

Chapter One

Background and context of the study

1.1 Introduction

This study investigated the effectiveness of learner support services in the Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) programme in Botswana. It was motivated by the need to understand why, despite the provision of learner support services, there was a high incidence of incomplete results, leading some learners to prolong their stay in the programme beyond the four-year duration (University of Botswana, 2005b). The purpose of the research was to assess participants' views about the contribution of learner support services to distance learners, on the assumption that such services were designed to help the learner's progress towards a successful completion of their studies. To assess the effectiveness of the support services, views were solicited from distance learners, tutors, programme coordinators and other stakeholders from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) and from learner support providers from the University of Botswana (UB). The study also solicited the views of the regional education officers based at the Kanye Education Centre of MoED (referred to in this study as the Kanye ODL¹ Office), on the assumption that these officers interacted with and assisted distance learners, where they lived and worked. The views of learner support coordinators and the office responsible for accreditation of teacher education diplomas at the UB were also examined to shed light on what might be contributing to the apparent low completion rates; despite the delivery of learner support services on the DPE programme.

¹ ODL: The COL defines ODL as a method of learning in which the learner can overcome barriers related to age, gender, or physical distance for those who are unable to physically attend a campus course due to time or scheduling, limited number of places, or costs, and can make best use of the few teachers available (COL, 2000). The term ODL is used in this study as embracing all other definitions.

1.2 Background to the DPE programme

In order to make sense of the effectiveness of the learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme, it was important to understand the context of the programme in Botswana. As explained in the definitions of ODL in Chapter 2 (§2.6), the learners were separated from their teachers in time and space for most of the time.

When the DPE programme was launched in 2000, teacher upgrading via the ODL mode in Botswana was not a new phenomenon. As reported by Nhundu, Kamau and Thutoeitsile (2002), between 1960 and 1962, the government of Botswana had successfully conducted a correspondence course to upgrade untrained primary school teachers to the primary lower (LC) status, using correspondence courses acquired from Salisbury (present-day Harare in Zimbabwe). This programme for untrained teachers was followed by another upgrading course called the Primary Upper (PU), which was carried out between 1968 and 1973 (Mokaeya, 1992; Republic of Botswana, 1997; Tau & Thutoeitsile, 2006), using printed materials supported by face-to-face contact sessions. This correspondence course was replaced by the pre-service Primary Teacher Certificate (PTC) course in 1973 (Mokaeya, 1992). Through these two teacher training courses, the government of Botswana demonstrated that it could increase access to further education through ODL and improve efficiency in the education system as part of the national development (Nhundu, 2010).

The launching of the DPE programme to upgrade serving PTC holders to the diploma level was prompted by the government's desire to raise the standards of education from the grassroots to the tertiary level (Republic of Botswana, 1993). As stated by Munger (1995), out of the 9,621 serving primary school teachers, 7,178 PTC holders required upgrading to the diploma level. Due to capacity constraints, the primary colleges of education offering pre-service teacher training could not absorb them for a two-year residential diploma course. In 1995, Munger recommended a five-year off-campus upgrading programme, through correspondence and peer group studies. This option would allow an intake of 1800 per session, and, assuming 100% efficiency, the upgrading programme could be carried out within 8-10 years (Munger, 1995). For effective implementation of this off-campus strategy, a demand

analysis was recommended in order to establish the ages of potential learners, their academic backgrounds, the number of years they had been out of school since their pre-service training, the proportion which would enroll for the five-year programme, their geographical dispersal, population density, and the estimated volume of demand over time (Munger, 1995:15). Other factors that needed to be known about the learners included their potential as off-campus candidates, their needs and expectations and their preparedness for further studies in terms of their learning styles.

The call for a demand analysis (Munger, 1995) was motivated by the fact that the entry requirements to the diploma curriculum were O-Level qualifications (University of Botswana, 1999). Furthermore, such an analysis could provide vital information about the challenges that could be anticipated during the learning process, considering that about 90% of the primary school teachers at that time had only Junior Certificate (JC) qualifications or three years of secondary education (Republic of Botswana, 1993). In addition, such a needs assessment could establish the most appropriate teaching and learning approaches for teachers who were returning to school after a long lapse (Granger & Benke, 1998; Munger, 1995), as well as offer information on any pre-requisite course requirements for the DPE learners. Given this background and context, the main aim of my study was to discover from the participants, the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

1.2.1 Learner support in the DPE programme

As explained in Chapter 3 (§3.4), distance learners were drawn from the 2002/2003 cohort who had received learner support services during school vacations at the six colleges of education situated at Tlokweng, Molepolole, Lobatse, Serowe, Francistown and Tonota, as shown in Table 1.1 below. At the time of the study, of the 978 PTC holders in the 2002/2003 cohort, 326 were male and 652 female. The stakeholders, mainly tutors and college managers, were employed both at the six colleges of education in the MoESD and in the UB, as explained in Chapter 3. Given both the completion and non-completion rates indicated in Table 1.1 below, there was a need to establish, both from the distance learners and the stakeholders, why some

learners were not completing their studies on time, despite the provision of support services. Previous studies (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009) had noted that there were low completion rates from the 2002/2003 cohort at the MCE, but that the Tlokweng College of Education had had over 90% pass rate in the 2008 final results, and I needed to understand why this was the case. Other studies (Sedisa & Bokopa, 2008; University of Botswana, 2008b) noted that distance learners were being asked to re-write assignments and tests, even when they could show proof of having done their assignments. This problem was traced back to poor record keeping, and again there was a need to know why this was the case. As stated by Butale (2008) and reiterated by Wright (2008), there were incidences of irregular attendance of tutorials by tutors, poor supervision of research projects, late marking and return of marked assignments to learners, loss of assignments and marks, and lack of accountability in the processing of distance learners' marks (Bogopa, 2008). The prevalence of incomplete results was exhausting for tutors because it appeared as a drain of staff from the conventional programme, who now had to conduct tutorials in the ODL programme and set frequent assignments, tests and examinations (Mautle, 2006; Oduaran, 2008; Sedisa & Bogopa, 2008). Table 1.1 below shows the completion and non-completion rates of the 2002/2003 cohort by 2008.

Table 1.1. Completion and non-completion rates for the 2002/2003 cohort

College	Number registered	Completed	Non-completion	Unaccounted for
Francistown	119	64	50	5
Lobatse	117	45	47	25
Molepolole	233	145	71	17
Serowe	113	43	62	8
Tlokweng	141	103	20	18
Tonota	255	168	74	13
Total	978	556	336	86

Source: University of Botswana (2008b). Status of the 2002/2003: Final year DPE results of 2008.

1.2.2 The teaching-learning system

In order to assess the role of learner support services in the DPE programme, it was necessary to understand the teaching and learning components. The delivery system comprises printed study materials (modules), supported by two-week tutorial sessions held three times a year at the colleges of education, to enable distance learners to interact with their tutors, receive feedback on written assignments and tests, get supervision of research projects and the teaching assignment portfolios, and have access to learning resources such as libraries, as well

as laboratories and equipment for hands-on experience in practical subjects. They study 14 modules in Levels 1a and b, and specialize from Level 2 to Level 4, taking five modules at each level. At Level 4, they carry out a compulsory research project and a teaching assignment portfolio in lieu of teaching practice. To qualify for the diploma, they must cover a workload of 29 modules (University of Botswana, 2005b), as shown in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2: DPE Programme Structure

Level 1 (a) 7 modules	Level 1 (b) 7 modules	Level 2 5 modules	Level 3 5 modules	Level 4 5 modules
Education 1 Communication & Study Skills 1 English 1 Religious Education (R.E) 1 Music 1 Maths 1 Agric 1	Education 2 Science 1 Social Studies 1 Art, Craft & Design 1 Home Eco. 1 Physical Edu. 1 Setswana 1	Education 3 and 4 Communication & Study Skills 2 English/Setswana 2 R.E/ Social Studies 2 Agriculture 2 Music 2 Art, Craft 2 Home Eco. 2 Physical Edu. 2 Maths/Science 2 Research Project	Education 5 and 6 Communication & Study Skills 3 English /Setswana 3 Maths/Science 3 R.E/Social Studies 3 Agriculture 3 Music 3 Home Eco. 3 Art, Craft & Design 3 Physical Edu. 3 Research Project	Education 7 (Teaching Assignment)* Education 8 – (Specialisation) Communication & Study Skills 4 English /Sets 4 Maths/Science 4 R.E/Social Studies 4 Agriculture 4 Music 4 H. Economics 4 Art and Craft 4 Physical Edu. 4 Research Project (submission)

*The teaching assignment portfolio and the research project are compulsory.

1.2.3 DPE programme implementation

The DPE programme was implemented as a joint venture between UB and MoESD, as outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of 2007 (UB & MoESD, 2007). Distance

learners were admitted and registered in colleges of education by the MoESD, just as in the conventional programme. Within the MoESD, the six colleges of education were responsible for the provision of tutorials and counselling support, and for making the required learning resources available during residential tutorial sessions. The Kanye ODL Office at the Kanye Education Centre was set up in 2005 to follow up distance learners in between the residential sessions (Butale, 2008; Wright, 2008). UB was to develop study materials and monitor programme delivery and assessment activities through the Centre for Continuing Education and the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) of UB (University of Botswana, 2010). As outlined in its strategic plan, *A Strategy for Development: University of Botswana Strategic Plan to 2016 and Beyond* (University of Botswana, 2008c), UB undertook to widen access to and participation in higher education by supporting ODL initiatives such as the DPE programme. In 2005, UB launched the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a) to improve the delivery of learner support services through collaborative activities in the implementation of ODL programmes, as discussed in the review of literature in Chapter 2 (§2.8). The effectiveness of this support for these learners had not been evaluated before the commencement of this study.

The learner support services provided in the DPE programme were intended to offer distance learners opportunities to interact with tutors and other learners. Specifically, support services were set up to:

- Provide personal and peer contact between learners, tutors and the stakeholder institutions during the learning process;
- Enable tutors to provide additional advice and learning materials to distance learners over and above the instructional package;
- Facilitate the organisation of study groups at designated study centres for ease of access by distance learners;
- Ensure that distance learners have access to learning resources such as libraries, tutor/counsellors, laboratories and equipment for practical work

- Encourage tutors to give timely and constructive feedback to learners on learning activities.

My research was designed to find out whether the learner-tutor and the learner-learner interactions enabled distance learners to complete their programme of study as scheduled. I also needed to assess whether the nature of the learner support services offered enabled distance learners to engage in self-help study groups where they lived and worked, as one form of peer support. There was also a need to establish whether learners had access to the learning resources required for their practical work. On the basis of these assumptions, I reviewed the relevant literature to determine the criteria for effective learner support services. Welch and Reed (n.d:32-34) describe certain criteria and qualities of effective learner support services, which were adapted for the purposes of this research, as explained in Table 1.3 below.

Table 1.3: Criteria for effective learner support services

Elements of effective learner support services	Criteria for effective learner support services
Academic support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutorials are conducted, and teaching on assignments and mentoring are provided. • Self-help study groups create communities of learning through active learner participation. • Learners are given orientation on the learning materials and appropriate study skills to help them cope with their studies in the ODL delivery mode. • Decentralised learner support services are provided close to where learners live and work, to save on their time and travel costs. • Learners are given the opportunity to interact with tutors actively in the interpretation of study materials through participatory facilitation techniques. • Learners receive timely and constructive feedback from tutors on a regular basis. • The tutor-learner ratio is sufficiently small to enable tutors to give learners either individual or group attention and to

	<p>monitor their learning progress. Welch and Reed (n.d) recommend a maximum of 1:20 tutor/learner ratio.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact sessions are integrated into the programme design, instead of being an add-on. • Teaching-learning activities used during contact sessions acknowledge distance learners' previous educational backgrounds and experience in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. • Learners have the opportunity to contact tutors regularly, either by phone, email, by appointment or through any other means.
Counselling support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners have access to counselling support in resolving personal difficulties they may encounter in the course of their studies.
Administrative support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligations of learners and those of ODL providers are clarified at the registration stage. Learner support services are integrated into the institutional core business. • Tutorial and assessment support and counselling activities are regularly monitored and feedback given to learners and tutors for improvement. • The number of tutors (most of whom are part-time to the programme) is sufficient to provide for individual needs of learners, such as supervision of research projects. • Required learning resources, in the form of libraries, laboratories and the equipment necessary for successful learning, are accessible to learners. • Learners are provided with technical support (literacy skills) in the technology needed for the programme, and equipment is in place to facilitate learning. • Procedures and processes for receiving, recording and dispatching assignments for marking and returning to learners are in place and communicated to tutors and learners. • Activities that take place at learning/study centres are clarified at registration stage, and study centres are permanent learning structures/homes with technical equipment that is accessible to learners. • Attendance at scheduled tutorial sessions and the workloads for learners are monitored regularly. • Submission of assessment work is monitored, and inactive learners and those at risk are identified, contacted and given

	<p>prompt attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correct, up-to-date records of learners' profiles, contacts and assignments are readily available. • Feedback from learners, tutors and other stakeholders is sought regularly for review and for the improvement of service delivery. • Learner representative councils (SRC) are established and empowered to represent learners on institutional management structures. • Clear communication lines and decision-making structures exist in order to make collaboration among stakeholders functional.
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Adapted from Welch and Reed (Eds) (n.d.32-34).

These criteria were informative in assessing the effectiveness of learner support services in meeting distance learners' needs in the DPE programme. To understand the role of learner support services in this programme, it was necessary to contextualise it within the definitions of ODL.

1.3 ODL definitions and learner support services

In its development since the 1840s, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 (§ 2.4), the term 'distance education', which is used in this study as ODL, has attracted different meanings. Generically, the term is defined as a delivery mode in which the learner and the teacher are separated from each other in time and space, while the term 'open learning' is used to refer to the relaxation of barriers such as age and physical distance to enable learners to access educational opportunity in a flexible learning environment. In an attempt to develop a more embracing definition of distance education, Keegan (1996) identified its major elements as the separation of the teacher and the learner; the influence of an educational institution; the use of technical media (print and electronic) to unite the teacher and the learner and to carry the educational content; the provision of two-way communication so that the learner may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and the opportunity for occasional meetings with tutors and learners for didactic and socialisation purposes. This physical and psychological distance between learners, their teachers and other learners, which often leads to feelings of isolation

and anxiety for distance learners, offers a justification for the provision of effective support services, as discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (§.2.3). A further justification for the provision of such support services is given in the theoretical framework, which provides a basis for this study.

1.4 Theoretical framework

In order to investigate the academic puzzle: *The effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in a primary education diploma*, it was vital to locate the problem within a relevant contextual or theoretical framework and theories of ODL, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 (§ 2.5). The purpose of the theoretical framework was to give the study a logical structure, starting with identifying the problem under investigation, followed by selecting the relevant literature, deciding the research questions and formulating the research design, which guides the selection of data collection methods, analysis and the presentation of the findings, as covered in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. I explored the relevant literature to identify the most appropriate structure to guide the study, including theories of ODL that justified the provision of effective learner support services for the DPE programme. This framework also helped me to select theories of ODL which were relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The theories of independence and autonomy of interaction and communication, of the industrialization of teaching, and of distance education based on empathy all helped to guide this investigation, as discussed in Chapter 2 (§.5.1 to §.5.2).

In my view, these theories form the background to this research, since they express the need to mediate a learning context in which learners and their teachers are separated in the process of studying the content of the programme, (see, Chapter 2.2.3). Furthermore, these theories recognise the circumstances of distance learners and infer learner support in the form of academic advice, counselling and administrative support to help learners become independent and take control of the learning process. The theories further express the need to promote dialogue through feedback which is given in a friendly and conversational style, and in an environment in which learners interact with their tutors and other learners, thus giving form to the concept of participation in self-help study groups. The physical separation of distance

learners from their tutors, other learners, and the institutions providing the support in the DPE programme created the need for tutorial contact sessions at colleges of education. The interaction of learners and their tutors (academic support), among the learners themselves (peer support), and with the institutions (stakeholder support) on the DPE had not previously been scientifically investigated. This study assessed the effectiveness of this interaction between learners, tutors and the providing institutions. In addition, there was a need to understand tutors' views and those of the stakeholders to find out how they saw their roles and responsibilities in the provision of support in the DPE programme. In Table 1.4 below, I present the issues that needed to be investigated in addressing the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme.

Table 1.4: Issues that guided the investigation in this study.

Learner support issues	Implementation and support strategies	Perceived benefits
<p>What contribution did learner support services make to the DPE programme?</p> <p>What motivated distance learners to enrol in the DPE programme?</p> <p>How were distance learners prepared before they enrolled in the programme?</p>	<p>What strategies were in place to facilitate the implementation of learner support services?</p> <p>What information were learners given prior to enrolment in order to prepare them for their studies?</p>	<p>What were participants' views about the learner support services in the DPE programme?</p> <p>How did this information prepare learners for their studies in ODL?</p> <p>How did this preparation assist distance learners to achieve their expectations?</p>
<p>What were the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services provided?</p> <p>What feedback was solicited from learners, tutors and other</p>	<p>What strategies were in place to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services?</p> <p>What strategies were there to ensure successful progress and programme completion for distance learners?</p> <p>What strategies were used to</p>	<p>What were participants' perceptions of the benefits and/or constraints of learner support services to distance learners?</p> <p>What were the benefits of decentralised support services for distance learners?</p> <p>How did distance learners benefit from these monitoring</p>

stakeholders about the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners?	get this feedback?	mechanisms? How was feedback used to improve service delivery?
What accountability mechanisms were there to ensure that tutors attended scheduled tutorials and gave timely and constructive feedback?	What measures were in place to ensure that learners received tutorial assistance and timely feedback on assignments and other assessment work from tutors?	Was the feedback given perceived by learners as timely and constructive? How did learners benefit from feedback on marked assignments?
What measures were in place to ensure access to learning resources? What provision was made to reach learners located in remote areas?	What strategies were there to ensure that learners had access to learning resources? What strategies were in place to maintain regular contact with learners where they lived and worked?	What were distance learners' views about the benefits of accessing learning resources? How did learners benefit from self-help study groups?
What procedures and processes were there for record keeping?	How were assignments received, recorded and dispatched for marking, and returned to the learners?	How did record keeping influence learners' progress and completion?
What was the Memorandum of Understanding by UB/MoESD intended to achieve?	What was the implementation strategy? How was it monitored to ascertain the extent to which it was achieved?	How did the implementation of the MoU benefit learners, tutors and programme coordinators?
How was UB Mainstreaming Policy communicated to stakeholders? How did it help the implementation of effective learner support services?	What was the implementation strategy among stakeholders?	How did the implementation of this policy influence the delivery of learner support services?

1.5 Problem statement

As reported from previous studies above, distance learners expressed their concerns about difficult concepts in the learning materials, especially because they required assistance with interpretation from the tutors. They complained about tutors' lateness and absenteeism, and the cancellation of tutorials without prior notice (Kamau, 2007, 2010a; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009; Wright, 2008). Further concerns were overdelayed marking and feedback, the lack of constructive comments on continuous assessment, and the late processing of final results, which in turn prolonged their stay on the programme. It was necessary to find out why distance learners were facing these challenges, despite the provision of learner support services. The findings from this study were intended to shed light on how this support influenced distance learners' progress and programme completion. It was also necessary to identify barriers which may have interfered with the implementation of effective learner support services and make suggestions for improvement.

As discussed in Chapter 2 (§2.6), distance learners on the DPE programme were adults who were returning to school after a long period of time, who had family, work and other commitments, in addition to their part-time studies. Due to the lapse of time, these learners needed to be oriented in their studies by receiving academic support in the form of appropriate study skills. In this regard, this study examined how the learner support providers or intermediaries monitored the various learner support activities, such as attendance of tutorials by both learners and tutors, the turnaround time for assignments, feedback mechanisms and record keeping, and whether these services were provided in an empathetic and helpful manner. It was also necessary to hear from the participants how the support services contributed to distance learners' progress and programme completion. To make progress in their studies, distance learners needed access to learning resources for practical subjects. I thus had to find out from the participants whether distance learners interfaced with the learning resources and, if not, to establish the constraints which were experienced.

It was also necessary to understand the policy documents that guided the provision of learner support services, such as the MoU (UB & MoESD, 2007), to determine whether the stakeholders

understood and carried out their roles and responsibilities as outlined in the MoU. Investigating the effectiveness of learner support services from such a divergent sample of participants would establish whether there was convergence of expectations and interpretations of learner support services between distance learners, tutors, and the policy makers. Finally, it was necessary to document and understand how the challenges encountered by distance learners influenced their progress and programme completion on the DPE programme. This study was intended to seek solutions to this academic puzzle.

1.6 Purpose and rationale of the study

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme. Even though academic, administrative and counselling services were provided, their effectiveness in facilitating distance learners' progress and successful completion of the DPE programme was not known. I therefore needed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the support services in terms of facilitating interaction between learners and their tutors and the supporting stakeholder institutions, taking access to learning resources as a measure of good practice, so as to diagnose and suggest improvements to ward off learning problems before they intensified. The other objective of this study was to understand how processes such as attendance at tutorials by both learners and tutors, the turnaround time for assignments, provision of feedback, and record keeping, were monitored. This would shed light on how these management structures contributed to distance learners' progress and programme completion. My research sought to find out whether distance learners benefited from record-keeping processes, in terms of the way their assignments were handled, from submission to marking and commenting by tutors, to the return of the marked scripts. The study also set out to assess whether policy documents, such as the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy of UB (University of Botswana, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2008a) and the MoU (UB & MoESD, 2007), which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 (§2.8), and in the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.7.2) facilitated the provision of effective learner support services in a context of division of labour, in conjunction with the reviewed literature (Peters, 2000).

1.7 Focus of the study

The main focus of the study was to find out, both from participants and relevant policy documents, the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion. I targeted distance learners (both completers and non-completers), tutors and other stakeholders so as to explore the challenges that learners faced and how these were addressed, and as a result, gain a balanced view of the effectiveness of the available academic, administrative and counselling support. I was motivated by the fact that, despite the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme, many incidents of incomplete results were reported by both learners and stakeholders, as argued in the literature review in Chapter 2 (§2.7) and in the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.1).

At the stakeholder level, my research was focused on part-time tutors and programme coordinators with whom the learners interacted during tutorials and in the supervision of research projects, in order to understand how these processes contributed to distance learners' progress. A further focus was on institutional management and policy makers at the Molepolole and Tlokweng colleges of education, where the academic tutorials and administration of assignments, tests and examinations were conducted, as per the MoU (UB & MoESD, 2007). At the policy and management level, it was important for these senior managers to shed light on the availability of and access to learning resources for distance learners and the monitoring mechanisms which they were enforcing to ensure that the support activities were carried out as scheduled, as observed in the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.6). The study also focused on the officers at the Kanye ODL Office who interacted with distance learners near where they lived and worked, in order to get their views about the challenges the learners were facing and the nature of the assistance they received from these officers.

At the University of Botswana, I focused on service providers to establish whether the learner support services provided were fit for purpose in terms of their relevance, timeliness and appropriateness. In this regard, I concentrated on the DPE programme and coordinator and learner support staff at the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), and the quality assurance office at the CAD of UB, to find out their views about the strengths and bottlenecks that may

have hindered the provision of effective learner support services and how these affected distance learners' progress and programme completion. According to the 2007 MoU, between UB and the MoESD, the CAD was to monitor the implementation of assessment processes and procedures, which entailed the timely marking of assignments, tests and examinations, supervision of research projects and the teaching assignments portfolio, correct conversion and entry of marks into the relevant records, and access to learning resources. It was therefore necessary to discover from the CAD, how the execution of these processes and procedures contributed to distance learners' progress and success, and what changes, if any, the CAD thought were necessary as discussed in the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.4).

Yet another focus was on policy documents, such as the 2007 MoU between UB and the MoESD and the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a). To establish how these documents described and facilitated the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the provision of learner support services, I focused on the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 (Republic of Botswana, 1994). From this, I was able to find out what resources were provided to facilitate upgrading of primary school teachers to the diploma level, through in-service training as discussed in the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.3).

1.8 Research questions

In order to investigate the research problem, this study set out to answer the following research question: *What is the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in a primary education diploma?* From this main question, four sub-questions were formulated.

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme?
- What are distance learners' perceptions about the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme?
- How do tutors and other stakeholders perceive their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme?

- What barriers and opportunities exist in the implementation of effective learner support services in the DPE programme?

In formulating these research questions, my main aim was to find out why, despite the provision of such support services, some distance learners were not completing their studies as scheduled.

1.9 Qualitative research design

For this study, I adopted a qualitative research design because I believed this would enable me to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon I was investigating as indicated in the research questions above. One of my assumptions was that the interpretive qualitative approach, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3 (§ 3.2), would give me an opportunity to investigate the research topic and research questions more meaningfully than would the quantitative approach, since I was seeking the views and opinions of human participants in order to understand the meaning of a social phenomenon. As such, the quantitative research approach, which emphasizes representation of social reality in statistical terms as the most appropriate way of achieving objectivity, was not considered appropriate for this study. Researching a complex phenomenon of this nature, with multiple players and influences, meant that a simple cause-and-effect analysis, as is commonly used in the positivist quantitative research design, would not have been adequate to address my research question.

The case study, which renders itself appropriate in the qualitative and interpretive approach, was selected because it enabled me to explore and understand a complex and dynamic phenomenon as described by the human participants in the DPE programme, in their own context and natural setting. Further, the interpretive approach allowed me to collect in-depth data from a small but information-rich sample comprising multiple sources, in my case, the distance learners, their tutors and other stakeholders who were directly involved in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. Collecting data from different sources using different data collection methods allowed me to compare and interpret the sources, offering me an in-depth understanding of participants' views on the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

1.9.1 Research sample

As discussed in detail in Chapter 3 (§4.1), the participants for this study were purposively selected from Tlokweng and Molepolole colleges of education, Kanye ODL Office, of the MoESD, and from UB, who were collaborating in the implementation of the DPE programme. The purposive sampling technique allowed me to hand pick a sample of 30 participants who were information-rich, based on my judgment that they had in-depth knowledge of the problem I was investigating and that they were both typical and appropriate for addressing both the research problem and the research questions. I targeted final-year completers and non-completers from the 2002/2003 cohort, because these learners were familiar with the learner support services that were provided. I also selected tutors, part-time programme coordinators and institutional management and policy makers from colleges of education that provided learner support services. In order to get the appropriate participants, I asked college coordinators to assist me in picking a sample of learners and tutors according to subject combinations, on the assumption that these participants had adequate knowledge about the provision of learner support services in stakeholder institutions. The policy makers, who were also the implementers, were in charge of learning resources, and in my judgment, had in-depth information about the challenges facing the provision of learner support services in their institutions. My assumption was that these participants were sufficiently familiar with the challenges and the reality on the ground to respond to the interview questions as explained in Chapter 3 (§3.5).

1.9.2 Data collection sites

Data from distance learners, tutors, part-time programme coordinators and college principals were collected from Tlokweng Primary College of Education and the Molepolole College of Secondary Education, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3. During data collection, my initial intention was to interview six completers and six non-completers, but one of the completers was unable to attend the interview session, and my attempts to find a replacement were not successful. I ended up filling that slot with a non-completing participant, having judged that this would not have any negative effects on the study. Data were also collected from learner support officers at the Kanye ODL Office and DPE programme coordinators from the UB, as discussed

in Chapter 3. Although the number from this sample was small, I concluded that it was adequate for the scope of the study and as such would yield dependable information to address the research questions in terms of trustworthiness and credibility.

Data were collected between September 2009 and January 2010. Group interviews and individual interviews were carried out at different dates, with participants from Molepolole and Tlokweng Colleges of Education, the Kanye ODL Office, and the University of Botswana, as explained in detail in Chapter 3 (§.5.1). Participants expressed their views freely about the advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses of the support services, and how service delivery could be improved to enhance distance learners' progress and completion as discussed in the recommendations in Chapter 5 (§5.8). Further data were collected through document analysis, which was already ongoing as part of the literature review before the commencement of fieldwork which is explained in Chapter 3 (§.5.2). The review of documents was meant to provide insights as to the preparedness of supporting institutions in providing learner support services in the DPE programme as discussed in the findings in Chapter 4 (§.7.2). Although this research was small and cannot be said to be representative in terms of generalizability beyond the DPE programme, the findings may help explain the problem in similar contexts.

1.9.3 Data collection methods

The study embraced data collected from interviews with the participants and document analysis of journal articles, policy documents, reports, and minutes of meetings and records that were relevant to the case study, as discussed in Chapter 3 (§3.5). Before commencing the field work, I obtained ethical clearance from the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria (see Appendix 8), from the MoESD in Botswana (see Appendix 5), and signed letters of consent from the participants (see Appendices 6 & 7). After due clearance by the University of Pretoria, and in order to avoid conflict of interest, a research assistant was identified and trained to carry out data collection from the UB participants. To prepare her for this task, I explained the purpose of the research, and discussed the research problem, the research questions and the semi-structured interview questions that she used for data collection. During data collection, I listened to the

tape-recorded interviews and transcriptions in preparation for data analysis and interpretation as explained in Chapter 3 (§3.7).

1.9.4 Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis commenced during the field work, as I listened repeatedly to the cassette tapes in order to identify the themes that were emerging from the data, and thus determine a structure for data analysis and presentation which is explained in detail in Chapter 3 (§3.6 to §3.7). During data analysis, I leaned on the interpretivist construction of social reality, which I have discussed in detail in the research design in Chapter 3. This was because my research entailed dealing with people, and recording their experiences about the phenomenon under investigation. I analysed and interpreted their responses in order to construct meaning about the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme. In this way, I was able to propose a theory to guide the provision of effective learner support services which is presented in Chapter 5 (see Table 5.1). This was made possible by the fact that whereas in quantitative studies the theory to be tested is given at the beginning of the study (deductive), in qualitative studies, where meaning is constructed from the findings, a theory which may be tested by others is built from the findings (inductive). To facilitate data analysis, I developed codes in the form of words, phrases and coded data *in vivo* in order to represent participants' views and opinions, as explained in Chapter 3 (§.7.1). I then generated categories and sub-categories which allowed me to group the data into related families of themes. This in turn enabled me to create a logical structure during report writing. The Atlas ti computer software which is discussed in Chapter 3 (§.7.1) was used to generate codes and patterns of related codes, enabling me to refine the categories and themes that I used and to develop a structure for data analysis and interpretation, which guided data presentation in Chapter 4.

1.10. Ethical issues

1.10.1 Informed consent

To gain the confidence of the participants, I explained that this study was part of my doctoral research with the University of Pretoria (see appendices 6, 7). I also informed them that their

participation in the project would be voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time if they wished to do so. Before recording the interviews on tape, both I and my research assistant asked the participants' permission, emphasizing that recording would facilitate correct transcription of their responses.

1.10.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

I ensured participants' confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms during data collection, and collective designations, such as distance learners, tutors, lecturers and management, in the data analysis and reporting stages. In order to enhance the trustworthiness and the credibility of the study, the institutions involved were named.

1.10.3 Credibility and dependability

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I ensured that the participants were directly involved in the implementation of learner support services, either as distance learners, or as tutors, programme coordinators, managers or policy makers. During the planning phase, the interview questions were subjected to peer review, and the feedback obtained was incorporated, both to improve the quality of the questions and to ensure that the data collected answered the research problem and the research questions. I also anticipated subjecting the data to the participants so that they could confirm that the transcriptions reflected the information they had given during the field work. I took all these steps to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility and dependability of my findings which is explained in more detail in Chapter 3 (§3.8).

1.11 Significance of the study

This study was intended to throw further light on the existing body of knowledge about the effectiveness and role of learner support services in the DPE programme. It investigated participants' perceptions about the contribution of learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme of the University of Botswana. The participants were given a voice to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services and to suggest changes which could be implemented to improve the effectiveness of such services in the DPE

programme. By researching the stakeholder involvement in the provision of learner support services, I was able to show both the benefits that could be reaped through the shared use of resources and the constraints, due to a lack of clear management structures and lines of communication, that prevented learners from benefiting from institutional resources, as discussed in Chapters 4 and of data analysis and presentation, and Chapter 5, which deals with the conclusions of the study. The recommendations derived from participants' perceptions and experiences proposed a theoretical structure for the implementation of effective learner support services (see Chapter 5, Table 5.1) which is a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field of ODL. Although as a case study, my research is not generalisable, nonetheless it could be of use as literature or as a source of knowledge or insight into distance education for practitioners in similar contexts elsewhere and could inform policy formulation for the implementation of effective learner support services in other ODL programmes.

1.12 Limitations of the study

This study focused on participants' perceptions, views and opinions about the effectiveness of support services available to distance learners on the DPE programme of the University of Botswana. In carrying out this research, I selected participants who were directly involved in the provision of learner support services on this programme. Other distance education programmes of the university were excluded, since including them would have generated massive data which would have been difficult to process given the time constraints. In this regard, I make no claim that my findings could be generalized to all other distance education programmes at the University of Botswana or indeed to any other distance education institution in Botswana, beyond the DPE programme. However, my assumption is that these findings could be transferred to ODL programmes in similar contexts.

Finally, the study was designed specifically to seek in-depth information about the effectiveness of learner support services in the distance-taught DPE programme so as to improve their delivery. It was not compared to any other programme, since a comparative study could not adequately have addressed this concern.

1.13 Conclusion and summary

This conclusion summarizes the issues discussed in Chapter 1. At the commencement of the study, the final year cohort in the DPE programme (2002/2003) showed a high incidence of incomplete results, despite the provision of learner support services which were meant to help them complete their studies successfully. My research therefore drew on the views of the participants and various policy documents to discover how learner support services contributed to distance learners' progress and completion in this programme. The most significant factor to emerge was that while resources may be available in the stakeholder institutions, their availability to distance learners should be planned for and not assumed. The next chapter reviews the literature in order to assess the significance of effective and/or non-effective learner support services in ODL and, in particular, in the DPE programme.

1.14 Organisation of the study

The study is organised in five chapters as follows:

Chapter One gives the background, context, problem of the study, its rationale, and the significance of the investigation in relation to the theoretical framework.

In **Chapter Two** I explore the literature relating to learner support services, from the global perspective to that of the Sub-Saharan and SADC regions and Botswana, and identify the knowledge gaps that are addressed in the study. Issues relating to the effectiveness of academic, administrative and counselling support are discussed, with examples from various ODL institutions. Reference is also made to institutional documents relevant to the provision of learner support services on the DPE programme.

Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the research design and data collection methods that were used to solicit data from the participants and explains how the data were analysed in order to arrive at the findings of the study.

In **Chapters Four** I present the data analysis and interpretation. Data patterns are explained in relation to the research questions. The criteria for developing codes, categories, and sub-categories and for grouping data into themes are also discussed.

Chapter Five presents my conclusions and recommendations. In this chapter, various suggestions and strategies for improving the implementation of learning support are offered.

In the next chapter, I explore the literature review.