

Chapter Two

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature relevant to the provision of learner support services in ODL programmes. In order to find a basis on which to discuss the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme, it was necessary to assess how such services are conceptualised in the ODL discipline. Understanding the different meanings of learner support services was critical to this study, considering that, as reported by Bunker (2003), there was little emphasis on delivering such services in ODL before 1982.

As indicated in the reviewed literature, the term 'learner support services' has attracted different meanings and contestations in a bid to contextualize it within the ODL field of study. In this chapter, I interrogate the different descriptions of learner support services and conceptualisations of ODL in a bid to explain the role and rationale for providing effective support in the DPE programme. The review looks at the developments and theoretical underpinnings of ODL in order to identify and explore factors relevant to the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme and suggest areas of future research. Specifically, it looks at definitions, developments and relevant theories of ODL and how these have influenced the provision of learner support services in ODL. The literature review lays the foundation for discussing the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme. In particular, the meanings of learner support services, the challenges faced by distance learners and the need to identify learner problems are explored in order to design and provide relevant and effective learner support services. Definitions of ODL and a brief history of its development are given, so as to situate learner support services in the DPE programme in the context of ODL discipline. Theories of ODL and in particular, the theory of distance education based on empathy (Holmberg, 2003), are explored so as to establish their contribution to the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme.

I used a thematic approach in order to locate the assessment of the effectiveness of learner support services in the reviewed literature. This approach allowed me to critically explore the thoughts, views and experiences of other researchers in this field. In this study, literature review is organised in sub-themes that form the sections of this chapter, starting from the contextualisation of learner support services followed by exploring the definitions, developments and theoretical approaches in ODL. I also looked at the role of learner profiles and needs, resource and policy requirements, as determinants of the implementation of effective learner support services. It was also critical to assess from the literature, the factors which affect availability and access to technology, considering that ODL is a mediated delivery mode which uses various media for the purposes of teaching and learning.

2.2 Contextualising learner support services in the ODL discipline

In this section, I reviewed literature in order to assess the role of learner support services in the ODL discipline. My assumption was that this would enable me to compare the provision of the learner support services in the DPE programme with that described in the existing literature, and by so doing, identify gaps existing in the literature in this field. Due to the lack of a single embracing definition for ODL, and the resulting desire by scholars to find such a common definition, the meaning of ODL has attracted considerable controversy (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2006). The debate on the interpretation of ODL centres on finding a clear meaning which could relate it to the general education system (Simonson et al., 2006).

For this reason, ODL has attracted different definitions, from correspondence education, home study, or external study, where the provision of learner support is minimal or totally absent (Bunker, 2003; Holmberg, 1995; Peters, 2000), to distance learning, and distance instruction (Keegan, 1996), which acknowledge the need for the provision of learner support services. According to Keegan (1996) the term 'distance education' implies a quasi-permanent separation between the teacher and the learner throughout the learning process, and the participation of an educational institution in the planning and provision of learner support services. Keegan (1993) and Garrison (1993) viewed the separation between learners and their tutors and the ODL institution as geographical, while Sauvé (1993), supported by Moore

(1994), viewed it as a psycho-social or transactional distance. Other scholars (Holmberg, 1995; Rowntree, 1992; UNISA, 1997a:56, 1997b, 1997c) describe the physical distance as a barrier because it tends to create fear and anxiety among distance learners, by preventing them from benefiting from any form of dialogue during the learning process.

To reduce the learners' isolation, Keegan (1996) recommended two-way communication, so as to create dialogue between learners, tutors, other learners and the ODL institution. Nunan (1993) and Nunan, Reid & McCausland (2002) maintain that creating opportunities for occasional meetings for didactic and socialisation purposes could reduce learners' isolation in this highly individualised delivery mode. In this learning context, distance learners receive instructional materials at a different time from when the study package was developed, thus creating a distance of time (Simonson et al., 2006). To neutralise the physical distance, Holmberg (1995), Keegan (1996), Moore (1994), Moore & Kearsley (1996), Simonson et al. (2006), and Threlkeld and Brzoska (1994) argue that distance learners should interact with instructional media, either synchronously or asynchronously, thus acknowledging that distance learning is a mediated form of teaching and learning. This definition assumes the presence of a teacher, one or more learners, a course of study (content to be taught and learnt), a learning process, and interaction, on the one hand between the teacher and the distance learners, and on the other with the ODL institutions (Simonson et al., 2006), further stressing the need for learner support services in the ODL learning context. This definition was supported by Holmberg (1995) when he defined ODL as a non-contiguous learning process, taking place in the absence of a tutor but preceded by planning, guidance and teaching from the supporting institution.

Perraton (1988, 2000) describes distance education as an educational process in which a large portion of teaching is conducted by someone who is removed from the learners in time and space. This infers that learners are on their own because of their physical separation, but can be taught, assessed and given guidance at anytime, anywhere, either individually or in groups, thus setting the scene for distributed learner support services in decentralised study centres (Rennie & Mason, 2007; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). Peters (2000) sees distance education as an industrialised way of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes in a learning context

characterized by a division of labour, where, in order to realise economies of scale, electronic and other media are used to reach large numbers of students. This implies that academic, administrative and counselling support are likely to be provided by people who are not themselves necessarily the developers of the learning materials.

With the arrival of newer technologies, such as radio, audio, and other electronic media the ODL attracted other definitions, among them the notion of ‘open learning’ (Taylor, 2001). This term refers to the relaxing of policies and practices, removing barriers such as age, gender, or time constraints, geographical distance and personal barriers, such as family confinement, lack of educational infrastructure and reduction of costs. It recognises prior and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2002), thus allowing many more people entry to learning (COL, 2000). No one is excluded in such a learning environment, which is defined by life-cycles, locations and time, allowing learning to take place at anytime, anywhere (COL, 2000; Peters, 2000:98, 2003), and the recognition of the notion of prior learning.

Another term used to describe ODL is ‘flexible learning’ (Farrell, 2003; Garrison, 2003; Gibson, 2003; Peters, 2000:156). This refers more to scheduling of activities and self-pacing than to any particular delivery mode. It allows distance learners to learn what they want, when they want, and to decide how they want to learn. In so doing, they take responsibility for their learning (Garrison, 2003; Peters, 2000). Flexible learning is associated with the relaxation of administrative structures and curricula, as well as with methods of teaching and learning using the emerging technologies (Simonson et al., 2006), thus accommodating both on-campus and off-campus learners, particularly in dual-mode institutions. Open and flexible learning offers widening access and participation to educational opportunity through ODL (COL, 2000; Edwards, 2002; Farrell, 2003; Garrison, 2003; Peters, 2000; Simonson et al., 2006), because they open up opportunities for lifelong learning. In this context, the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (Republic of Botswana, 1994) has also opened up opportunities for PTC holders, allowing them to be upgraded to diploma level through in-service training, without leaving their families to attend training in a conventional institution.

The definitions of ODL discussed above have a bearing on the effectiveness of support services for distance learners in the DPE programme. Here, the learners are adult teachers who are studying on their own, and are separated from their tutors, peers and the ODL institutions giving the support services. They enroll in the ODL programme because it gives them the flexibility to learn while keeping their jobs and taking care of their families. A further consideration is that, through the ODL facilitation methodology, they are able to study for a diploma and upgrade their qualifications from the PTC to the diploma level. However, since they are returning to studies after a long time, they need to be provided with learner support to reduce the physical and psychological gap, as explained in the ODL definitions and the literature on learner support needs (Hope, 2006). Furthermore, these definitions of ODL are relevant to this study since distance learners are separated from their tutors and study alone in isolation from each other and the ODL-providing institutions. As indicated in the reviewed literature (COL, 2000; Farrell, 2003), the flexibility of the ODL delivery mode allows them to study part-time as they continue to serve their employers and take care of their families (Dearnley, 2003).

2.3. Meanings of learner support services

To answer the research question, which sought to understand the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme, I needed to know what the term 'learner support services' referred to in the context of ODL. In this regard, different definitions were explored. Simpson (2002), for example, defines learner support services as comprising all those activities beyond the production and delivery of learning materials. He categorizes learner support specifically as academic support, consisting of tutorials where tutors help learners to understand the learning materials by defining and explaining content and by providing appropriate study skills. Sewart (1993), Thorpe (2001, 2002a, 2002b), supported by Kelly & Watts (2001), describe learner support services as institution-based, with clearly defined systems. Learners are helped by the staff in the institution to interpret and understand the learning materials and make use of educational resources in handling learning difficulties. To address such problems, Thorpe (1994) suggested introducing correct information and ODL skills at the pre-enrolment, registration, and orientation stages. Tresman (2002) and Usun (2004) maintain

that distance learners should receive an explanation of their content workload, plus any other information about opportunities for interacting, sharing ideas and encouraging each other during the course of their studies. In this view, learner supporters are seen as intermediaries who are able to talk the language of the learner in accessing services and resources from complex and bureaucratic institutions (Ashby, 2004; Lewis, 1995; Tait, 2000, 2003a; Tresman, 2002; Usun, 2004). Although learner support services were incorporated in the DPE programme, their strengths and weaknesses in addressing these issues had not been evaluated, thus creating a gap between service delivery and its effectiveness.

In another definition, Thorpe (1994) describes learner support services as constituting all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners before, during and after the learning process. To this end, the learner supporters will need to understand both the profiles of the learners and their needs. The functions of learner support services in ODL should include the provision of academic support, through interaction with tutors and peers, ODL service providers, family members, friends, employers and significant others within a supportive structure and a supportive learning environment (Thorpe, 1994). Thorpe (1994) and Anderson (2003) further maintain that the identity of learners, interaction and time/duration are key elements of learner support services.

In this context, Thorpe (1994) stressed the need for the supporting institution to build interpersonal interaction, whether synchronously or asynchronously, with a known learner or a group in order to distinguish effective learner support services from other elements of ODL systems. In this regard, it is important to heed the advice of Keegan (1996:156) when he describes learner support as comprising the essential feedback mechanisms that are characteristic of education. This view is supported by Tait (2003a, 2003b), Simpson (2002), Hodgson (1993) and Thorpe (2002a) when they refer to learner support services as offering distance learners academic advice, information about the programme of study, exploring problems and suggesting directions, as well as assessment, feedback and practical help in the form of study skills, so as to empower them to study on their own.

Like Thorpe (1994), the UNISA Teaching and Learning Policy (UNISA, 2008) defines learner support services as helping learners by giving tuition support, peer support to promote dialogue, and administrative support through the provision of timely, accurate and accessible information about all aspects of the learning process. Hodgson (1993), Simpson (2002) and Thorpe (2002a, 2002b) examine the nature of support (academic and non-academic) and the providers (tutors and the ODL institution), and suggest the need for learner support services so as to close the gap between learners, ODL providers and other learners, as discussed in section 2.4 below. A running theme in these different meanings of learner support services (Keegan, 1996; Sewart, 1987, 1993; Tait, 2003a, 2003b; Thorpe, 1994; UNISA, 2008) is that support services are an essential component of ODL. The reviewed literature confirms that they help learners solve both academic and non-academic problems, so as to succeed in their studies.

In this study, these definitions offered a platform on which the effectiveness of the functions of learner support services in the DPE programme could be discussed. By emphasizing that learner support services should respond to a known learner or group of learners in a specified time duration, Thorpe (1994) stressed the need for ODL providers to compile and use profiles of distance learners for formulating learner support services. These would facilitate the provision of effective academic and non-academic support and feedback within a specified timeframe (Keegan, 1996; Tait, 2003a) and within an institutionalized support system (Sewart, 1993). Given the low completion rates and the high incidence of incomplete results in the DPE programme, the concerns raised in the reviewed literature (Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009; Wright, 2008), justified the need for this study to assess the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

From these definitions it was also necessary to discover whether learner needs and expectations in the DPE programme were known, understood and met in an empathetic manner, as outlined by Holmberg (2003) in the theory of distance education based on empathy, which is discussed in detail in this chapter (§5.4). The reviewed literature (Holmberg, 1995; Hope 2006; Saba, 2000; Tait, 2003a; Tresman, 2001) stresses that, in order to reduce the physical and psychological distance, tutorial, counselling and administrative support are needed. Interaction between learners, tutors and the ODL institution would be promoted with the provision of timely and

constructive feedback, through which learners would be able to judge their own learning progress. In this regard, it was necessary to understand learner support services in the wider discipline of ODL.

2.4. Development of ODL as a field of study

In this section, I reviewed literature related to the development of learner support services within the ODL discipline. According to Taylor (2001), both correspondence education, which was the precursor, and the first generation of ODL relied mainly on print technology and adopted newer and electronic technologies such as the audio as they entered the market in different parts of the world. Correspondence education, as it was known in Britain, France and Germany, took its name from its use of the postal service (Simonson et al., 2006). It was also called 'home study' in America and 'external studies' in Australia, in order to distinguish ODL from institutionalized face-to-face conventional education. Around 1840, Isaac Pitman started teaching shorthand by correspondence through the post (Simonson et al., 2006), while the University of London, founded in 1858, became the first tertiary institution in Europe to offer degree and diploma courses by correspondence. In 1969, the Labour Government under Harold Wilson set up the Open University of the United Kingdom, which became one of the world's mega-universities (Daniel, 1996). In America, correspondence education was pioneered in 1877 by the Illinois Wesleyan College, followed by the University of Chicago in 1892 (Birnbaum, 2001). In Australia, the University of Queensland established its first department of correspondence education in 1911 (Simonson, et al., 2006). UNISA, one of the oldest tertiary institutions in Africa, was founded in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope, with one of its roles being that of an examining body for affiliated colleges (Daniel, 1996, 1999). It was renamed UNISA in 1916 and moved to Pretoria in 1946 from where it began to offer correspondence courses for the equitable inclusion of marginalized communities (Daniel, 1996).

One of the major criticisms of correspondence education, home study and external studies was that they did not offer any form of support to the students, many of whom were adults with occupational, social and family commitments (Simonson et al., 2006). In the 1930s and 1940s, radio broadcasts and audio began to carry instructional content, changing the learning

environment from print media to a combination of print and electronic media, foreshadowing the multimedia and the second generation of ODL (Taylor, 2001). The third generation of ODL can be traced from the 1970s through the 1990s, when audio-teleconferencing and video-teleconferencing, coupled with audio graphic communication, became available for teaching purposes (Taylor, 2001). According to Taylor (2001), the fourth and fifth generations of ODL have exploited interactive media and the internet-based worldwide web and computer-mediated communication to reach distance learners either individually or in groups. In the context of this study, these historical developments underscore the paradigm shift in ODL, from reliance on print media with minimal learner support to the application of emerging technologies, carrying content and facilitating support for distance learners as discussed in this chapter (§2.9).

ODL associations have played a key advocacy role at the international, regional and national levels (Bunker, 2003). The International Council on Correspondence Education (ICCE), which had been in existence since 1936, changed its name in 1982 to the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) in order to lay a greater emphasis on the provision of decentralised learner support services through emerging educational technologies (Bunker, 2003:58). The Commonwealth of Learning (COL), based in Vancouver, Canada (COL, 2000), has played a key role in the development of ODL by bringing together practitioners to share experiences in short training workshops and, participation in the biannual Pan-Commonwealth conferences (Bunker, 2003). Within the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), are the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), of which Botswana is a member country (DEASA, 2006), and the National Association of Distance Education Organisations of South Africa {NADEOSA} (NADEOSA, 2009). The aim of the Botswana Distance and Open Learning Association, BODOLA, though still at the nascent stage, is to promote good ODL practice both in Botswana and beyond (BODOLA, 2008). In this context, the reviewed literature reinforces the need to assess the contribution and effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DPE programme.

2.5 Theoretical underpinnings of ODL

The intention of this research was to find out why, despite the provision of learner support services, the 2002/2003 cohort in the DPE programme had low pass rates and incomplete results, leading some of the learners to take longer than expected in completing their studies. The purpose of theoretical or conceptual framework in this study was to help me to delimit the research problem and develop relevant research questions and concepts to guide the investigation. The review of literature and my own experience in ODL and interpretation of the academic puzzle enabled me to formulate the theoretical framework. This involved analysing concepts in ODL which were relevant to the problem under investigation. The literature review was selected from descriptions of the meanings of learner support services, definitions of ODL and the role and nature of learner support services, so as to highlight concepts that were relevant to the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme. The theoretical framework further enabled me to select the most appropriate research design and to develop a logical structure which would guide data analysis and presentation of the findings. The theories of ODL discussed in this section provide a basis for the phenomenon under investigation by foregrounding the role and nature of learner support services in ODL.

Reviewed literature (Simonson, et al., 2006) posits that although the ODL discipline has been in existence since the 1840s, it lacked a theoretical basis to inform its practice. As a result, scholars such as Holmberg (1985, 1988), Keegan (1986), Moore (1993) and Peters (1993), articulate the need for a theory of ODL which could provide this field with an identity. To arrive at a practical ODL methodology, a touchstone was needed, against which political, financial, social and educational decisions could be made with confidence (Holmberg, 1986, 1989, 1995; Keegan, 1986; Perraton, 1988). The existence of such a theory, it was argued could reduce the trial-and-error approach which had for a long time, characterized decision making in ODL (Peters, 1993, 2000, 2003; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006; Simonson et al., 2006).

To this end, theoretical underpinnings in ODL strove to explain how ODL could be systematically ordered to reduce learner isolation and marginalization (Amundsen, 1993; Keegan, 1986:105), creating an environment in which learners could study at anytime anywhere

(Saba, 2000; 2003). These theories set out to understand the distance that isolated learners are from their teachers and from other learners, seeking to explain it from a theoretical perspective. Given the thrust of this study, five theories in the ODL discipline were considered appropriate:

- Theory of independence and autonomy
- Theory of interaction and communication
- Theory of industrialisation
- Theory of distance education based on empathy
- Constructivist Theories

2.5.1. Theory of independence and autonomy

The theory of independence and autonomy advocates a learning context in which the learner is self-paced and in control of his/her learning process. Developed by Charles Wedemeyer in the 1960s and 1970s, it predicated an environment in which the learner could study at anytime, anywhere, while being in control of the pacing of the learning process (Saba, 2000, 2003; Wedemeyer, 1974). According to Wedemeyer (1974), the essential elements of the independent and autonomous theory include placing greater responsibility on the learners, providing an effective media mix and methods, and catering for distance learners' different learning styles. Because learning is considered to be non-contiguous (Holmberg, 1995), this theory advocated the facilitation of mediated two-way interactive communication between the learner and the teacher. Peters (2000:48) describes an 'autonomous or independent learner' as a person who is no longer the object of educational guidance but the subject of his/her own education, and takes responsibility for pacing his/her own progress since such learning is individualised most of the time.

Advancing this theory further, Moore (1993, 1994, 2003) and Saba (2003) underscored the need for effective learner support services, to bridge the psychological gap for distance learners who study in isolation, and to help them to solve cognitive, affective and personal problems. In so doing, the theory placed the distance learner at the centre of the learning process. According to Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, (2000), two-way communication (dialogue) is

required to bridge the physical and psychological divide between the learner and the teacher, and create a learning context where autonomous learners are self-paced and assumed to be in control of the learning process (Moore, 1993; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006; Wedemeyer, 1974). Carrying this argument further, Craig & Perraton (2003:107-110) suggest that, although well-designed instructional materials may encourage participation and dialogue, the use of face-to-face tuition, or any other media, is inevitable if learners are to derive meaning from their study materials.

The theory of independence and autonomy has a bearing on my study. As discussed in the definitions (see §2.3) above, distance learners in the DPE programme are separated from their teachers, the ODL institution and from each other most of the time. They need to be given appropriate study skills in order to develop into independent and autonomous learners. In this study, I needed to find out if distance learners in the DPE programme applied the study skills acquired during learner-tutor interaction in order to become independent and autonomous learners. Thus my research addressed the knowledge gap relating to the effectiveness of tutor-learner interaction and whether it assisted distance learners to learn on their own and to complete their studies successfully.

2.5.2 Theory of interaction and communication

One of the issues raised in Chapter 1 (§1.5) was the need for tutor-learner interaction to help distance learners with the course content, and the lack of immediate feedback to their assessment work. The theory of interaction and communication is related to the theory of independence and autonomy since it argues for a didactic two-way communication between learners and tutor/counsellors (Holmberg, 1989; Simonson, Schlosser & Hanson, 1999). Such an interaction would assist learners to make sense of the content of instruction (Saba, 2003). Sewart, (1993), Thorpe (1994) and Hope (2006) contend that the essence of learner support services is to enhance interaction and communication between learners, their tutors and the ODL providers in an empathetic learning context (Holmberg, 1995, 2003). The need for interaction is further supported by Knowles (1975) when he argues that distance learners are mainly adults and, according to the principles of andragogy, need to be supported in a manner

which promotes feelings of mutual respect, collaboration, trust and openness (Knowles, 1975). Prior to this study, these attributes of learner support services had not been documented in the DPE programme and thus needed to be addressed.

In summary, both the theory of autonomy and independence and the theory of interaction and communication are relevant to my study because they underscore the need for learner support services that promote interaction between learners, their tutors and the providing institution (Holmberg, 1995; Moore, 1993; Garrison, 2003). These theories created a platform for me to assess the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme, and to understand the role of tutors and stakeholders in the provision of such services.

2.5.3 Theory of industrialisations of teaching

This theory is relevant to this study because the implementation of the DPE programme involves a division of labour in which, as explained in Chapter 1 (§2.2), different responsibilities are carried out by different people; hence the need to assess how the providers perceive their responsibilities. The theory of industrialisation of teaching, was pioneered by Otto Peters in Germany, and has influenced ODL since the 1960s and early 1970s (Peters, 1993, 2000). It describes ODL as the most industrialised form of education (Simonson et al., 2006). In this theory, (Peters 1993, 2000) likens the execution of different functions in ODL to the division of labour in industry. Applying this theory to ODL, Simonson et al. (2006) and Schlosser and Simonson (2006) compared tasks such as materials development and production, learner support services, assessing and keeping records of assessments to the industrial production of goods because these activities are carried out by different people and hence the need to assess their effectiveness. The organisation of ODL is also influenced by institutional structures similar to those of an industrial organisation (Anderson, 2003; Saba, 2003).

The theory of industrialisation of teaching is relevant to this study, as it provides a basis on which to assess the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in the DPE programme which are outlined in the 2007 MOU between UB & MoESD. It was necessary to discover whether the stakeholders understood and executed their roles and communicated with each

other in a collaborative environment (Masalela, 2007; Paul, 1990). The theory of industrialisation thus strengthened my resolve to interrogate the research questions, which sought to understand participants' perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the provision of learner support services, the barriers that were encountered, and the opportunities for the improvement of service delivery in the DPE programme.

2.5.4 Theory of distance education based on empathy

The theory of distance education based on empathy (Holmberg, 2003) was also selected as relevant to this study, since it embraces many aspects of the theories discussed above. It advocates the introduction of academic support to promote tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction and the provision of timely and constructive feedback in an empathetic and friendly manner, using a conversational style, so that the student may derive pleasure from the learning process (Holmberg, 2003). This theory was considered relevant to my study because it advocates short turnaround times for assignments, thus enabling distance learners to judge their own progress (Holmberg, 2003:81). According to this theory, the ODL:

- serves individual learners who are unable to attend face-to-face institutions for one reason or another;
- is guided and supported by non-contiguous means, mainly pre-produced course materials and mediated communication between learners and a supporting institution (school, university, etc.) which are responsible for course development, instructional learner-tutor interaction, counselling and administration of the teaching-learning process inclusive of the arrangements for the study;
- is open to behaviourist, constructivist modes of learning;
- enhances personal relations between the parties concerned, by providing study pleasure and empathy between learners and those representing the supporting organisation;
- fosters empathy through learning materials that are presented in a friendly, conversational style and mediated with friendly interaction between distance learners and tutors and other staff from the supporting institution;

- puts in place a learning process that includes short turnaround times for the assignments, suitable frequency of assignment submission, constant availability of tutors and other advisors, and includes frequent communication with the supporting institution.

By advocating interaction between learners and service providers, provision of timely and constructive feedback and short turnaround times for assignments Holmberg's theory envisions learner support services which could improve distance learners' progress, completion and success rates. For the present study, this theory offered a means of measuring the effectiveness of academic input, counselling and administrative support, and determining whether the distance learners in the DPE programme received timely and constructive feedback from tutors and other service providers. It was assumed that such interaction through tutorial support could encourage dialogue between learners, tutors and the ODL institution (Garrison, 1993; Holmberg, 2003 and Schunk, 2000), and as a result, help learners to achieve their goals.

2.5.5 Constructivism and learner support services

Holmberg (2003) contends that the theory of distance education based on empathy is open to behaviourist and constructivist modes of learning since it emphasizes interaction between learners and the supporting institution. Tau (2006), supported by Amey (2005), Gatsha (2007), and Gatsha & Evans (2010), argue that interaction is essential, given that ODL caters for diverse groups of learners who, although they are expected to learn on their own, still associate learning with a teacher who is physically present. The presence of tutors as part of the provision of appropriate learner support services is therefore essential to correcting this misconception.

The constructivist epistemology argues that humans construct meaning from available knowledge according to their needs, circumstances and life experiences, even without the assistance of the teacher, since learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Instruction is a process of supporting that construction, rather than communicating knowledge, as is the case in the behaviourist context (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996:171). Constructivist theorists further argue that learning is a

social process (Farrell, Ryan & Hope, 2004; Granger & Bowman, 2003; Morrison & Collins, 1996; Reeves & Okey, 1996; Sahin, 2007; Terblanche, 2010), in which the instructor assumes the role of a coach, offering guidelines and creating an environment in which learners can engage in a dialogue, enabling them to draw constructive conclusions from the teaching and learning experience. According to Beck & Kosnik (2006), learners construct knowledge according to their needs, their circumstances and life experiences.

Chaille, (2008), Driscoll & Wood, (2007), Jonassen, Myers & Killop, (1996), Lentell (2004) and Wilson (1996), all postulate a learning experience in which learners are able to construct knowledge on what they already know from interpreting their own experiences, rather than having the teacher interpret the reality for them, as is the case in behaviourist learning contexts. One of the differences between behaviourist and constructivist theories, as suggested by Duffy & Jonassen (1992) and Schunk (2000), is that constructivist theories allow learners more latitude to construct knowledge on the basis of their own experiences and the learning context than is the case with the behaviourist model. According to Schunk (2000), the behaviourist view is that learning is more effective when learning materials are presented in small chunks, with clear and measurable objectives, where learners can move at their own pace in a context where teachers give immediate feedback (Lentell, 2004:253).

ODL scholars who lean on the constructivist theory (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Elden, Pea & Gomez, 1996; Gunawardena, Wilson & Nolla, 2003; Saba, 2000, 2003; Sammons, 2003) argue that distance learners should be given opportunities to construct knowledge by engaging in active dialogue with tutors and other learners. In this manner, they will be able to develop a deep understanding of knowledge by collaboratively deducing solutions to their learning problems through meaningful construction of ideas based on both current and past knowledge (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Sammons, 2003). Through building communities of learning, with more opportunities for dialogue, they will derive greater meaning from the content of their studies.

There is a link between constructivism and the theory of independence and autonomy, because advocates of the two theories, agree that learning is more effective in learner-centred

environments (Curry, 2003:171), where the learner studies independently, is self-directed and autonomous. Given the behaviourist and constructivist points of view, it was necessary to establish whether learner support services in the DPE programme prepared distance learners to construct their own meanings from the learning materials, rather than relying on their tutors for interpretation.

For this study, and as noted in the reviewed literature (Motswagosele & Marakakgoro, 2009), I needed to establish whether learner support services in the DPE programme prepared learners to construct their own meanings. My assumption was that the support services were meant to facilitate interaction between learners, tutors and the ODL institution (Kamau, 2010a; Wright, 2008), and that this interaction would equip the learners with the study skills needed to develop independence and autonomy. In my view, theories of ODL recognise the circumstances of distance learners and infer support in the form of academic advice, helping them to become independent and take control of the learning process. These theories form the background to this research, expressing the need to mediate a context in which the learners and their teachers are separated in time and space for most of the learning process.

These theories further reflect the need to promote dialogue through feedback which is provided in a friendly and conversational style, thus bringing in the concept of participation in self-help study groups. In the DPE programme, distance learners were separated from their tutors and from other learners, as well as from the institutions providing support. There was a clear need to give them opportunities to interact with tutors and other learners for academic support, with other learners in self-help study groups, and with the ODL stakeholder institutions. Against this background, I needed to investigate participants' feelings about the effectiveness of learner support service in the DPE programme.

2.6 Learner profiles as a basis for determining learning needs

In order to understand distance learners' views about their preparedness for the DPE programme, I reviewed the literature to establish the relationship between learner characteristics and learner needs. According to Holmberg (1995), Melton (2002), Robinson

(1995), Rowntree (1992), Simonson et al. (2006), van Schoor (2010) and Thorpe (1994), ODL providers need to know the demographic factors, motivation, learning styles, learning resources, and educational backgrounds of distance learners, in order to design support services relevant and responsive to their identified needs. Knowing about distance learners' geographical locations is also important, since it relates to the decentralisation of learner support services to regional study centres.

The reviewed literature showed that support services should be responsive to the needs of known learners (Melton, 2002; Stewart 1993; Thorpe, 1994, 2001). In this respect, Aalto and Jalava (1995), Aguti (2006), Reid (1995), Tait (1995) and Threlkeld & Brzoska (1994), argue that the provision of effective support services should start at the pre-enrolment stage with the diagnosis of learners' needs. The information collected would help the support providers to design services that respond to the needs of known distance learners, and shed light on the availability and access to learning resources (Bates, 1995; 2000). As stated by Fadlallah (2009), collating the identities of all registered learners would facilitate easy follow-up and maintenance of correct, up-to-date records of assignments and ensure monitoring of distance learners' progress and programme completion. Other scholars (Moon & Robinson, 2003) argue that, because of their multiple responsibilities (jobs, family and other commitments), which compete for their time and attention, distance learners require specific skills to prepare them for the new style of study. According to Sherry (2003), the majority of distance learners are adults who are returning to school after a long time. For extrinsic reasons they want to improve their qualifications. However, depending on when they left school, they may lack appropriate study skills. For this reason, Sherry (2003) reiterates the need for ODL providers to ascertain the academic backgrounds and commitment of potential learners in terms of their self-directedness in securing support from significant others, availability of time and their literacy in technology. Such information would enable the providers to understand the distance learners' academic readiness and emotional preparedness for the programme of study. In the same vein, Biswas and Mythili (2004) attribute inability to complete courses and dropping out of academic programmes at the Indira Gandhi National University (IGNOU) to personal factors such as lack of time and family commitments.

The literature showed that information about learners is essential to anticipating their needs. In their phenomenological study about expectations of distance learners in an ODL programme, Bird & Morgan (2003) found such learners to be apprehensive about returning to school because of a fear of failure. They argued that lack of support at home, inadequate academic preparedness, unsuitable choice of programmes of study, and changing circumstances, could reduce distance learners' motivation to continue with their studies. Bird and Morgan, (2003) further established that institutions which provide academic guidance and counselling to their learners report a smoother transition to distance learning experiences and more learner satisfaction and retention rates. They concluded that the role of support services was to provide a warm, supportive atmosphere in which learners could interact with their peers, tutors and other stakeholders, because this interaction would help them develop appropriate study skills and self-confidence. This preparation could in turn enhance distance learners' progress and programme completion (Amey, 2008a; Simpson, 2002). The extent to which distance learners interacted with their tutors and other learners in the DPE programme was not known and, this study intended to fill that gap.

The review of literature further indicated that having in-depth knowledge of distance learners facilitated the provision of support services that were closely aligned with their needs. In a study to evaluate the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) at the University of Pretoria, Aluko (2009) found that determining learner profiles was critical to mounting a successful programme of study. Drawing on the evidence from learner profiles, Aluko (2009) showed that in addition to face-to-face contact, mobile phones were used to support learners who were geographically dispersed in rural areas of South Africa because 99% of the learners had access to mobile technology. To improve throughputs in ODL programmes, Aluko (2009) also stressed the need to hold ODL providers accountable for disappointing completion rates. In a similar study on learner profiles, Beukes (2009) asserts that the University of Namibia supplements face-to-face tutorials with telephone contacts, through short messaging systems (SMS), e-mails, a students' newsletter and field trips, in order to reach all learners, irrespective of their geographical location or access to mobile phone networks. In addition, the University of Namibia makes sure that learners have access to physical facilities, such as libraries, laboratories and computer equipment for practical work at designated study centres (Beukes, 2009). Commenting on ODL

programmes at the Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL), Mensah (2006), and Rumble & Koul (2007) observed that the provision of learner support services was efficiently carried out at various study centres. The students received learning materials on time, and tutors handled and returned marked assignments expeditiously. The tutors' marking and performance were monitored regularly, although monitoring of study centre activities still remains a challenge (Rumble & Koul, 2007). Tresman (2002) also stresses the need for ODL institutions to put in place procedures for handover or continuity of care when learners are to be passed on to another tutor, together with peer support, mentoring networks and follow-up strategies to enable them to integrate their academic work with their extra-institutional life.

2.6.1 Effects of learning challenges on programme completion in ODL

To assess the factors that could improve retention and completion of the DPE programme, it was important to understand the challenges and factors that contributed to completion and/or non-completion of an academic programme in ODL. The reviewed literature (Dirr, 2003; Mills et al., 2006; Mostert, 2006; Sharma 2002; Simpson, 2002) noted that unsuccessful learners attributed programme non-completion to changes in family circumstances, illness or bereavement, inappropriate course choice, feelings of isolation, boredom, difficulties in self- and time-management, and poor support from the ODL institution. Scholars such as Ojo and Olakunlehin (2006), Smith and Kelly (1987), Reid (1995) and Tait (2003a, 2004) cited poor previous educational backgrounds and lack of timely and constructive feedback as among the factors which interfered with programme completion. However, Simpson (2002) and Tait (2003a, 2004) warned that distance learners' concerns about lack of time could be a symptom of other underlying causes, including intellectual difficulties, lack of preparation, negative attitudes to studying and poor study habits, all of which they could perceive and misinterpret as a lack of time.

A study by Mehrotra, Hollister, and McGahey (2001:141) on factors which contribute to retention and completion rates in ODL programmes found that learners' and tutors' characteristics, access to learner support services, and the nature of ODL itself influenced programme completion or non-completion. These authors argued that students' approaches to

studying are among the best predictors of completion rates. For example, students with incomplete results tended to be less aggressive in their study habits and not to participate in self-help study groups. According to Mehrotra et al. (2001), such learners did not allocate enough time to their studies. To improve programme completion, Mehrotra et al. (2001) proposed a thorough assessment of students' needs, perceptions and preferences prior to programme launch. Describing learners' experiences in the Open University of the United Kingdom, Ashby (2004), supported by Harrison, Laster, Stennet & Carnwell (2004), and Henri & Kaye (1993), cited the demands of employment, needs of dependants, workload, financial problems, academic difficulties inherited from previous educational backgrounds, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with tutors and tutorials, time and work pressures, geographical location, unhelpful course information, and personal problems such as balancing part-time studies with family obligations, as among the key factors contributing to incomplete results and early withdrawal from courses.

Morgan (1999), identified dispositional barriers, such as lack of confidence and inappropriate learning styles, situational barriers such as sickness in the family, institutional barriers such as insufficient learner support services, unhelpful information, and difficult content, as among the impediments that could explain distance learners' failure to complete their studies. To assist learners in completing their studies, Kember (1995) and Tinto (1975) developed a throughput model in which they urged educational providers to understand distance learners' characteristics and both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors which motivated them to enroll in an ODL programme. Kember (1989) asserted that individual relationships, family and home life, work, educational background, age and other intrinsic factors were major determinants of distance learners' persistence in a programme of study. Such learners valued interaction with teachers who helped them to clarify content (Bray, Aoki & Dlugosh, 2008), since this enabled them to study more effectively on their own. Judging from the literature, I concluded that for this study I needed to discover whether learner support services on the DPE programme were assisting distance learners to reach their intrinsic and extrinsic expectations.

Another study by Tresman (2002) about improving students' retention in programmes of the Open University in the UK described non-completers as those who had participated but failed to reach the required standard (standard to me meaning completion of a programme of study).

Using this concept, I selected a sample of completers and of non-completers who were still participating but had not completed the course in order to establish whether the learner support services had or had not helped them to complete the DPE programme (Kamau, 2010a, 2010b). Although this study was not about attrition from a programme of study, I found that studies by Ashby (2004), Morgan (1999), Smith & Kelly (1987) and Tresman (2001) on factors which affect retention, completion and success rates in ODL programmes were relevant, since I specifically needed to find out how learner support services assisted learners to complete their studies in the DPE programme.

In another study by Lephoto & Mohasi (2009) at the National University of Lesotho, it was found that challenges which interfered with distance learners' progress and programme completion in Lesotho included lack of permission from employers to attend scheduled tutorials. Learning contexts such as remote rural areas with no electricity or public transport, which were far from the schools and study centres where support services were located and mountainous terrain made some areas inaccessible by radio and/or telephone. To improve learners' progress and completion in ODL programmes, Tresman (2002) and Usun (2004) proposed the implementation of completion and non-completion strategies. These would include providing distance learners with accurate and relevant information about their courses during registration and orientation, as well as addressing issues of content workload and density of concepts.

Judging from the reviewed literature, there seemed to be a knowledge gap about the demographic profiles, academic background and learning styles of distance learners, enrolled for the DPE programme who were assumed to be PTC holders (Munger, 1995; Republic of Botswana, 1993, 1994; Sedisa & Bogopa, 2008; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009; Wright, 2008). Given this lack of established learning needs, together with the high incidence of incomplete results, it was necessary to investigate the effectiveness of support services in addressing the needs of distance learners on this programme. As stated by Kamau (2002, 2004), some of the learners had taught for over twenty years after their initial teacher training, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3. Although the support services gave learners an opportunity to interact with tutors and other learners, this interaction had not been evaluated to establish its effectiveness in meeting the needs of distance learners, nor did it appear from the review of literature. The question then arose

whether the learner support services in the form of academic, counselling and administrative support assisted or failed to assist distance learners' progress and programme completion. Given the need for answers to these questions, this study set out to address this gap.

2.7 Role of learner support services in ODL programmes

In this section, the literature was reviewed to discover the opinions of other researchers about the role and nature of learner support services in ODL, in order to relate their views to the effectiveness of such services in the DPE programme. As established in the definitions of ODL (see § 2.2), distance learners study in isolated environments without encouragement from tutors, the ODL institution, or their colleagues (Gibson, 1998; Hope, 2006; Martins, 2007; Olgren, 1998; Robinson, 1995; Wang, 2005). This could cause low levels of motivation, compounded by anxiety and fear of failure, and subsequently result in non-completion of their studies. This study set out to measure how far the extant support services helped learners to study in this separate context and relate this to the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme.

The reviewed literature (Bernath Kleinschmidt & Walti, 2003; Leem & Lim, 2007; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlop, 2003; Moon & Robinson, 2003) stressed the need for ODL providers to encourage interaction of distance learners with ODL institutions which otherwise could be both inaccessible and impersonal. In a study carried out to determine the relevance of learner support services at the National Teachers' College (NTI) in Nigeria, Ukpo (2005, 2006) reported that students valued the administrative, academic and counselling support they received, although they considered the materials distribution and library services poor. They also valued support from tutors and study centre administrators, but raised concerns about inadequate material resources at the study centres (Ukpo, 2005:204). In another study carried out to determine the quality of support programmes for distance learners at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, Adelowotan & Adewara (2009) reported that learners appreciated tutorial and library support, including support services at the study centres, but were not satisfied with the way the personnel in the centres attended to their complaints. This study found that learners would have appreciated more contact with their tutors through mobile phone technology to

supplement face-to-face contacts. Commenting on the use of mobile phones to support distance learners, Maher and Rewt (2001) and Famuyiwa (2009) noted that mobile technologies such as cell phones, personal computers, and laptops, have made pedagogies less stressful since tertiary institutions in Nigeria now use them to generate and disseminate information to learners.

The studies by Adelowotan and Adewara (2009), Famuyiwa (2009) and Ukpo (2005) demonstrate the value that distance learners attach to support services, reinforcing the need to assess their effectiveness. In another research on problems of part-time students in Ghana, Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko & Torto (2009) identified family, work, institutional chores, taking care of small children and aging parents and spouses, noisy environments, lack of time and poor time management, power cuts and social commitments as some of the constraints that prevent distance learners from completing their programmes of study. Similar trends were reported in Botswana by Butale (2008) and Wright (2008) who found that teachers in the DPE programme perform multiple tasks, as they combine part-time studies with attending to their daily work and raising their families.

Tait (2003a) reported low success and poor completion rates in external programmes of the University of London, which were attributed to a lack of learner support services. In a study which investigated the perceptions of decision makers, tutors and learners about the impact of learner support services in tertiary institutions in China, Wang (2005:7) established that a learning support system which prepared distance learners to become self-directed was highly valued. Though my study could yield similar results, it is contextually different from the ones conducted by Wang (2005) and Ukpo (2005), since it is addressed to a different target group, that of the DPE programme in Botswana. In another study, Tait (2003b) attributes the low success rates at the UNISA to lack of learner support services, which were not put in place until after the apartheid era. Louw & Engelbrecht (2006: 82) argue that the continuing low pass rates at UNISA, which has over 200,000 learners and over 600 study centres, are due to inadequate learner support services, admission policies which are too open, inadequate course materials, and insufficient formative assessment and feedback processes. Stressing the need for effective support services at UNISA, Killen, Marais & Leodolff (2003), Lessing & Schulze (2003), and

Tshivhase (2008) cite lack of contact between lecturers and learners and lack of self-help study groups as some of the major factors contributing to low performance and pass rates at UNISA. Tshivhase (2008) recommends further research to establish whether the goals for learner support at UNISA are fit for purpose, as outlined in the UNISA Teaching and Learning Policy (UNISA, 2008). From this literature review, I concluded that since distance learners on the DPE programme are adults who are returning to school after a time lapse, they require effective support services to help cope with their studies (Amey, 2005, 2008a; Kamau, 2010a; Nonyongo, 1999).

In order to assess the effectiveness of learner support services, I needed to understand the meaning of the term 'effectiveness'. I adopted the description by Clark (2005), and O'Neil (2005) who relate effectiveness to the successful result or outcome of an action. Oliveira and Orivel (2003:220) and Morrison, Brand & Cilliers (2006), relate the term to the way learning support is conducted. For support services to be termed effective, Robinson (1995) and Hannafin (2003) maintain that there must be frequent contact between tutors, learners and their peers, regular provision of timely feedback, explanation of difficult content, and access to learning resources such as libraries, laboratories and necessary equipment.

From these definitions, I concluded that academic, advisory, administrative, counselling and infrastructural support could be termed effective if it helps to sustain distance learners in their studies, and improves retention and completion rates (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Dearnley, 2003; Robinson, 1995; Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2003a). I also concluded that promoting tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction in self-help study groups, while giving learners access to learning resources in an empathetic and friendly environment (Holmberg, 2003), could lead to effective learner support in the DPE programme. Judging from the reviewed literature, the role of academic and counselling support in either helping or hindering distance learners in the completion of their studies in the DPE programme needed to be established. Since the DPE programme was designed for learners with higher academic requirements compared to the PTC holders, it was necessary to understand how distance learners' previous educational backgrounds prepared them for the DPE diploma curriculum. In this regard, I agreed with Braham & Piela (2009), Hill & Taylor (2009) and Lezberg (2003) when they argue that an ODL institution

should ascertain before admission that distance learners are qualified for the programme they apply for. It was therefore necessary to determine the nature of learner support services, which is discussed in the next section.

2.7.1 Academic support in ODL

In this section, the literature was reviewed to establish the nature of academic support and compare it with the one given in the DPE programme and its effect on distance learners' progress and programme completion. Devlin (1993), Holmberg (1985, 2003) and Thorpe (1988) contend that academic support refers to interaction between learners and the tutors, where tutors enrich the learning experience through explanation and clarification of content. It also entails marking and grading assignments, and helping learners with timely and constructive feedback, as well as providing further information to supplement the pre-produced, self-paced instructional materials. The literature on feedback mechanisms in the DPE programme (Sedisa & Bogopa, 2008; Wright, 2008) indicated that there was absenteeism at tutorials, frequent incidents of lost assignments and scripts, poor entry of marks, suggesting lack of accountability, and delayed feedback from tutors and institutional managers.

As noted by Fodzar, Kumar & Kannan (2006), Fouche (2006), Freeman (2004), Tau (2006) and Thorpe (1988), distance learners invest a great deal of effort and emotion in their studies. ODL institutions therefore have a moral duty to contact them and give them feedback on their performance. In this, I agree with Curry (2003) and Hattie and Timperley (2007) when they state that the provision of timely and constructive feedback, together with access to learning resources, is the backbone of interaction, since it helps distance learners develop error-detection skills on their own. Holmberg (1985) maintains that distance learners seem to benefit from feedback on assignments in the form of comments and corrections, if the feedback is given between 7 and 14 days, reflecting the need for frequent learner-tutor contact to enhance two-way communication. The literature further contends that improved performance in learning contexts will follow when distance learners engage in didactic, self-directed studies in groups, with or without a tutor (Holmberg, 1986; Moore, 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). As argued by Holmberg (2003), Horne & Naude (2007: 270) and Thorpe & Grugeon (1987), distance learners

need to reflect on their learning if they are to develop towards becoming independent and self-directed learners. In this regard, I concur with Morrison (1999), Robinson (1995), Stark and Warne (1999), and Tait (2003a), when they assert that distance learners need to interface with learning resources in order to gain practical experience in the required subjects. However, a weakness of the tutor-led tutorial system, according to Simpson (2002), is that it may perpetuate the notion that learning is tutor-focused, rather than student-focused. This would tend to negate the theories of independence and autonomy introduced earlier (see §2.5) which strive to develop learners towards becoming autonomous (Moore, 1994).

In another study investigating students' success or their failure at UNISA, Risenga (2010) found that factors contributing to students' success included the provision of academic advice through attending tutorials, since these offered distance learners an opportunity to interact with their tutors and their peers. Risenga (2010:96) cited lack of adequate prerequisite knowledge for a course, inadequate grasp of subject matter arising from difficulties in comprehending the learning materials, lack of regular assistance and timely feedback from tutors, of contact in practical subjects and of interaction with peers, and poor time management, as factors contributing to drop-out and failure at UNISA. Commenting on the tutor-learner interaction, Robinson (1995) identified the role of the tutor as:

- providing tutorials to help learners to understand the content through discussion, marking assignments, commenting and giving feedback on learning materials and on students' written work;
- helping learners to form and participate in self-help study groups;
- demonstrating and supervising practical work;
- keeping records of students' progress;
- answering learners' queries during face-to-face tutorials or by telephone;
- acting as intermediaries between learners and the ODL institution.

In their investigation of lecturers' expectations of post-graduate supervision in a distance education context in South Africa, Lessing and Schulze (2003:159) concluded that academic support is essential, particularly feedback in the supervision of research projects, since distance

learners may not have adequate research skills. Lessing & Schulze (2003) also note that poor knowledge and guidance skills on the part of lecturers, inefficient systems for allocating students to supervisors, and poor quality of feedback could all contribute to distance learners' failure to complete their research projects. These views were echoed by Fouché (2006) in a study to investigate tutors' perceptions about working in isolation from colleagues, which found that UNISA tutors received under-average training and administrative support, and appreciated the regular professional support they received from their colleagues. Although my study is not about tutor support, it was essential to understand the kind of support that tutors were given to prepare them for their new roles in the DPE programme, bearing in mind that as intermediaries (Sewart, 1987, 1993; Thorpe, 1994) they are assumed to be in contact with learners in the provision of learner support services. Thompson and Irele (2003) and Terblanche (2010) emphasize that tutors who supervise research projects and portfolios need to be oriented and trained in research skills.

In summary, the reviewed literature (Botha, 2010; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009; Risenga, 2010) stresses the importance of both academic and non-academic support to enable distance learners to interact with their tutors and ODL providers for instructional purposes and with their peers for socialisation, since it is assumed that such interaction will enhance their progress and programme completion (Amey, 2008a, 2008b; Simpson, 2002). According to Botha (2010), barriers related to the lack of appropriate study skills and the challenges of difficult content include learning styles (Kurasha, 2003), institutional factors such as heavy workloads for both learners and tutors, lack of commitment by tutors, and the lack of clear information about assignments (Siaciwena, 2000). Egbert, (2000), Manning, (2001), Mayor & Swann, (2002), Mitchell, (2005) and Sampson (2003) attribute distance learners' inability to understand content and write assignments to their difficulties with the language of instruction. Lephoto & Mohasi (2009) cite social and cultural factors such as fulfilling community responsibilities, and attending funerals. Other problems are related to low self-esteem particularly in environments where ODL is perceived as of inferior quality (Dzakiria, 2004). Attitudes such as these, which are often carried over from the conventional system, are among the challenges with which distance learners have to contend (Botha, 2010; Kurasha, 2003; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009;

Pfukwa & Matipano, 2006). The extent, to which they can be said to affect distance learners' completion of their studies in the DPE programme needed to be established in the context of Holmberg's (2003) theory of distance education based on empathy.

In this study, tutors, programme coordinators and institutional managers, who are discussed in Chapter 1 as intermediaries, provide learner support services in the DPE programme. In order to carry out their roles effectively, Beyth-Maron, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, Bar-Haim & Godder (2006) argue that tutors, who are mostly part-time to ODL programmes need to be motivated through orientation to their new duties, as well as given other incentives to exert themselves above and beyond the call of duty. In their study to assess tutors' job satisfaction and work motivation at the Open University of Israel, Beyth-Maron et al. (2006) concluded that tutors' work motivation, job satisfaction and organisational identification influence their decision to work for the institution and do more than their job description demands. Grant & Spencer (2003), Watkins & Kaufman (2003) and Wolcott (2003) assert that clear institutional commitment, adequate information and compensation guidelines are needed as incentives to encourage staff to participate in distance education programmes. Other incentives range from workload adjustments, with release time for staff to prepare for distance learners, extra financial compensation, and training in ODL practices and ICT technical skills, including the skills to support distance learners and maintaining a conducive work environment.

In this context, it was important to understand the reward system in the DPE programme. Apart from paying for programme coordination, tutorials and setting, marking and assessing work, the remuneration rates (University of Botswana, 2002) do not cover other services, such as counselling support, which distance learners are expected to receive from stakeholder institutions. Wolcott (2003) argued that the existence of a positive and supportive institutional leadership, particularly in dual-mode institutions, such as the University of Botswana and Colleges of Education, was necessary to encourage staff to participate in ODL activities and reduce the marginalisation of ODL programmes.

In this study, it was assumed that payment rates influenced staff in stakeholder institutions to participate in the DPE programme activities; hence my need to find the participants' views about

the effectiveness of payment as an incentive in this programme. In addition, I needed to discover whether the orientation and incentives given to tutors encouraged them to participate in the provision of academic support in the DPE programme, and how this affected the quality of tutorials, assessment and feedback mechanisms.

2. 7. 2 Counselling support in ODL

In this section, the literature was reviewed in order to assess the contribution of counselling support to distance learners' progress and programme completion in ODL programmes. Simpson (2002) defines counselling in ODL as the intervention between the learner, the tutor and the supporting institution, aimed at helping learners to solve those academic and personal problems which could interfere with their studies. Simpson (2002) further argues that counselling support is necessary in ODL because distance learners study on their own for most of the time, and problems of anxiety and lack of confidence, coupled with a lack of proper study skills, can interfere with their progress and programme completion. To help learners settle in their studies, Morrison, Brand & Cilliers (2006), supported by Thorpe (1988), posit that before enrolment, learners should be given information on course prerequisites, on how to interact with the learning materials, how to cope with the pressure of work and review their own learning progress, as well as career advice and opportunities for further qualifications. The present study aims to establish whether distance learners in the DPE programme were provided with effective counselling support, as compared to the examples in the reviewed literature.

As discussed in Chapter 1 (§2.3), learner support services were introduced to colleges of education so that distance learners could benefit from available resources. It was assumed that the counselling services which were available for the conventional programme would also be available to distance learners, as per the MoU (UB & MoESD, 2007). The reviewed literature (Butale, 2008; Sedisa & Bogopa, 2008), indicates that distance learners do not appear to benefit from counselling services in stakeholder institutions. This study set out to find out why this is the case and how access to or lack of access to counselling support influence distance learners' progress and programme completion.

There was also the need to determine whether distance learners received emotional support from other support structures, such as family, friends and employers. Bird & Morgan (2003) indicate that employers, workmates, friends and family members are useful sources of emotional support in ODL. In a longitudinal study in a nursing programme in the United Kingdom, Dearnley (2003) investigated the impact of academic, professional and domestic networks in ODL, establishing that students who had support from their professional colleagues, supervisors, tutors and mentors were more motivated to continue with their studies than those who did not participate in similar networks. This study also identified peer group discussions, support from spouses, family, children and friends, including institutional support as among the motivating factors which helped distance learners persist in their studies (Dearnley, 2003:12). These findings are corroborated by Bertram (2003), who reported that distance learners at the University of Natal in South Africa found learning and doing self-test activities in groups useful. Learners gave each other emotional support by encouraging each other to persist in their studies and achieved good marks in their assessments. Similar findings were reported by Snowball & Sayish (2007:321), who emphasised the need for a peer tutorial and assessment system to enhance didactic interaction among distance learners. It was not known whether distance learners in the DPE programme received support from their employers, families and friends, and if they did, what effects this support had on their learning progress and programme completion. In the context of this study, there seemed to be a gap regarding the type of counselling support the learners received, giving rise to questions about how this support affected their progress and programme completion in the DPE programme. The present study addresses this gap.

2.7.3 Administrative support and stakeholder involvement

In this section, the literature was reviewed to establish the role of stakeholders in the provision, management and monitoring of learner support services in ODL programmes. At the time of the study, it was not known how the stakeholders managed this support, and whether or not the administrative support available facilitated distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DPE programme. I agree with Holmberg (2003) when he insists that the supporting institution is supposed to facilitate regular dialogue between tutors and learners by developing programme management structures which ensure tutors' attendance at tutorials,

learners' interaction with tutors, short turnaround times for assignments and access to learning resources. As stated by Simonson et al. (2006), administrative support in ODL requires coordination of tutorial and assessment functions to ensure effective service delivery and accountability. In this respect, Haughey (2003:56) asserts that the introduction of ODL programmes means that the participants' roles will change, calling for a re-engineering of the conventional institutions. Infrastructural adjustments and changes in traditional power structures and communication patterns are needed in order to integrate ODL activities into the existing institutional activities (Haughey, 2003).

It was therefore necessary to find out whether the stakeholder institution at the planning stage clarified and communicated to learners, tutors and other stakeholders the organisational procedures for dealing with applications, pre-enrolment information, selection, registration and procedures for the dispatch of learning materials. Other questions related to the availability of learning resources, the submission of assignments, marking, commenting and turnaround times from tutors, together with record-keeping procedures and processes, and whether contractual agreements needed for part-time tutors were enforced in order to commit them to what they had signed to do. In the review of literature, I examined the assessment and feedback structures used in the DPE programme to sustain two-way communication between learners, tutors and the ODL institution. In India, the Handbook for Recognition of ODL Institutions (IGNOU, 2009) outlines the mechanisms used to monitor learner support provision, to check that learners receive tutorial assistance, timely feedback with constructive comments, and access to learning resources in the form of libraries, computers and science laboratories at study centres.

For the present study, I needed to examine the monitoring mechanisms of learner support services in the DPE programme, as outlined in the 2007 MoU (UB & Mo ESD) and compare them to other practices in the reviewed literature. Studies carried out in Scotland by the Open University of the United Kingdom, in Australia, and at the California State University, USA (Curry, 2003), found that distance learners value academic advice sessions which highlight enrolment and orientation procedures prior to the introduction to course materials. According to Curry (2003), distance learners consider information on course materials, time management, and preparation of assignment work, as well as reassurance from institutional representatives to be

very helpful because it enables them to make sound judgments when selecting their courses. Information about opportunities to interact with their tutors and their peers was also highly valued by distance learners (Curry, 2003).

2.7.3.1 Determining access to learning resources

In this section, the literature was reviewed to assess distance learners' access to resources in the DPE programme. Perraton & Lentell (2004:31), recommend collaboration in the sharing of institutional resources for optimal utilisation so as to:

- develop and share clear goals and clear statement of purpose;
- define roles for administrative and academic staff for all collaborating partners;
- develop a governing and funding structure in line with the stated purpose of a collaborative venture;
- understand, own and execute their roles and responsibilities effectively for the benefit of distance learners, and commit all partners and their resources.

Reviewed literature (Butale, 2008; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009; Wright, 2008), indicated that the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme had not been evaluated. UNISA (1997a, 1997b, 1997c) purports that evidence for the provision of effective learner support could be demonstrated through the shared use of learning resources. In support of these views, Pidduck & Carey (2006) urged participating institutions to hunt for resources, and to guarantee that staff had the time and expertise to support distance learners. Scholars such as Hon-Chan & Mukherjee (2003), Mukamusoni (2006), Robinson (2006), Shelly, White, Baumann & Murphy (2006), and Siaciwena (2006) all stress the need for ODL institutions to train staff in ODL skills and not assume that because staff are qualified in other areas they are adequately prepared to offer support to distance learners.

2.7.3.2 Providing decentralised learner support services

Literature was also reviewed to establish whether distance learners in the DPE programme had access to decentralised learner support services. Melton (2002) underscores the need for the

decentralised learner support services to be as close as possible to where distance learners live and work. Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlop (2003) prefer the 'scaffolding' learner support structure which offers a clear and elaborate definition of functions for each stakeholder, so as to empower distance learners and reduce their frustration (Bernath et al., 2003). This claim is echoed by Duffy and Cunningham (1996), Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlop (2003) and by Moore (2003), when they argue that empowering learners to manage their learning tasks is a critical administrative function, bearing in mind that many ODL institutions utilise the services of tutors and other stakeholders who are external to the institution. Considering that distance learners in the DPE programme are scattered all over Botswana (Wright, 2008), there was a need to investigate the nature of the decentralised support they received and how it contributed to their progress and programme completion.

At the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), which was established in 2000, Pfukwa & Matipano (2006) found that the ZOU experienced high dropout rates in its early years, particularly in remote rural areas, where distance learners were unable to secure resources beyond the module. Kurasha (2003) noted that distance learners at ZOU, though motivated to learn, showed signs of wanting teachers to stand in front of them, probably as a hang-over from the conventional face-to-face system, and advised ODL providers to inculcate appropriate study skills to enable distance learners to study on their own. Kurasha (2003) also reiterated the need for timely feedback on assignments to help learners judge their own progress. This included encouraging collaborative learning through the creation of self-help study groups at accessible study centres, which Kurasha (2003) claimed provided an environment in which learners could construct their own knowledge through group interaction. It should be borne in mind; however, that some of the students lived in remote rural areas with limited public transport which restricted their chances of attending tutorials at the nearest study centre (Mukeredzi & Ndamba, 2007; Ncube, 2007). At the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), Mmari (1998) acknowledged the role of stakeholders in the provision of decentralised learner support services in twenty-two regional centres, situated in major towns in Tanzania, reaching out to students who lived in remote rural areas with a limited infrastructure. Komba (2004) noted that each study centre in Tanzania required a minimum of forty enrolled learners in order to make its operations economically viable.

2.8 ODL policies and the provision of effective learner support services

The literature was further reviewed to establish how ODL policies contributed to the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme. Pacey & Keough (2003) and Simpson (2002) noted that programme completion in ODL programmes depends on national and institutional policies which clarify staff responsibilities to avoid overlap and role conflict in service delivery. To facilitate this process, Simonson & Bauck (2003) mention seven policy areas in ODL. Among these are academic policies which deal with admissions, assessment and students' records; fiscal, geographic and governance policies to deal with tuition, physical distribution of learners and contracts for collaborators; faculty policies to regulate workloads, promotion and compensation, and support in form of staff development and training; student policies to deal with academic advice, access to resources, equipment and software; and technical and philosophical policies that deal with the achievement of vision and mission statements at the institutional level. Given this claim from the literature, I reviewed the relevant policy documents, among them the 1994 RNPE (Republic of Botswana, 1994), the ODL Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a), and the 2007 MoU between UB and the MoESD, to establish their role in the implementation of support services. As noted in Chapter 1 (§2.3), the colleges run pre-service teacher education programmes, which are now required to provide academic support in the DPE programme, in addition to their other fulltime responsibilities.

Scholars such as Siaciwena (1997, 2000, 2006) and Siaciwena & Rubinda (2008) identified institutional factors such as heavy workloads for learners and tutors and non-responsive organisational structures, mainly prevalent in dual-mode institutions, as among the barriers which affected distance learners' progress at the University of Zambia. Siaciwena (2000) advocates tutorial sessions with a small number of students to ensure effective tutor-learner interaction, with detailed comments on assignments and learner-learner interaction during group discussions. However, because of the over-heavy workload placed on lecturers at the University of Zambia, Siaciwena (1997) observed that the rate at which assignments were marked tended to be slow, which in turn affected the quantity and quality of comments on the assignments. Another study by Botha (2010), which investigated the role of the individual lecturer in

minimizing the obstacles that lower throughputs at UNISA, found that an individual lecturer's (or tutor's) commitment to his/her work also contributed to distance learners' progress and programme completion. Botha (2010) reported on the failure of service delivery, noting that lack of information on assignments, loss of assignments, and institutional barriers, such as learners receiving their learning materials late and phones not being answered were among the obstacles which retarded distance learners' progress and completion. This study showed some correlation on the institutional challenges experienced by distance learners in the DPE programme and learners from UNISA. The main issue, according to Botha (2010), is whether ODL institutions enable distance learners to integrate their multiple responsibilities with their studies. Abrami & Bernard (2006) caution ODL institutions to control attrition in distance education which they viewed as a serious problem, requiring foresight and persistence on the part of ODL providers. As cautioned by Tinto (1975), institutional barriers are a major cause of withdrawal from a distance education programme. My intention in this study was to find out how such barriers were addressed through learner support services in the DPE programme.

In this regard, the literature review explored the existing policy guidelines relating to the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. As explained in Chapter 1 (§2.3), the DPE programme was launched in response to, and in order to implement, Rec. 104 (b):47 of the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) of 1994, which required existing Primary Teacher Certificate holders (PTC) to be upgraded to the Diploma level. Also, the intention of Vision 2016 (Republic of Botswana, 1996) was to give all Batswana the opportunity to enjoy continued and universal education, which are among the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA), (COL, 2009). Withdrawing primary school teachers from the classroom for conventional training would stretch already limited resources and institutional capacities and have a negative effect on human capacity in primary schools, (Dodds, Gaskell & Mills, 2008; Mills, 2006; Munger, 1995; Richarson, 2009; Tau, 2002, 2008a). Launching the ODL DPE programme offered a solution to this problem in Botswana, since the PTC holders could be upgraded without sending them to full-time institutions.

The review of the relevant policy documents shows that, although ODL has been practised in Botswana since independence in 1966, there is no policy framework to guide its implementation (Nhundu, Kamau & Thutoetsile, 2002). This appears to be a major gap in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. Although various education commissions, such as the 1993 National Commission on Education and the 1994 Revised National Commission on Education recommended the provision of resources to facilitate the implementation of ODL programmes at pre-tertiary and tertiary levels, there continues to be a lag in the translation of these policies into practice (Kamau, 2007, 2009).

To provide effective learner support services, Tau (2006) and Thutoetsile & Tau (2006) advocated the development of a learner-centred support strategy that would ensure regular contact between learners and their tutors and between learners and other learners, and maintenance of correct and up-to-date records. As stated by (Amey, 2002, 2008a, 2008b; Mills, Marchessou, Nonyongo & Tau 2006), ODL programmes benefit from a tutor marking system that guarantees timely and constructive feedback and address distance learners' queries in an empathetic, caring, patient, helpful and compassionate manner. The Botswana College of Open and Distance Learning (BOCODOL) has increased enrolment and participation in academic programmes since it started its operations in 1998, and improved its pass rates as a result of the introduction of decentralised learner support services (Tau, 2006). At the commencement of this study, it was not clear whether the same could be said about the contribution of learner support services in the DPE programme at the University of Botswana, hence the need to fill this gap.

One factor which may have perpetuated the prevalence of incomplete results, as noted by Tau (2008a, 2008b), was the lack of clarity in the college management structures for processing DPE assessment work, particularly for learners who received tutorial support at (MCE) and Tonota secondary colleges of education. Tau (2008a) noted that the final results of distance learners attending tutorials at secondary colleges of education were processed by Academic Boards of Primary Colleges of Education. This practice tended to frustrate the efforts of distance learners, tutors and the programme coordinators, since deadlines were not met. The CAD of UB, which is the quality assurer, did not know whom to hold accountable for the

delays (University of Botswana, 2008b, 2008c). The intention of this study was to understand the contribution of institutional policy guidelines to distance learners' progress and

The reviewed literature further shows that UB intended to provide support services to distance learners (Dodds, Gaskell & Mills, 2008). The ODL Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana (2005a), the Articulation and Recognition of Prior Learning Policy (University of Botswana, 2009), the Teaching and Learning Policy (University of Botswana, 2008a), and the Academic Quality Management Policy (University of Botswana, 2003), indicate the university's intentions to provide academic support, together with learning resources such as laboratories, equipment, decentralised library services, and efficient record keeping. The 2005 ODL Mainstreaming Policy of UB intended to provide learner support services as indicated in Table 2.1 below:

Table 2.1: Intentions of the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy of UB

| Elements of the ODL learner support mainstreaming policy | Intended service provision by the University of Botswana |
|---|--|
| Academic support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure provision of helpful, timely pedagogical comments on all assignments; • To provide flexible access to library resources by aligning acquisition, supply and loan policies with the needs and circumstances of distance learners; • To provide opportunities for academic advice at regional and other study centres. |
| Administrative support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure access to quality administrative, advisory and instructional support; • To provide information on admission criteria, registration, scheduling, and timely processing of grades from pre-enrolment to certification; • To provide information through students' handbooks, guidelines, regulations and brochures from study centres. |
| Guidance and counselling support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To assist distance learners with personal problems related to their studies. |
| Infrastructure support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To create and manage regional study centre facilities in collaboration with external organisations to promote and strengthen the delivery of ODL programmes. |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Part-time staff support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To equip part-time tutors, study centre coordinators and other staff with skills in ODL to enable them to execute their responsibilities adequately. |
|-------------------------|--|

Although the 2005 ODL Mainstreaming Policy of UB intended to provide learner support services in rural centres, it was not accompanied by any guidelines to facilitate its interpretation and implementation (Kamau, 2008, 2009). As noted by Motswagosele and Marakakgoro (2009), the policy seemed to cater only for internal academic departments of the UB and not the DPE programme, which is accredited by UB. In pursuit of expanded educational opportunities, UB introduced the Articulation and Recognition of Prior Learning Policy (University of Botswana, 2009). This policy recognises prior learning and lifelong learning, through which learners could be granted credits in terms of their current knowledge, skills and life experiences, regardless of where and when these were acquired. This policy was relevant to the present study, in determining whether prior learning was considered during the implementation of learner support services in the DPE programme, and as such represented a further knowledge gap. Despite the existence of these policies, UB did not appear to have developed elaborate and decentralised learner support services of the kind offered by BOCODOL to support its distance learners (Dodds, et al., 2008; Kamau, 2009). In recognition of this shortcoming, Tony Morrison sought assistance, from the MoESD in 1999, in the letter below:

The Diploma in Primary Education by distance mode...requires laboratories...equipped music rooms...computers at designated study centres...so as to give students hands-on experience in practical subjects...These resources are available at Colleges of Education, Education Centres and Secondary Schools... Students will also require tutors and library services from Colleges of Education.... The purpose of this letter is to ask you to make these resources available to support this programme. (T. Morrison to the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education and Skills Development, November 29, 1999).

In this communication, Morrison hoped to get the assistance of tutors and supervisors by securing release time for them to prepare for tutorials, tests and examinations for the DPE programme considering that UB was not in control of these resources. By getting participants'

views about access to learning resources, my intention was to compare the situation on the ground with what the literature says about the availability of and access to learning resources (Rowntree, 1992).

In reviewing these policy documents, I concurred with Moore & Kearsley (1996) and Gokool-Ramdoe (2008) when they observed that it appeared as if in ODL, although policies were formulated, little was done to find out whether there were any mechanisms at the national and institutional levels to scrutinize whether these policies were carried out, or if they worked (Gokool-Ramdoe, 2008). This study examines the available policy documents to see whether they facilitated the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme completion.

2.9 Role of technologies in the provision of learner support services

The review of literature in this section assessed the availability and accessibility of technology and how this has influenced distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DPE programme. In order to acquire computer literacy skills in the Communication and Study Skills course in the DPE programme (University of Botswana, 1999), distance learners needed access to computer equipment (Morrison, 1999). The 2007 MoU between UB and MoESD emphasised the need to make institutional resources available to distance learners for practical work. The reviewed literature (Butale, 2008; Kamau, 2004, 2010b; Wright, 2008) indicates that distance learners had either limited or no access to computer laboratories and equipment. This reported lack of access to resources in the DPE programme seems contrary to Bates' ACTIONS model (Bates, 1992), in which the author argues that at the programme implementation stage, providers should evaluate learners' technological needs in terms of Accessibility, Costs, Teaching appropriateness, Organisational changes required, Novelty and Speed.

Given this knowledge gap, I planned to obtain participants' views about the support available to facilitate the acquisition of computer literacy skills by distance learners. At the national level, there was evidence in the reviewed literature (Boitshwarelo, 2009; Nleya, 2009; Richardson, 2009) that the Botswana government envisioned a population that was literate in information

and communications technologies (ICTs) from the primary school to the tertiary level. Furthermore, the National ICT Policy, *Maitlamo* (Republic of Botswana, 2005), promised full support for a widespread use of ICTs in the development of all the sectors of the economy, and the creation of community centres to cater for adults who did not have access to technology at home or at their work place. In addition, diversification of technology was evident in other ODL programmes in Southern Africa (Aluko, 2009; Beukes, 2009; Fresen & Hendrikz, 2009), where short messaging (SMS) mobile phone technology was used to support distance learners, supplementing print and face-to-face contact. In Uganda, Kajumbula (2006) found that, with mobile phone software, Makerere University was able to give administrative support to distance learners such as on new dates for submitting assignments.

Reviewed literature (Boitshwarelo, 2009; Nleya, 2009; Richardson, 2009) identify certain challenges and barriers that will have to be overcome in the application of technology to teaching and learning via ODL. Among these are limited telephone connectivity, slow bandwidth, policies which are not supported by implementation guidelines, and a dearth of information and literacy skills in both learners and instructors. Beyond Botswana, and particularly in Africa South of the Sahara, Aderinoye, Ojokheta & Olejede (2007), Leary & Berge (2007), and Nwagu & Ahmed (2009), all identify limited access to ICTs due to poor ICT infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas, limited or no computer ownership, lack of access to the internet, limited knowledge in the use of technology and lack of social support as among the issues that require attention by governments in partnership with the private sector. The review of literature in this section is thus relevant to the research question which sought to assess the barriers that interfere with the provision of effective learner support services and opportunities for improvement.

To improve access to ICT technology for teaching and learning in ODL, Robinson (2006), Richardson (2009) and Lewis, Friedman & Schoneboom (2010) suggest integrating ICT skills in the school curriculum and tackling the technical, human and cultural challenges involved, including the improvement of ICT infrastructure (Mkhize, 2010). To support distance learners effectively, Mabunda (2010) urges ODL providers to ensure that staff members are well trained and equipped with adequate knowledge of ICT technologies, with access to suitable and

sufficient ICT facilities, and that equipment is well maintained to support teaching and learning in ODL. To ensure quicker communication, Wright (2008) and Sikwibele & Mungoo (2009) advise the use of e-mails and facsimiles, so learners in the DPE programme can send their assignments expeditiously to their tutors in colleges of education for marking.

In this section, it was necessary to understand the challenges confronting distance learners regarding access or otherwise to technology and how this affected their progress and programme completion. The reviewed literature (Butale, 2008; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009; University of Botswana, 1999; Wright, 2008) reflects a need to understand how the available learner support services have facilitated access to technology for distance learners on the DPE programme.

2.10 Some considerations about the provision of effective learner support services in ODL

One of the major issues in this study was to understand the mechanisms required for the implementation of effective learner support services in the DPE programme. In this regard, I found the studies by Robinson (1995) and Welch & Reed (n.d) useful, because they make direct reference to the provision of effective learner support services in ODL programmes. I found the criteria for the implementation of effective learner support services by Welch & Reed (n.d), relevant to my research because it has some relevance to the definitions of learner support services by Sewart (1993), Thorpe (1994) and Simpson (2002) in terms of suggesting useful direction for the formulation and provision of effective learner support services. By describing learner support services as comprising all those activities which go beyond the production and distribution of learning materials, Simpson (2002) stresses the importance of such support during programme delivery. This definition provided a basis for me to seek answers to the main research question which sought to assess the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme. The contestation by Thorpe (1994), echoed by Melton (2002), that learner support services should address a known learner or group of learners underscores the need for learner profiles. In the reviewed literature, Sewart (1993) views learner support services as institution-based, confirming the ODL theory by Holmberg (2003) that distance learners require support services to be provided by an institution.

The reviewed literature indicated that the existing knowledge on learner support services is fragmented with different researches concentrating on different aspects of learner support services. The need for implementing learner support services for known distance learners was emphasized in the reviewed literature (Melton, 2002; Munger, 1995; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 1994). Other studies by (Ashby, 2004; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009; Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko & Torto, 2009; Tresman, 2001, 2002; Usun, 2004) laid emphasis on challenges experienced by distance learners and their effects on their progress and programme completion. Studies by (Siaciwena, 1997; Siaciwena & Rubinda, 2008) discuss the effects of organisational unresponsiveness to distance learners' progress while (Komba, 2004; Kurasha, 2003; Mmari, 1998) provide vital information on the need for decentralised learner support services in ODL programmes. The other area which has attracted research in the reviewed literature (Botha, 2010; Robinson, 1995) has to do with the roles of tutors' commitment in enhancing distance learners' progress and programme completion. In this regard (Haughey, 2003; Lessing & Schulze, 2003; Wolcott, 2003) stress the need for empathetic ODL policies and institutional guidelines to address the recognition and ownership of ODL programmes particularly in dual mode institutions in order to ensure the availability and access of learning resources to distance learners. In my view, these studies lack a holistic approach to the provision of learner support services. For this reason, I took a different approach and included distance learners, and intermediaries such as the providers and policy makers in order to understand the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress from a variety of sources as explained in the research design in Chapter 3.

A number of authors expressed the need for effective support in ODL (Keegan, 1996; Moore, 1994) in order to break the physical and psychological separation between learners, tutors and other learners. Other authors (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Dearnley, 2003) were categorical that ODL institutions which provided guidance and counselling to their learners and sustained two-way communication recorded higher retention and completion rates compared to institutions that did not. Risenga (2010) maintains that academic support through tutorials, peer interaction and quick turnaround times on assignments contributes to distance learners' success. Stressing

the need for learner support services, Tait (2003a, 2003b) attributes low pass rates at the University of London and at UNISA to a lack of effective learner support services.

2.10.1 Limitations in the implementation of effective learner support services

While the literature reviewed seemed to agree on the criteria for the provision of learner support services which respond to the known needs of distance learners, there appeared to be a lack of clarity on the implementation processes. Although these limitations or gaps are explained in each section of this chapter, a brief summary is included in this section.

I found the reviewed literature both descriptive and prescriptive, with little advice about mechanisms for the implementation of effective learner support services. The prescriptive literature focused on what learner support should be (responsive to the needs of learners), while the descriptive literature described the type of support that could be offered (academic, counselling and administrative support). The prescriptive literature covered the purpose, definition and roles of learner support services in ODL, the definitions and theories of ODL, and the policy implications for the provision of effective learner support services. On the other hand, the descriptive literature concentrated on the nature of learner support services and the providers or the intermediaries, without clarifying the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress.

Rowntree (1992) and Munger (1995) indicate that it is necessary to have and apply information about learner profiles in order to set up support services that are responsive to the needs of learners. However, the literature lacks models or examples in which learner profiles are applied to inform the formulation and implementation of learner support services. Instead, it highlights the challenges that distance learners face and how these could be addressed through support services, without relating these challenges to learner profiles (Badu-Nyarko & Torto, 2009; Gatsha, 2007; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009; and Siabi-Mensah & Tau, 2006). There is thus a need for further studies to show how aspects of learner profiles such as the previous educational background and geographical location, influence the learning progress and programme completion.

Komba (2004), Kurasha (2003), Mmari (1998), and Tau (2006) stress the need to provide decentralised learner support services so that distance learners can interact with tutors and other learners near where they live and work. However, these studies lack information about the contribution of decentralised learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion, which is a major limitation. While these studies indicate that decentralisation of academic, counselling and administrative support to regional centres reduces the geographical distance between learners and their tutors from the supporting institution, it is not clear whether this interaction actually reinforces distance learners' progress and programme completion.

Perraton & Lentell (2004), supported by Pidduck & Carey (2006), emphasize the need to make learning resources accessible to distance learners, while Haughey (2003) and Wolcott (2003) stress the need for institutional reorganisation to ensure that human resources, technology and physical facilities, are available to the learners (Aluko, 2009; Beukes, 2009). In the reviewed literature, there appears to be no guidelines on access to institutional resources by distance learners. This explains why, although learners in the DPE programme were expected to interact with tutors, other learners and stakeholders, and to have access to learning resources, the literature (Butale, 2008; Wright, 2008) revealed that learners have either limited or no access to learning resources. Lack of clarity in this area suggests a need for future research to inform sharing of resources in ODL, considering that its existence is largely premised on the use of available resources (Lentell, 2003; Lentell & O'Rourke, 2004), such as academic staff from other institutions who are recruited mainly on a part-time basis to provide academic support.

The other limitation found in the reviewed literature was a lack of ODL policies to guide the provision of learner support services. Although there were indications that ODL policies needed to address academic matters such as processing of assignments and record keeping as well as workload and compensation for lecturers, evidence from literature (Simonson & Bauck, 2003), indicated that no such policy guidelines existed in the DPE programme. Authors such as Nhundu, Kamau & Thutoetsile (2002), and Siaciwena (2000, 2006) stated that the absence of ODL policy guidelines at both national and institutional levels tended to compromise the provision of effective learner support services, where assignments were sometimes marked late

due to workload constraints for lecturers. In this regard, Botha (2010) also highlighted the need for ODL policies to regulate lecturers' commitments to their duties.

From the literature review, it is noted that learner support providers or intermediaries should explore the question of access to learning resources and work out guidelines about how these resources could be made available to distance learners. This is critical, particularly in the provision of academic support where learner-tutor interaction is considered as one of the factors that enhances distance learners' progress and programme completion. The review of literature also stressed the need for ODL policies to ensure the provision of effective learner support services.

2.11 Conclusion

This literature review assessed the factors that contribute to the implementation of learner support services in ODL as a basis for determining the effectiveness of learner support services for distance learners in the DPE programme. The review also covered what different scholars in the ODL discipline have said about the provision of effective learner support services in ODL programmes in general and for the DPE programme in particular. The meanings of learner support services were strongly anchored in the different historical developments and in the theories of ODL. From the literature, it emerged that learner support providers or intermediaries need information about learner profiles in order to develop and implement services responsive to the needs of distance learners.

The literature identified academic, counselling and administrative support as key components of support services in ODL. However, it appeared that learner support services on the DPE programme were not based on identified learner needs which was a major weakness in their implementation. Regular learner-tutor interaction is needed to discuss content and learner-learner interaction for socialisation in order to reduce the learners' separation and isolation from each other. The other requirement, as noted in the literature, is the provision of administrative support to ensure that distance learners interact with tutors and that they have access to learning

resources. In this area, there was a gap in the policy guidelines which represented another major weakness.

In the next chapter, I discuss the research design for the study.