records are kept for registration, and information moves from cleaners and messengers to records clerks through the administrative officer, registry and the assistant registrar for academic, who then reports directly to the assistant directors. The assistant directors report to the director directly.

Library and Information Services Department at IDE



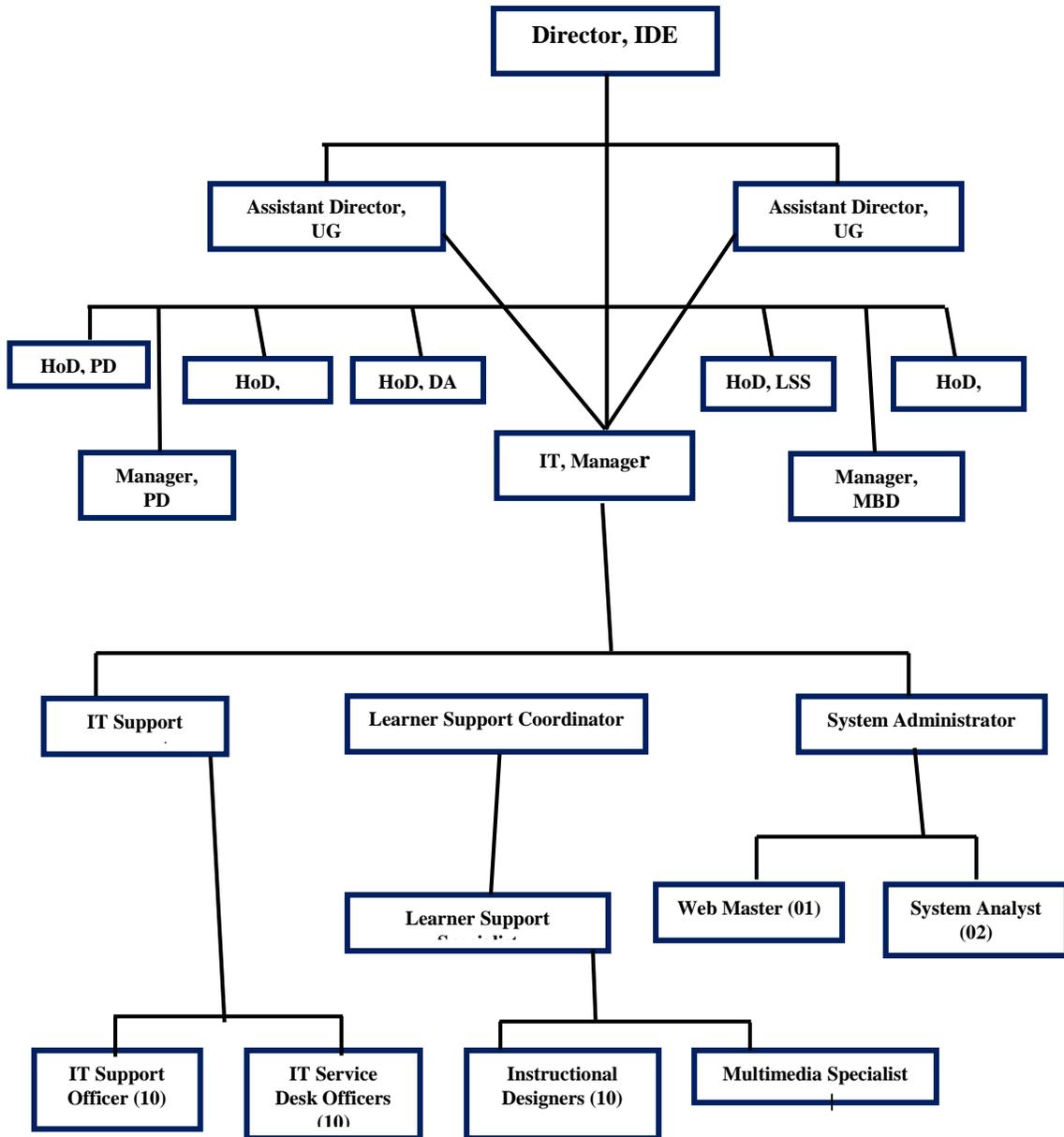
The Library and Information Services Department is one of the key departments for distance education and even for full-time students because it allows the student to access information that gives the student success as far as learning is concerned. Thus, the system as shown in the diagram has the provincial library assistants who report to the provincial assistant librarians. The provincial assistant librarians then report to the head of library and information services, who then reports to the assistant directors. The assistant directors then report directly to the director who is functionally responsible at all levels.

Accounts Unit for Financial Transactions at IDE



The Accounts Unit is responsible for all the financial transactions between the Institute and the students. Thus, the accounts clerks report to the assistant accountants who then report to the accountant. The accountant reports to the assistant director who then report directly to the director. The Accounts Unit is also responsible for all the financial needs for the institution, and to keep it running and to ensure that the best services are offered to the students.

Information Technology Management Department



The Information Technology (IT) management has three divisions that report to the IT manager and these include; the IT support coordinator, learner support coordinator and system administrator. The IT support officers and IT service desk officers work under the IT support coordinator. Whereas the learner support services get reports from the instructional designers and the multimedia specialist reports to the learner support

coordinator. The system coordinator has the web master and system analyst. Thus, the three coordinators report to the IT manager effectively, who then reports to the Assistant Directors. The assistant directors then report directly to the director.

Appendix IX

Undergraduate Programmes on offer at the Institute of Distance Education, UNZA. 2017/2018 Academic year.

Art Based Programmes

- a. Bachelor of Education (Special Education): 1 Year Entry [4 years]
- b. Bachelor of Education (Special Education): 3rd Year Entry [2 years]
- c. Bachelor of Arts with Library and Information Studies [4 years]
- d. Bachelor of Arts with Education in Zambian Cultures and Ceremonies [4 years]
- e. Bachelor of Education (Social Sciences) [4 years]
- f. Bachelor of Education (Environmental Education) [4 years]
- g. Bachelor of Arts With Education [4 years]
- h. Bachelor of Education-secondary (Mathematics and Science) [BEDMAS][4 years]
- i. Bachelor of Education in Primary Education (B.ED, Primary) [4 years]
- j. Bachelor of Science with Education (BSC.ED) [4 years]
- k. Bachelor of Adult Education [4 years]
- l. Bachelor of Teacher Education [4 years]
- m. Bachelor of Education in Educational Administration and Management [4 years]
- n. Diploma in Sports Studies [2 years]

Social Sciences Based Programmes

- a. Bachelor of Arts – Non Quota, B.A.NQ [4 years]
- b. Bachelor of Laws [4 years]
- c. Bachelor of Science in Accounting and Finance [4 years]

Natural Sciences Based Programmes

- a. Bachelor of Science in Nursing [3 years]
- b. Diploma in Laboratory Diagnostics [2 years]
- c. Diploma in Livestock Health Management and Production in Tropics [2 years]
- d. Diploma in Computer Science and Information Technology [2 years]

Appendix X

Accessing the ASTRIA Platform

The Astria platform can be accessed by using the following:

- Edu Tab (IDE Tablet)
- IDE Dongle
- Wi-Fi
- Use of other internet services (Bundles, internet cafés, mobile phones and other networks)

One can access the ASTRIA Platform as long as one has Internet Connectivity

Benefits of the IDE Astria Tablet (recommended for a student without internet connectivity, laptop or desktop)

- Free access to the platform as long you are a paid up student
- Access to 300 eBooks
- Dual Sim (You can use another network Sim)
- You can use the Tablet as a phone and a computer
- The Tablet can be used normally even after you graduate
- A school life time one off purchase
- The Tablet package comes with a free MTN Simpack

Benefits of the IDE Astria Dongle (recommended for a student without internet connectivity but possessing either a laptop or desktop)

- Free access to the platform as long as you are a paid up student
- You can use another Sim network for other personal activities
- You can use the Dongle on your laptop
- The Dongle can be used normally with another Sim after graduating
- A school life time one off purchase

How to Purchase a Tablet and a Dongle

Tablets are currently sold for K1, 800.00 while Dongles are for K450.00 each, respectively. To buy any of these gadgets, deposit the money into the following IDE's

ZANACO ACCOUNT:

A/C Name: UNZA-IDE

A/C Number: 0382200300177

Contact:

Institute of Distance Education
Great East Road Campus
PO Box 32379
Lusaka

Contacts

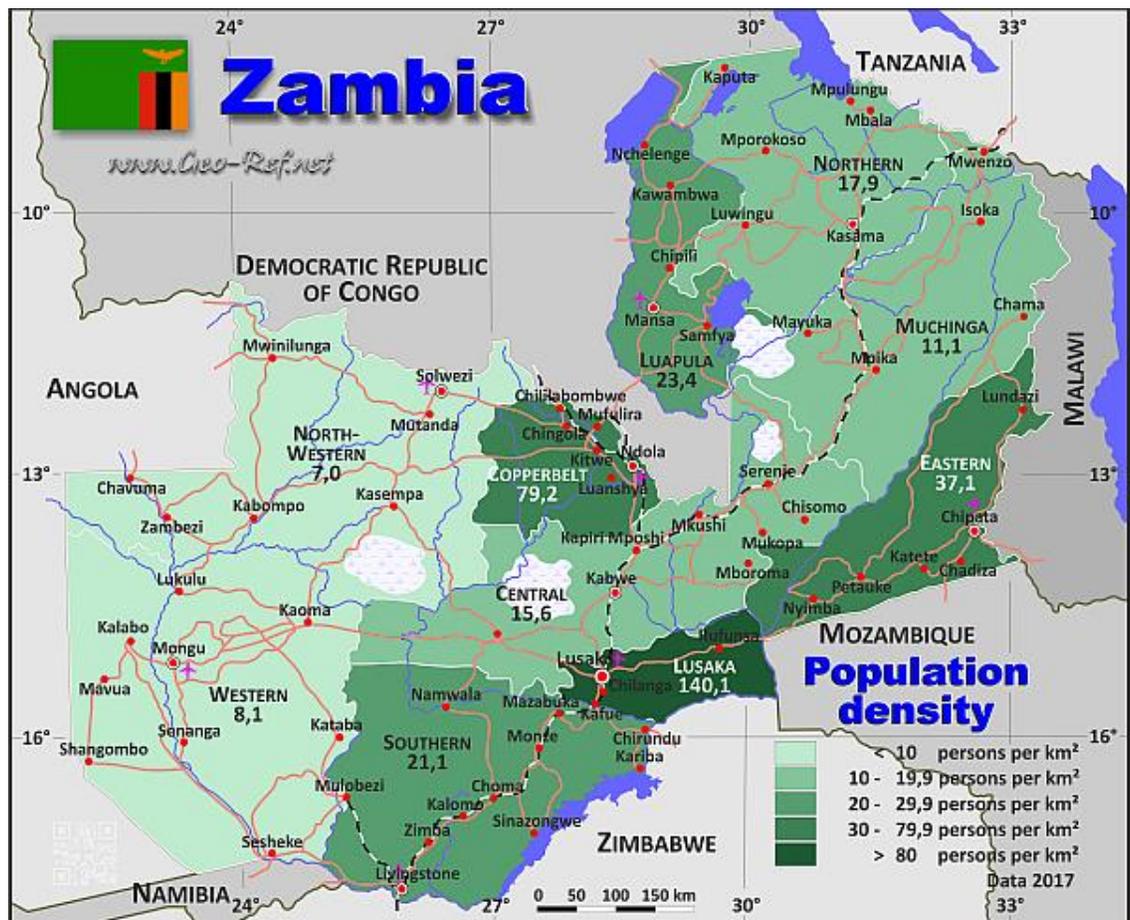
Cell: +26 097 177 8753 / +26 097 877 2249/ +26 097 877 2248

University of Zambia
P. O. Box 32379
Lusaka

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Centre for Information and Communication Technologies (CICT)

Appendix XI

Map showing population in all the provinces of Zambia



Source: Zambia Demographic Surveys, 2010