

## Chapter Four

### Findings: Participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of learner support services

#### 4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, I presented the research design for this study. I selected the interpretive qualitative approach because I found it most appropriate for addressing the investigation. This involved collecting and interpreting data from the chosen participants in order to get their views, perceptions and meanings of their experiences about the effectiveness of learner support services in their own subjective natural setting. I found this research approach interactive because data analysis proceeded simultaneously with the fieldwork. I listened to the cassette tapes as I conducted the fieldwork and reviewed the relevant literature to establish themes as they emerged from available data. Since I was using the same interview questions for each category of participants, the preliminary analysis enabled me to identify areas of data saturation and to probe more deeply on questions which required further clarification. After checking the consistency and accuracy of the transcripts against the audiotape recordings, I coded, recoded and categorised the data into a set of related themes, grouping similar ideas from different interviewees into thematic categories and sub-categories. Through this, I developed a structure for the findings which is presented in this chapter. To facilitate interpretation of participants' responses, I coded data *in vivo* using Atlas.ti software. The codes were then used to guide the generation of themes, categories and sub-categories, which in turn determined the structure for the presentation of the findings.

As explained in Chapter 1, this research set out to assess: *The effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in a primary education diploma* offered by the University of Botswana. The sub-questions listed below were used to guide data analysis and interpretation:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme?

- What are distance learners’ perceptions about the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme?
- How do tutors and stakeholders perceive their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme?
- What barriers and opportunities exist in the implementation of effective learner support services in the DPE programme?

Data analysis in Chapter 4 is organised thematically according to the research questions. To address these questions, it was necessary to give a detailed analysis of participants’ views about the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme and their contribution to distance learners’ progress and programme completion.

#### 4.2 Distance learners’ motivation for joining the DPE programme

To answer the research question, which sought to understand distance learners’ perceptions about the effectiveness of learner support services, I needed to understand their motivation for enrolling and their expectations from the DPE programme. To this end, data were grouped into the category of learner needs and two sub-categories. The first sub-category dealt with the benefits learners expected from the DPE programme, while the second addressed the challenges relating to the learner support services, as shown in Table 4.1 below.

*Table 4.1: Distance learners’ motivation for enrolling in the DPE programme*

<b>Theme: Distance learners’ motivation for enrolling in the DPE programme</b>			
<b>Meaning unit</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Category</b>
It had taken PTC holders too long before they had an opportunity for upgrading	Expectations	Benefits from in-service upgrading	Addressing learner needs
In-service upgrading was meant	Qualifications		

<p>to improve academic and professional qualifications</p> <p>Learners wanted to upgrade their knowledge and gain more confidence when teaching their subjects</p> <p>Their motivation to study was driven by personal factors such as promotion and salary increase</p> <p>They needed to get recognition and respect from their more qualified colleagues</p> <p>Some aspired to provide good quality service and become role models to other staff at their workplaces</p>	<p>Motivation</p> <p>Promotion Salary</p> <p>Recognition</p> <p>Diploma holder</p>		
<p>Correct or up-to-date information about ODL delivery mode was not given before enrolment, at registration or in the orientation stages</p> <p>Learner needs were not aligned with learner characteristics</p> <p>Learners had multiple responsibilities of family, work and their part-time studies, which competed for their time</p> <p>Physical distances separated and isolated learners from their tutors and from each other</p> <p>Study environment was not supportive</p>	<p>Study leave</p> <p>Study group</p> <p>Workload Family</p> <p>Remote area</p> <p>Noise Neighbour</p>	<p>Challenges facing distance learners</p>	

The need to understand distance learners' motivation for joining the DPE programme was based on the assumption that support services would be designed with a clear understanding of learners' needs, expectations and characteristics, as stated by one of the tutors:

**Khumo:** *We should try to understand their background. What type of students do we have in class? You will find that we have very, very old ...people, with sugar diabetes and high blood pressure, everything...So we have to sort of guide them to show them the importance of being able to go to school on a programme because sooner or later these students find that...this is too much! So many things at a go! I am going to drop...they say, 'now I want to quit', so emotionally, we have to prepare them. PD14:126 (87:87).*

This claim of desolation was supported by the distance learners, whose ages at the time of data collection ranged between 35 and 60 years. The youngest in this study was 36 years old at enrolment in the DPE programme, while the oldest learner was 57 years old at the time of data collection.

**Sarah:** *36 years at enrolment. P11:21 (30:30).*

**Boitumelo:** *57 years old at data collection stage. P13:49 (18:18).*

Based on this background information, the age range of distance learners in the study was determined to be between 35 and 60 years as explained in Chapter 3 (§4.2). Some of the mature learners joined the distance education programme specifically because of their age, as stated by Mary, 49 years old and one of the non-completers:

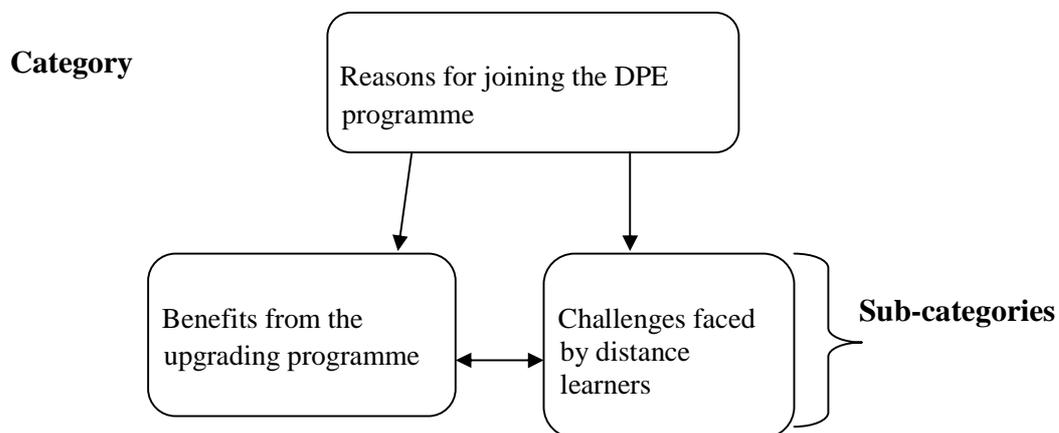
**Mary:** *I really wanted to take this one (referring to the ODL programme. P11:138 (100:100). ...because of my old age. P11:140 (102:102).*

For learners like Mary, the DPE programme was convenient because she could learn even at a mature age. The findings further revealed that background knowledge about learners and their characteristics was necessary to design effective support services, as noted by one of the learner support providers based at the ODL office within the Kanye Education Centre:

*Junior... it didn't matter where you were, you had to enrol on the programme, and be thrown to any college... as long as you were fixed in a college for tutorials. This is one reason that made them very, very uncomfortable, and for some of them ...the geography of Botswana, a good number of places are away from the railway line and the roads are not good...maybe you are the only teacher studying in that school, you don't have anybody that you can work with or that you can refer to. P1:64 (18:18). ...There was no preparation done.... they got letters coming from colleges, that you have been admitted...to study for a four year diploma in Primary Education by distance mode. No preparation, no induction, nothing. ... P1:3 (53:53).*

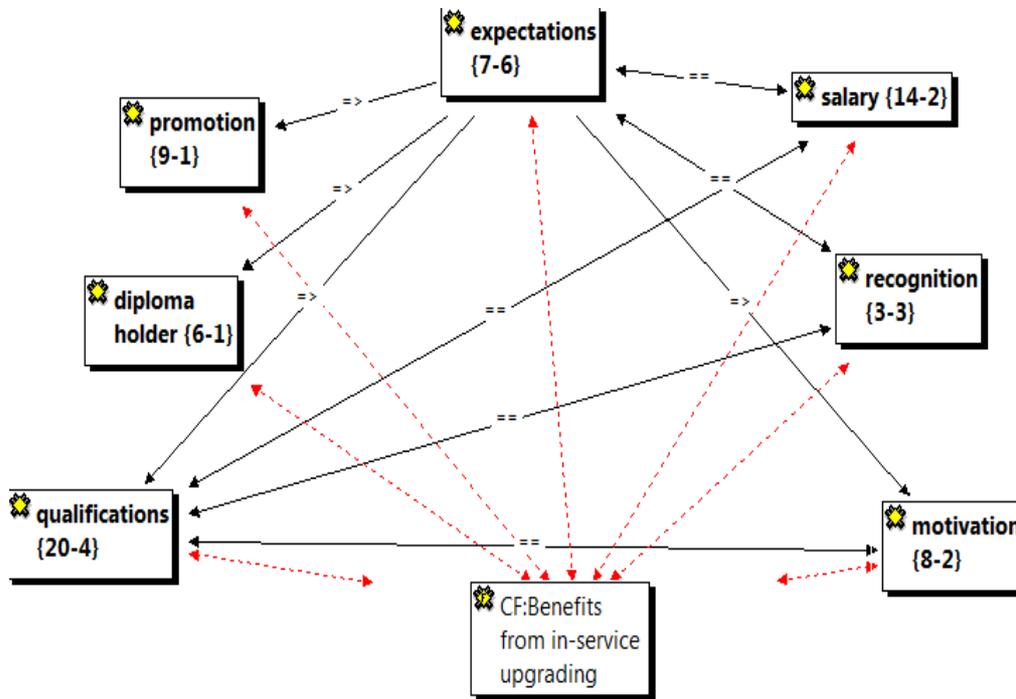
These findings reveal distance learners' fears about ODL delivery mode, which were not explained to them before enrolment. During the period of study, their fears appear to have been made more complicated by the fact they did not receive any information about the programme prior to enrolment. Their motivating factors are discussed under the sub-categories shown in Figure 4.1 below.

**Figure 4.1: Reasons for enrolling in the DPE programme**



The sub-category that addresses benefits for distance learners from the DPE programme is discussed under the code family (CF), indicated in Figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2: Benefits from the in-service programme



**Symbols:** == is associated with: => is a cause of

Participants highlighted further qualifications and professional development as among the factors that motivated distance learners to enrol in the DPE programme. Explaining her reasons both for enrolling and persisting in the DPE programme, Thato, a 52-year-old female teacher and one of the completers, said:

*Thato: I just wanted to become a diploma holder. The DPE gave me an opportunity to help teachers that I work with, mostly in Agriculture. Before that, I had some problems and difficulties when helping teachers teaching Agriculture because...I didn't know what agriculture meant to a primary school child... I want to improve myself and have more knowledge ...about agriculture ... Now I can help teachers presenting Agriculture in standard six and seven classes where Agriculture is mainly taught. DPE helped me to gain more knowledge across other subjects. P13:143 (38:38)*

While securing a diploma qualification in order to become more effective in the teaching subjects, another learner, a 53-year-old male head teacher and one of the non-completers, felt that it had taken too long before PTC holders were given the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications.

***Denn:** It had taken a long time since leaving school to have a course to upgrade myself... in Maths and Science...the DPE programme by distance mode was the right programme for me as I would study by myself. I was promoted to the post of maths and science, so I wanted to upgrade and make myself familiar with the subjects so that I can have more confidence when I am teaching maths... Also, the Syllabus changed and we were getting to renew content and as such there was need for teachers to understand the new content. I am head teacher. P13:196 (40:40).*

In addition to improving content in academic subjects, distance learners appreciated self-study and the study skills they acquired which they applied in their work of managing their schools, as stated by Denn.

***Denn:** I was taught how to write...assignments and references in a correct manner. We should not plagiarize but come up with our own original work. P13:145 (83:83)...in the CSS course, we covered topics such as addressing meetings which we are doing at schools, writing reports, writing circulars, filing and even the use of the computers... it was of great benefit to us because students were taught how to take notes and used this skill in their studies and reading and now I am quite used to it... P13:123 (82:82).*

These findings confirm that distance learners wanted to increase knowledge in their teaching subjects and enhance study skills which they could use in their daily work in primary schools. Others wanted to upgrade their qualifications so as to offer effective leadership and act as role models in their work, as stated by Mayo, a 52-year-old female teacher and one of the completers:

***Mayo:** By that time, I was a head of department... I wanted to upgrade myself so that I can produce quality work to my subordinates. As I am a manager I wanted to be effective ...as*

*a leader and role model when supervising teachers serving under my leadership. P13:200 (44:44).*

These responses reveal PTC holders' desire to improve their management skills so as to be able to manage their school functions more effectively. Gaining respect was a further motivation. Boitumelo, a 57-year-old female teacher, and one of the completers, wanted to upgrade her qualifications to gain respect and recognition of her staff, whom she managed as a head teacher:

***Boitumelo:** I just wanted to upgrade myself... The young people come to schools with degrees and diplomas and as a leader who is a PTC holder, you feel as if they challenge you to see if you know what you are doing...I am a head teacher. You feel as if they undermine you. P13:198 (42:42).*

From these responses, it is evident that some mature distance learners wanted to upgrade their qualifications to gain confidence, reducing the fear of competition from younger and more qualified teachers, who often resented working under the supervision of academically less qualified PTC leadership in primary schools. Other learners wanted to secure promotion to teach higher classes in the primary school hierarchy, with an accompanying salary increment, as stated by Pearl, a 39-year-old female teacher and one of the completers:

***Pearl:** I needed an increase of salary, and also to be recognised at work...I realised that teachers with the diploma programme, ...are recognised ...even during meetings, and if they have an idea, everyone will listen to them, as compared to the PTCs... They are allocated upper standards, so I also wanted to teach standard six and standard seven. P11:123 (57:58).*

Views about lack of respect and recognition for PTC holders in primary schools were echoed by Mary, who is a Deputy Principal in one of the primary schools:

***Mary:** Yes, it could be so. But myself, I am lucky because I have been promoted to senior teacher, and Deputy Principal, that is why I am at a place where my voice can be heard.*

*But for those people without a portfolio, there still is some sort of discrimination, between the diploma and the primary teaching course, something like that. P11:129 (46:46).*

Although this study was not about school dynamics in terms of how teachers socialise with each other, the perceived lack of respect and recognition suggests a need for further research. This would establish whether PTC teachers gained respect and recognition after qualifying from the DPE programme. From the present research, I drew the conclusion that PTC holders appreciate the benefits and opportunities offered by the DPE programme to further their qualifications, enabling some of them to advance in their careers, as expressed by Pearl:

***Pearl:** I have been promoted recently to senior teacher practicals ...and also I...use the timetable schedule to manage my time ...I know when to attend to the class, for study, remediation, and when to attend to the garden or other activities regarding practical subjects. P11:153 (243:243).*

From these answers, it is clear that distance learners appreciated the opportunity to study because it enabled them to acquire further qualifications, which in turn made them eligible for promotion. They also benefited from the knowledge and skills they gained from the DPE programme, improving their academic performance in their various subject combinations and their professional skills as leaders and school managers. These skills could also be applied to other activities in their places of work, such as organising school meetings and writing minutes, which often presented challenges before joining the DPE programme.

Despite these motivating factors, distance learners often did not appear too eager to study via the ODL mode, partly because of lack of information about it prior to enrolment. Instead, they preferred to study through the conventional mode, as stated by Junior:

***Junior:** The reason why they were not too eager to enrol is ...because of those 10 people who would go to the colleges of education full time for the pre-service programme. They would wonder why ...they were being subjected to in-service... it sounded like they were resenting...distance education. But ...the support they were given during the course of*

*their studies paid off...I believe this intervention increased their motivation to keep on going. P1:118 (82:82).*

These comments are echoed by another learner support provider at the Kanye ODL office, who said that distance learners seemed to be overwhelmed by their multiple responsibilities and part-time studies. For this reason, they preferred the conventional mode, in which they could just concentrate on their studies:

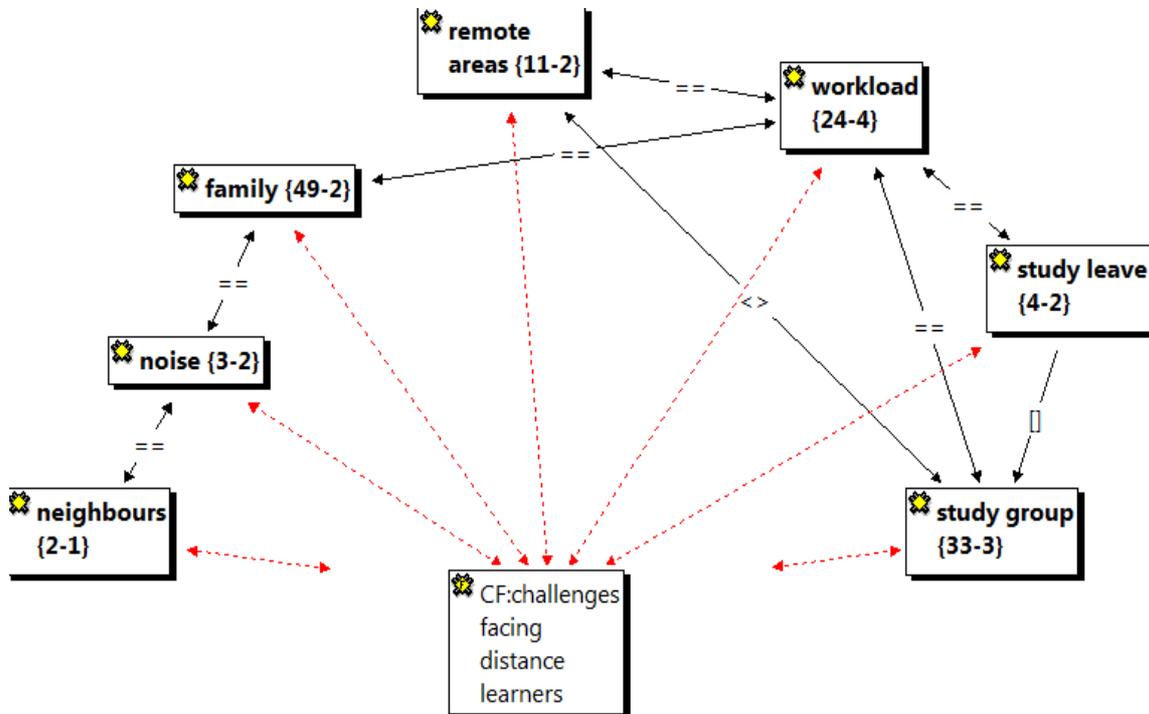
**Tebogo:** *If they had a choice they would not enrol with distance education because they say... it takes a long time...it's coupled with a lot of things that they are doing at school and they don't have time to pay much attention to it because they are full-time teachers at school. So if they had a choice, they would choose to go to full-time colleges of education for two years. P10:78 (14:14).*

Despite these opinions, the findings confirmed that the ODL has the flexibility and capacity to provide educational opportunities to distance learners, even as they continue with their employment and take care of their families. The findings further indicated that distance learners were able to acquire further qualifications through in-service training, without confining themselves to conventional institutions. Other motivating factors for upgrading are reflected in PTC holders' opinions about the ODL as a mode of delivery. Though not one of the research questions, this suggests scope for further studies to find out peoples' awareness and acceptance of the ODL delivery mode. The next category relating to the challenges that face distance learners is discussed under the codes indicated in Figure 4.3 below.

#### **4.3 Challenges encountered in the learning process**

In this section, data were analysed to determine what challenges were experienced by distance learners and whether learner support services helped them to overcome these challenges. Their views on duration of study, prerequisites for the course before enrolment, assignment due dates, effects of changing family circumstances, job transfers, and the constraints they faced during their studies were all examined. The sub-category of the challenges facing distance learners is discussed under the code family (CF), indicated in Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3: Challenges faced by distance learners



**Symbols:** == is associated with: => is a cause of: <> contradicts: [] is part of

When asked to give their views on information they received to prepare them for the DPE programme at registration, at orientation and during the programme itself, distance learners appeared content with the assistance they received from their tutors and institutional managers:

**Mary:** *We were really assisted and given a word of encouragement that we are old enough to know what is happening, that we should learn to work very hard... that we should always...submit our assignments on time...read... they really supported us.* **P11:87 (122:122).**

That distance learners appreciated the information and encouragement they received from their tutors during orientation was confirmed by Sarah, a 42-year-old teacher and one of those who had completed her studies:

**Sarah:** *There was a lot of encouragement and support from the lecturers, even during the research. We used to call them and make appointments with them and they used to come and discuss and they really used to help us. And we would even get help from our Principal Education Officers who allowed... us some weekdays off when we were preparing for tests and examinations. P11:233 (124:124).*

However, despite the information and encouragement given during registration and orientation, distance learners did face various challenges in the course of their studies as reported by Winnie, a 46 year old teacher with incomplete results:

**Winnie:** *You try to study at home but the kids are there also, running up and down. You tell them to keep quiet... the kids will be quiet for some time, then from there they are jumping all over the house. You tell them to go to their room, they run there, then after five minutes they are back. ... it was difficult. P7:23 (203:203).*

Noisy environments, taking care of young children and old people, poor time management, power cuts and institutional chores emerged as some the factors which interfered with distance learners' progress and programme completion. In particular, lack of a quiet place to study at home, due to living with young children and in noisy neighbourhoods, was singled out as a major problem, as reported by Mary:

**Mary:** *At home with the neighbours there...the radios, making loud noise...if you talk to them in a nice way...they listen. Sometimes I am trying to sit in the room... to study and my grandchildren...are calling Mama! Gugu! So I lock myself in the room and they knock: twa! twa! twa! twa!.. open! Open! We want to come...P11:34 (301:301).*

These findings confirm that learners had problems studying at home because of family responsibilities and living in noisy neighbourhoods. Many faced challenges of isolation, working and living in remote areas and with heavy workloads from combining part-time studies with various responsibilities in the school. Lack of books for reference and lack of electricity were also found to make inroads on their progress, as reported by Denn:

**Denn:** *I was teaching in a remote area...There was no telephone network to enable me to contact anyone. After 2 O'clock, I...try to do the assignments but stop at night due to lack of electricity. Public transportation was a problem. When working on assignments, I would sometimes stop because I would ...not find information...because there were no books...The workload was...a problem because you are teaching and administering the school...this left you with no time to do your studies...sometimes, I was too tired to continue with my studies. P13:52 (241:241).*

From these comments, it is clear that heavy workloads, physical exhaustion, lack of time, inability to contact other learners because of poor telephone networks, poor public transport, particularly for those living and working in remote areas with no electricity to study at night, and lack of resources such as libraries were major challenges that hindered distance learners' studies. A further challenge, as claimed by learner support providers, relates to institutional barriers, with some distance learners saying they were denied study leave to prepare for tests and examinations:

**Junior:** *There is the study leave policy where ...teachers who are enrolled on the DPE programme by distance mode had... personal right to be given two weeks to study for tutorials during the holidays ...but... not all the regional education officers are allowing the teachers to go for residential sessions... That is where we had a problem... P1:112 (143:143).*

These findings stress the need to remove such institutional barriers because unresponsive organisational structures contributed to some distance learners missing tutorial sessions and not receiving feedback from their tutors.

In summary, intrinsic factors, such as self-actualisation, and extrinsic factors, such as getting a higher salary after further qualifications, motivated distance learners' to enrol in the DPE programme. The findings further showed that distance learners experienced various challenges which interfered with their programme of study. These challenges, coupled with distance learners' motivation to join the DPE programme, needed to be investigated to determine

whether learner support services enabled them to meet their expectations. Background information about distance learners was needed to facilitate the provision of effective learner support services as discussed in the next section.

#### 4.4 Participants' views about the effectiveness of learner support services

In this section, data were analysed to assess participants' views on the effectiveness of learner support services in responding to distance learners' needs and expectations. Data were analysed under the theme of issues relating to the rationale for providing learner support services. This theme generated three categories of data. The first category, responding to learner needs, was analysed under four sub-categories, while the second and third categories generated their own sub-categories, as shown in Table 4.2 below. Data analysis enabled me to answer the research questions which sought to understand participants' views on the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services and distance learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of such services in the DPE programme. In this section, barriers hindering effective implementation of these services were also addressed. To this end, data were clustered into three categories and six sub-categories, summarised under the codes shown in Table 4.2 below.

**Table 4.2: Need for learner support services**

<b>Theme: Rationale for learner support services in the DPE programme</b>			
<b>Meaning unit</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Category</b>
Tutorial strategies did not acknowledge learners' previous experiences	Tutorial methods	Tutor accessibility	Responding to academic needs
Tutors were assumed to be knowledgeable in the subject matter			
Participating in tutorials assisted learners to judge			



<p>their learning progress and programme completion</p> <p>Distance learners' physical locations inhibited participation in self-help study groups</p> <p>Poor telephone network inhibited learner-learner contact, particularly in remote areas, from contacting tutors and other learners</p>	<p>Tutorials</p> <p>Study group</p> <p>Telephone network</p>		
<p>Tutors were expected to attend scheduled tutorials</p> <p>Assist learners to interpret the content in the learning materials</p> <p>Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials interfered with distance learners' progress</p> <p>Frequent changes of tutors and coordinators meant that learners dealt with more than one tutor per module</p> <p>Heavy workload inhibited distance learners' progress to complete their studies</p> <p>Irregular supervision of research projects interfered with programme completion</p>	<p>Attendance</p> <p>Difficult concepts</p> <p>Absenteeism</p> <p>Supervision</p> <p>Workload</p> <p>Research projects</p>	<p>Learner-tutor interaction</p>	

<p>Marking and commenting on assignments and providing timely and constructive feedback</p> <p>Short turnaround times for assignments was not maintained</p> <p>Loss of assignment scripts resulted in unnecessary re-writing of assessment work and incomplete results</p> <p>Feedback was not timely and constructive</p> <p>Clear, correct, and up-to-date records on assignments were not kept</p>	<p>Assignments Completion Incompletion</p> <p>Assessment</p> <p>Feedback</p> <p>Loss of scripts Record keeping</p>	<p>Facilitating two-way communication</p>	
<p>Limited access to required learning resources (human, libraries, computer laboratories and equipment)</p>	<p>Tutors, Library Laboratories Labs Computers</p>	<p>Access to learning resources</p>	
<p>Supporting institutions were not involved in the provision of counselling support</p> <p>Learners lacked appropriate study skills and time-management skills</p> <p>Learners needed advice on how to complete their programme of study</p> <p>Juggling multiple responsibilities was a major challenge</p>	<p>Counselling</p>	<p>Addressing non-academic needs</p>	<p>Responding to non-academic needs</p>

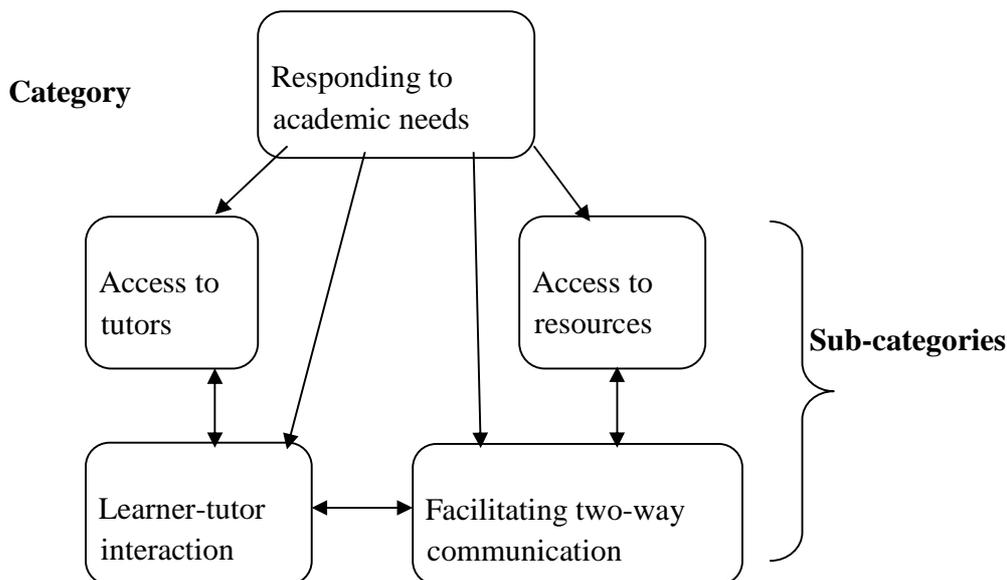


<p>Increased workload due to multiple commitments, caring for family members and their studies</p> <p>Learners received support from family, children, friends, spouses and employers</p> <p>Limited public transport and poor telephone network inhibited peer interaction for learners living and working in remote areas</p>	<p>Husband Family Friend Child</p> <p>Remote areas Telephone</p>		
<p>Lack of commitment and accountability by part-time tutor</p> <p>Learners not provided with correct and up-to-date information about the DPE programme</p> <p>Institutional processes and procedures for learner support services were clarified</p> <p>Learners' progress was monitored throughout, module by module</p> <p>Tutorial support, assessment, and feedback functions not adequately monitored</p> <p>Turnaround deadlines for assignments and other assessment work were not enforced</p> <p>Record-keeping processes and procedures were not enforced to enhance</p>	<p>Accountability Policy</p> <p>Tutorials</p> <p>Supervisor</p> <p>Assignments</p> <p>Feedback</p> <p>Record keeping</p>	<p>Learner support monitoring mechanisms</p>	<p>Management of learner support services</p>

learning progress			
Lack of clear guidelines about access to learning resources	Resources		

In this study, I made the assumption that learner support services would prepare distance learners for the diploma content - which was targeted at post COSC level - by developing them towards independence and autonomy in line with the theories of ODL, as discussed in Chapter 2, (§ 2.4). To find out whether learner support services helped distance learners to progress successfully in their studies, I analysed the data in three categories: academic, non-academic and administrative support. The first category, on responding to academic needs, was further analysed under four sub-categories, as shown in Figure 4.4 below.

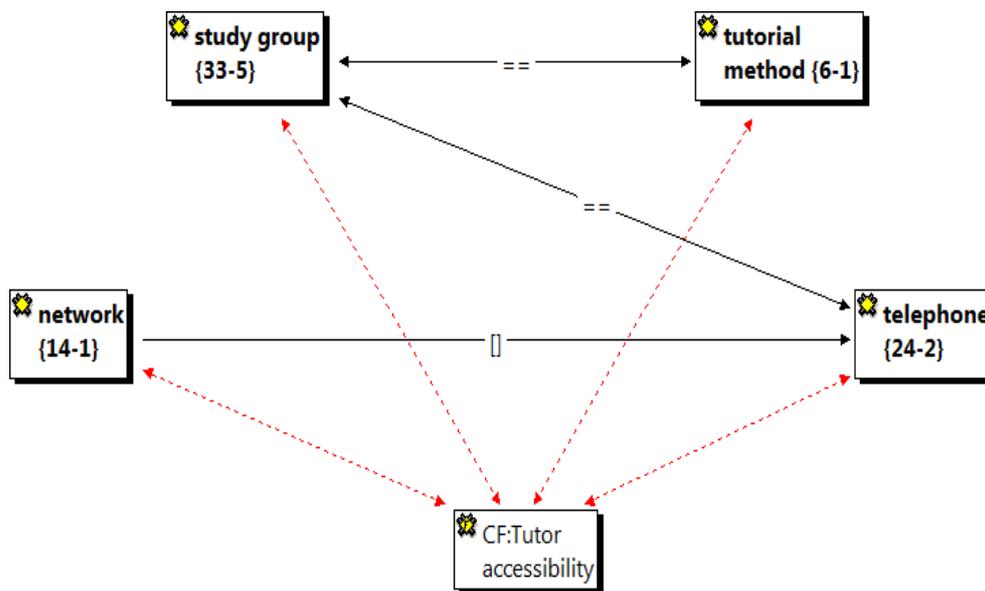
**Figure 4.4 Responding to academic needs**



In the sub-category of tutor accessibility I discussed learners' views about the availability and accessibility of tutors to distance learners as part of academic support, in response to their academic needs. This was to answer the research questions which sought to further assess

distance learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of support services in conjunction with the research question relating to the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme. Participants' perceptions about tutor accessibility to distance learners and the type of assistance such learners received during tutorial sessions are discussed using the code family (CF) shown in Figure 4.5 below:

*Figure 4.5: Access to tutors*



(Symbols: == is associated with: <> contradicts: □ is part of)

The findings discussed under the sub-category of access to tutors indicate that distance learners needed access, both to tutors and to other learners throughout the learning process. In this context, it was also important to record the views of the tutors, as intermediaries between learners and the course content, thus answering the research question which sought to determine tutors' roles and responsibilities in the support services in the DPE programme. When asked to comment on the purpose of such services in the DPE programme, one of the learner support coordinators at UB remarked:

*Sego: The main purpose of tutorials is to help distance learners to understand the module and to put it into practice. It is not easy to separate it from assessment because assessment really is supposed to help learners to understand the module, that is how much they have learnt and in a way it serves as a motivator to assess how much they have understood the module. P9:55 (76:76).*

Other participants associated academic support with making learning resources such as books available in physical structures such as libraries, where they could find a quiet place to study:

*Tashata: Learner support... should be a support that makes learners go through the programme. But you find that at times they don't have enough support... like if you take the languages group... prescribed books are not even there in the libraries; they are just depending entirely on tutors to go through the programme... so this learner support service should see to it that learners do get such books or such material. P14:21 (25:25).*

These comments were echoed by another tutor who described support services as exposing students to learning resources:

*Khumo: Learner support services can also include things like libraries, where they can read, at their places or study groups, especially in the education centres, where we have access to some books...But here at the college, the support system that we provide is tutorials... so it helps them to understand what to do during their study....they are supported in several forms. P14:18 (19:19).*

In the sub-category of access to tutors, distance learners appeared satisfied with tutorial techniques which encouraged discussion of content during tutorials. Commenting on access to tutors and facilitation of tutorials, Winnie observed:

*Winnie: Some were very good in discussions. Like Mr X (giving the actual name of the tutor) in education, he facilitated discussions in class. He would also really try and take us chapter by chapter and summarise it with us and make us answer questions from the*

*summary. That really helped us a lot, because you could just take the summary to your group discussions and start asking each other questions for revision. P7:71 (166:166).*

These comments reveal some of the strengths of learner support services, with distance learners considering tutorial support which encouraged discussion of content among them as helpful to their studies as proposed in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.2). Some participants, though, noted that some tutors used techniques, such as reading the modules in class, which did not encourage active participation. This was seen as one of the weaknesses in the provision of tutorial support. Such an approach did not demonstrate tutors' empathy with learners or address the criteria for effective learner support, as described in Chapter 1 (§2.3). Indeed, some learners were discouraged from attending such tutorials:

***Teamwork:*** *Some would just read through the module and we discuss. P7:77 (140:140).*

***Dineo:*** *Others would ask you to read a passage from the module and ask you to explain. P7:77 (142:142).*

***Winnie:*** *Sometimes you stayed home when you knew that a tutor would just read the module. You would just... study in the dormitory rather than go to the classroom to see somebody reading the module...because you are better off reading the module ...quietly and trying to understand it yourself. P7:129 (147:147).*

Poor tutorial techniques during residential sessions were also confirmed by learner support providers from the Kanye ODL office:

***Tebogo:*** *We have to be sure that the teaching is what we expect...you will get into the classroom ... and the tutor will be ...reading from the ...module and we say...is this tutor prepared? It was not right.... you can't read the whole module to the students word by word, line by line... you discuss... But I don't blame the tutors...we don't sit with the tutors ... to discuss the expectations...P10:56 (67:67).*

From these findings, I concluded that one of the weaknesses of learner support services was the use of facilitation techniques which did not encourage active participation of the learners or

help them to become independent and autonomous thinkers, who are capable of constructing meaning from content either individually or through group discussions, as proposed in the theories of ODL which are reviewed in Chapter 2 (§ 2.5). Some tutors read the module in class, indicating that they were not adequately prepared to facilitate tutorial sessions. This suggests that distance learners' previous teaching and learning backgrounds and experiences were not taken into account. Commenting on tutorial facilitation methods used by some of the tutors, distance learners said that such tutors were not committed to their work, as confirmed by Joe, a 46-year-old teacher with incomplete results:

***Joe:** Some of the lecturers... were not committed. It's like they were just passing time, they want to get money... In some cases, someone will come to the classrooms, and ask, 'where do we start'? ...you end up being demoralised and wonder, what is the expectation...you don't have that much time at home, you have social problems to attend to... marking... and so a lot of problems...but some lecturers would expect everything from us. P11:152 (131:131).*

Although some learners encountered unhelpful tutorial techniques, others agreed that not all tutors read the modules during tutorial sessions:

***Thato:** Our tutors ...were not just reading the module. That is why I began to like Agriculture even more... P13:85(182:182).*

***Boitumelo:** Our tutors did not use the modules only, because modules do not have detailed information. So sometimes they borrowed us novels, and even helped us to find books in book stores. P13: 90 (194:194).*

Thus learners perceived tutors who used tutorial methods which involved them in discussion of content as helpful. However, the findings also suggest that distance learners did not always read the module in preparation for tutorial, which tended to slow the pace of discussions, as noted by one of the tutors:

***Neo:** They don't read the module. Or sometimes they say they read but do not understand... so much so that a lot of time is wasted trying to explain things one by*

*one...P12:37 (138:138)... then you have to come up with extra time outside the hours that have not been allocated in order to help them...P12:37 (142:142).*

These views could explain why some tutors included reading the modules during tutorials sessions, not as evasions of their own responsibilities, but as part of stimulating and facilitating discussion. However, learners cited lack of appropriate study skills as among the challenges they experienced and which contributed to their inability to read modules in preparation for tutorial sessions, as stated by one of the completers:

***Pearl:** It was very difficult for us because we had spent many years without being at school, so it was difficult for us to get into the habit of reading and preparing for our work, at the same time to carry out some reading...We had to learn a new style of living, how to read, how to prepare for lessons, how to mark pupils' books. P13: 154 (133:133).*

These views agree with sources in the literature review in Chapter 2 (§2.6), which emphasise the need for support services to help distance learners to acquire appropriate study skills considering that some may have left school a long time ago. Some of the learners in this study had graduated from PTC training over twenty years before they joined the DPE programme, as explained in Chapter 3 (§4.2), and needed assistance with updating their study skills. To facilitate group discussion of learning materials during tutorial sessions, some of the tutors suggested involving the learners in group presentations:

***Puso:** With me the issue of not reading the module was a challenge. I decided ... to divide them in groups... to deal with various topics overnight... and in the morning they have to present... I found out that it was very helpful because.. when you present and you are a group of five...there will be participation by every individual. I found that very helpful... instead of teaching. It worked for me because...it forced them to read... because when it was them doing it, they tend to understand than in the past when I used to make summary of notes. P12:37 (146:146).*

These findings reflect a need to train tutors in order to equip them with appropriate facilitation skills in ODL as articulated in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.6). The question also

arose whether it was better for distance learners to study the learning materials individually or in self-help study groups, which would reduce isolation and help prepare them for tutorial sessions. The findings showed that some distance learners did create and participate in self-help study groups in order to reduce isolation:

***Thato:*** *I benefited a lot from my study group...when we discussed... members of my study group helped me a lot, particularly when it comes to mathematics. P13:200 (225-226).*

Similar comments on the usefulness of self-help study groups were made by another learner:

***Teamwork:*** *It was useful because some students know better than others, so they helped us a lot! Like myself, I am old, this one... They went to school later and maybe have more insights in the new curriculum. P7:112 (261:261).*

However, although learners participated in self-help study groups, they had to contend with constraints during the group sessions. Physical distances also prevented many from taking part in such study groups:

***Winnie:*** *Sometimes after supper during residential sessions, we would go back to the classrooms...and start discussing ...But outside residential sessions it was difficult because you find that you come from different areas, and so we did not organise self-help study groups outside residential session periods. P7:112 (257:257)...there were some advantages and disadvantages, because you find that some learners were a bit too slow... and that would really delay you. P7:11(249:249).*

These views were shared by other learners:

***Pearl:*** *We couldn't have time to meet and discuss. The only time we discussed assignments was here in the college...P11:117(194:194). We formed study groups but...we couldn't meet ...because the students were far from each other...physical distances... P11:117(196:196).*

***Joe:*** *When you phone them, someone would say...I've got a problem...funeral, wedding... P11:117(197:197).*

These responses indicate that, although distance learners intended to join in self-help study groups, social problems and physical distance often prevented them from meeting with their colleagues. This suggests that when they formulated learner support services for the DPE programme, learner support providers did not take into consideration the physical distances that separate learners from each other, as well as their social commitments, as suggested in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§7.3). Participants also stated that working and living in remote areas made it difficult for some of them to form and participate in self-help study groups:

*Denn: You suffer a lot, particularly if you are studying alone in a place where there are no students and no libraries. For example, teachers who are in Tsoshong in Kweneng District...where there are no other students or libraries suffered a lot when it came to completing their assignments. Most of them used to complete their assignments at college when they came for residential sessions. P13:149(95:95).*

While appreciating the benefits of such groups, including the encouragement to study, some learners found it more beneficial to study on their own, as reported by Mayo, who was one of the completers:

*Mayo: When I was alone, I kept postponing my work. That is laziness of some kind. However, the advantage of being alone is that I am able to absorb the information and develop meaning of content on my own, rather than depending on other peoples' ideas when we are in a group. P13:148 (99:99).*

The fact that some distance learners manage to study on their own, without joining in self-help study groups, supports the constructivist views discussed in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§5.5) that learners are capable of constructing meaning from knowledge by interpreting their experiences, with or without the presence of a mentor, coach, tutor or facilitator. My findings established that many distance learners are unable to form and sustain self-help study groups due to poor communication networks and social problems. However, those who live in areas with good telephone networks are able to contact their tutors and other learners by telephone.

*Thato: Students kept in touch with tutors through the telephone numbers in the supervision of research and portfolios. P13:60(205:205).*

In conclusion, analysing the category of tutor accessibility (Figure 4.5) revealed that learners benefited from tutors who used tutorial techniques which encouraged them to engage in the discussion of content. A tutor reading modules during the tutorial session was interpreted as a weakness in academic support, since it did not encourage learners to participate actively in constructing meanings from the content. Self-help study was also made difficult for many students by their physical distance from the residential sessions. The next sub-category of learner-tutor interaction is discussed under the codes indicated in Figure 4.6 below.

#### **4.4.1 Facilitating learner-tutor interaction**

In addition to assessing learners' access to tutors, I needed to establish distance learners' perceptions about their interaction during tutorials. In this section, data were analysed to discover how learner-tutor interaction enabled tutors to clarify content and programme structure for distance learners during the provision of academic support. To understand how learner-tutor interaction influenced the students' progress and programme completion, I analysed the data under the code family (CF), indicated in Figure 4.6 below.



*Mary: Sometimes the lecturers...would not come...and if some had some commitment... they would ...exchange the lessons... That is why we would come to the classroom and find that the lecturer did not come...then we would be told to join classes where there was a tutor. P11:49 (122:122).*

Similar sentiments were shared by another learner:

*Winnie: They would just come in some days and at other days they won't be there. P7:108 (136:136)... We attended tutorials but we had no teacher... We would be running to other classes to get information and find those classes at different stages of the module. P7:68 (129:129).*

These comments suggest that tutor absenteeism and frequent changes of tutors during tutorials were major barriers in the delivery of effective academic support in the DPE programme. Such lapses interfered with the continuity of tutorial support, as reported by one of the learners:

*Thato: Students whose tutors kept changing...did not get their assignments back, let alone feedback on them. When tutors change there is no follow up since the outgoing tutor has not handed over to the incoming tutor. This may have partly contributed to poor performance, failure and prolonged stay on the programme. P13:25 (203:203).*

The frequent change of tutors also led to inconsistency in explaining content in a logical sequence:

*Winnie: Nobody, even the coordinator, came to tell you why there was no tutor. The coordinator just said, go and get into the other classes...And they were not able to replace him so we had to run from one class to the other, from one teacher to the other teacher, and you do not know the sequence of the module discussion in that class. P7: 82 (371:371).*

These findings suggest lack of commitment and accountability on the part of the tutors and limited monitoring and supervision of tutorial support. To maintain continuity of tutorial

support, this learner recommended a consistent learner-tutor interaction, in which one tutor handled one tutorial group until a particular course/level was completed:

***Winnie:** I think there should be continuity of the teacher. The teacher really should be there when the course starts. And there should be people to monitor that those teachers are there from day one to the last day. It would really help a lot. P7:82 (365:365).*

A further problem, was the frequent change of programme coordinators indicating that the academic support did not conform to management structures suggested in the theory of distance education based on empathy (Holmberg, 2003), as discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (§5.4). These changes appeared to disrupt the continuity of programme activities, as stated by one of the learners:

***Teamwork:** Even changes of the coordinators was a big problem. Today it is this one, the other day it is that one, then the other session a different person is there. So there is no continuation in what the other person did. P7:70 (153:153).*

From these findings, I concluded that tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials and frequent change of tutors and part-time coordinators were major weaknesses because they disrupted learner-tutor interaction and interfered with the provision of effective academic support. Asked about the measures taken against tutors who failed to attend tutorials, one of the tutors made the following observations:

***Tiro:** Nobody is bothered...Mr. X (referring to the programme coordinator at MCE) would run around finding replacements for tutors who were absent. Otherwise...I am not obliged! I don't expect anybody to take any action! I come when I feel like! P12:53 (312:312).*

Similar views were given by other tutors:

***Neo:** That is the case. Nobody can take any action against you. It's just something that you are volunteering to do. P12:60 (298:298).*

***Tashata:** Yes! And nobody can say why. P14:80 (338:338).*

These remarks echo distance learners' claims that some lecturers were not committed to conducting tutorials on the DPE programme. They also confirm the absence of administrative structures for supervising and monitoring tutor participation in the learner support services in the programme. However, there were notable exceptions to tutor absenteeism, as one learner explained:

***Boitumelo:** During the course of my studies, I was lucky because we did not encounter the changing of tutors time and again or even with the computer...Even with the project, I did not have any problem because my English teacher is the one who was helping me with the project and he was also a lecturer here at Molepolole College. P13:73 (71:71).*

Thus, even in the same college, some tutors were consistent in giving tutorial support, while others were reported to absent themselves from scheduled tutorials. These views confirmed the need to examine the role of decision makers in monitoring academic support and assess the responsibilities of stakeholders in providing support in the DPE programme. It was also made clear that learner-tutor interaction was necessary, given distance learners' perceptions about their readiness for the diploma course. Asked to comment on the courses in the DPE programme that they found challenging, distance learners identified maths, science and practical subjects such as music and home economics as among the subjects that they found difficult. Some participants traced difficulties with maths and science back to PTC holders' educational backgrounds:

***Thato:** My educational background is Primary Upper after JC and my maths and science knowledge was limited. I prayed in my first year!... I didn't know what to do because for maths, to add  $(a+b+y)$  was difficult for me. P13:196 (129:129).*

Other learners said that the Maths content in their PTC course differed from the type of content they found in the DPE programme:

***Teamwork:** When I was doing maths in secondary school and at PTC, I was not doing this modern maths, because I didn't do Form Five. That is why I had a very big problem in*

*maths... It is too difficult. P7:112 (120:120). Like today (December, 2009) we are still struggling with first-year modules. After eight years. This is not right. P7:6 (363:363).*

Teamwork's concerns about lack of prerequisite knowledge for the diploma course confirms the need for learner profiles as a basis for effective learner support services. Distance learners' claims about difficult content in maths were confirmed by one of the tutors:

*Neo: They have problems that are scattered all over in mathematics...to the extent that...maybe...there are some students...who are still supplementing module one... Whether it is the test or an assignment or the exam, there are students who are still in module one. P12:38 (168:168).*

Some learners, however, found other subjects, such as music, difficult, simply because they did not like the subject:

*Boitumelo: I had a serious problem, because I don't like music. I thought I was going to go straight to English and Setswana. I would have preferred to specialise in English and Setswana straight away. P13:136 (132:132).*

Other learners said that they found all the subjects in the diploma curriculum difficult:

*Gorata: I had problems because most of the subjects were tough like communication and study skills, especially the computers, because we just finished the course without being shown how to use the computers because there were no computers on the course at the college. P13:108 (65:65).*

Some of the participants attributed these difficulties to distance learners' work environment which limited the development and use of the language of instruction (English):

*Mmusi: Maybe the problem is the programme itself... the teacher has been teaching in standard one for many years! Language wise! If you teach standard one you are bound ... to be speaking Setswana, or their mother tongue... almost throughout your life... definitely*

*when it comes to the college here, it's... like you have a very serious elephant in front of you. P14:142 (171:171)*

***Khumo:** What he is saying is they cannot express themselves!! So we have a problem in assignments, their...mistakes! It is terrible! P14:142 (172:172).*

These responses suggest a gap between what was known about distance learners' previous educational backgrounds and the DPE entry requirements. If information was made available about learner characteristics, it could have been used to specify the needs to be addressed, define the appropriate study skills, motivation and expectations from the new programme, and indicate the best learning approaches to be taken as discussed in Chapter 2 (§ 2.6). Despite finding the content in some subjects difficult, learners said the diploma content was useful because it gave them an opportunity to upgrade their knowledge across all subjects, as stated by one of the learners:

***Denn:** The first modules had information that the teachers did not have at the PTC level. Teachers have problems covering the syllabus. Most primary school teachers of our age do not understand content. The PTC content is Cambridge level which PTC teachers did not have. P13:62 (134:134). We need to elevate our content in teaching subjects up to form five (O-Levels). ...so as to help pupils. We do not understand content, we primary teachers of yesterday... Take the objectives of Standard 6 or 7 maths. Teachers will teach it without adding or subtracting because they do not have content. P13: 137 (136:136).*

Some learners found it difficult to study due to heavy workloads. Given this conflict, some concentrated more on their employment work than their studies:

***Winnie:** The class I was teaching was too demanding. More so than with one of the schools, we were really competing, and so... the pressure. We really had a lot of pressure. P7: 67 (287:287). We really put more effort to see that we get position one...when the final results come out. P7: 67 (289:289).*

Another learner said she had made slow progress in her studies, ending up with incomplete results, because her employment responsibilities left her only limited time to concentrate on her studies:

*Mary: The problem I had is that our school did not perform well last year (referring to 2008). ...Our bosses!.. We committed ourselves with lots and lots of strategies so that we improve the performance... I have to help the teachers...and see to it that things are done.*

**P11:34 (344:344).**

Other learners said they were unable to concentrate on their studies because they were taking care of their old parents:

*Teamwork: I am having a mother who is very old. A blind one... she is staying with my sister. And when we close, we all come and help with staying with our mom...It is really hectic to see myself...every residential session, leaving my mother behind!*

**P7:27 (305:305).**

*Joe: My results for the research project and the teaching assignment portfolio are incomplete because of social problems, not because of the lecturer who supervised me.*

**P11:22 (340:340).**

Thus workload constraints and social responsibilities such as taking care of old parents may leave distance learners little time to concentrate on their studies. Despite these constraints, some learners devised mechanisms for coping with their part-time studies and the increased workload, as recalled by one of the completers:

*Thato: I didn't have any problems because I had a plan. ... My second and last born were at college completing their studies. So we planned our studies at home together. They studied together from 7.00 to 10.00 am. I studied from 2.a.m when the family, including grandchildren, was asleep. At six o'clock, I woke up and prepared myself to go to work. If I had problems I used to call my tutors and they would help me with content any time. They would arrange for a venue and help me.*

**P13:11 (152:152).**

Other learners devised time management skills which allowed them to combine various responsibilities with their part-time studies:

***Boitumelo:** I planned to study with my friend, but she fell out of our discussion due to other commitments. She has not finished her studies because she did not allocate time for her family, work and studies...Tell your family about your problem...There is need for a life plan that should be discussed with the family. P13:15 (154:154).*

These data indicate that some distance learners did manage their time in a manner that enabled them to combine their part-time studies with their other responsibilities.

Interaction between learners and tutors was vital to facilitating the supervision of research projects. As discussed in Chapter 1 (§2.2), one of the reasons why distance learners dropped out was their inability to complete research projects and written assignments in modules. This was confirmed by one of the officers at the UB, whose office was responsible for processing final-year results in the DPE programme:

***Betty:** Actually the research projects for the distance learners have been a concern and teaching assignment portfolios... these students are not completing ...the programme because... they are unable to complete their research projects and portfolios. P6:33 (40:40).*

When asked to comment on why they were unable to complete their studies, some of the learners gave lack of time as one reason they were unable to do their written assignments and finalise their compulsory research projects and teaching assignment portfolios:

***Mary:** I had no time to carry out research for my project. It was not due to lack of support from the college. Even the lecturer, he used to call me... and with the portfolio...it is a little bit difficult because you know I don't have much time, although I don't have a class. P11:24 (344:344).*

Time management emerged as a major constraint for another distance learner:

**Denn:** *I did my own work except studies. I did not allocate time to my studies. That is why I fell behind with my work. For example, I still owe assignments in maths and science module 3... I postponed my assignments and suffered.* **P13:150: (156:156).**

Although tutors made attempts to help learners with the supervision of research projects, some learners did not turn up for supervision, as explained by one tutor:

**Tiro:** *With research we try to make some schedules of when we can meet, but in most cases they don't turn up...because of commitments at their workplaces... or because of the distance between the student and the supervisor... they don't honour the scheduled meetings.* **P12: 68 (213:213).**

Distance learners' claims about being unable to complete their studies due to work commitments and lack of time were shared by programme coordinators, as observed by Faith from the MCE:

**Faith:** *Their main problem was... time! Looking at the programme vis-à-vis their own business, which is teaching. You would find that we expect them to read on their own but... they would be teaching standard 7 so they didn't have the time to concentrate on the programme...The other problem was the workload... They were supposed to be given time to study and at times, it was not possible because they had to do their work ... knocking off on Friday and being expected to write the following day... they would come to write tests and exams not prepared... due to their workload at their work station.* **P8:299 (175:175).**

Evidence from the findings indicates that in addition to lack of time and heavy workloads, distance learners lacked the study skills appropriate to carrying out the research projects, as noted by some of the tutors who also supervised research projects:

**Tiro:** *It is difficult to supervise research projects...the problem is sometimes access to the library, and even how to use the library. Critiquing and analysing documents is a major problem for them... P12:10 (51:51). It takes a long time for the student to complete the project. They don't understand. They keep asking... what do you mean by this? It is very*

*time consuming. P12:20 (236:236). They don't have any knowledge on research. P12:26 (40:40).*

These data appear to question the notion that the ODL is a flexible mode of study, in which distance learners can combine their work and family responsibilities with part-time studies. This view was confirmed by one of the learners, who felt that distance learners needed more time with tutors in order to be equipped with research skills:

***Pearl:** Staff should be able to visit us ...just once, to see how well we are doing with our research and teaching assignment portfolio, to help us... because we sometimes struggle...especially with the research project because it was our first time to carry out a research. We didn't know what to do. P11:168 (405:405).*

Other participants claimed that distance learners might be unable to carry out their research projects because they were not given adequate research skills by their supervisors, as agreed by one of the tutors:

***Khumo:** They may have the idea but because they are not practically doing it... I know here and there, we have lecturers presenting in different conferences, but ...we are not directly involved, we just read for class, we don't read to research! P14:87 (170:170).*

The physical distance between learners and their tutors took a significant toll on the supervision and completion of research projects, as stated by one of the tutors:

***Faith:** The problem really could be the kind of learner support because supervising a project and somebody is in Ghanzi and I'm supervising... in Molepolole for me to be able to supervise, that...student has to be travelling up and down. And how many of them...have the resources? For them to do the project they have to come to Gaborone...when the schools have closed... The learner support system is failing them, because we are not providing them with the guidance that we should be providing... If they would come to Molepolole just for two weeks to work on the projects...the tutors are there, and then they use the library, they are helped here...then it would do. P8:76 (244:244).*

Some supervisors felt that the lack of continuous supervision of research projects may have contributed to some learners submitting completed but unsupervised research projects. This raised concerns about how a learner could carry out and submit a research project without supervision, as recalled by one of the tutors:

***Tiro:** I received a complete project which we had never discussed, which I never passed. I called the student and up to date she has never come. I think she knew why I was calling her, and when I went through, I could see that this was not her work and it was very difficult for me to put wrong or right because I could suspect that this was not the student's piece of work. She has not shown up to date. **P12:46 (69:69).***

To reduce the distance between learners and tutors in the supervision of research projects, one tutor suggested more learner-tutor interaction through frequent meetings at the education centres:

***Puso:** Like here in Molepolole...if we organise with places like education centres, rather than coming to a central place...then you can make arrangements with the students to ...come the day before, in the morning, others can come in the afternoon, you do the work then they go back. **P12:17 (364:364).** ... not at a four months interval but maybe shorter intervals. **P12:16 (351:351).***

From these comments and from the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.7), I concluded that learner-tutor interaction in the DPE programme should be devolved to the education centres. This would bring the support services closer to where learners lived and worked, offering a possible strategy for improving completion rates. The justification for decentralising learner support services was summed up by one of the learners:

***Denn:** I know some of the students who deserted because of distances from the college... Why don't these people do their tutorials somewhere near...education centres? **P13:66 (250:250).***

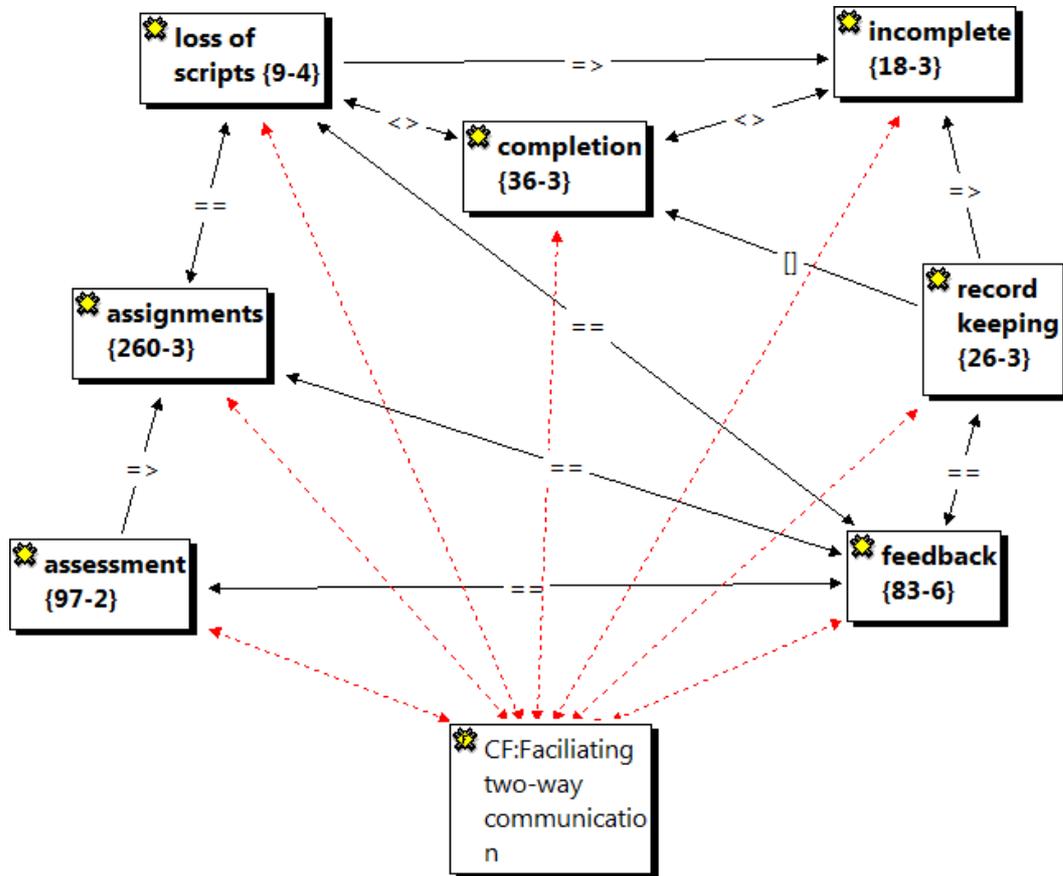
In summary, the findings established that it was necessary to build learner-tutor interaction into the provision of academic support. Tutors could then help learners to interpret content through using the appropriate study skills as explained in Chapter 2 (§2.7.2). Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, frequent changes of tutors, and the use of tutorial techniques that did not encourage learner participation further discouraged some learners from joining in tutorial sessions. Lack of appropriate research skills was one of the factors that contributed to distance learners' failure to complete their research projects on schedule.

Academic support was not available in between the residential sessions, particularly for learners who lived and worked in remote areas and who could not contact their tutors or other learners because of poor public transport or limited telephone network. The introduction of decentralised learner support services at or near education centres could ensure more learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction, thus obviating long intervals of waiting between the residential sessions and contribute to the provision of effective learner support services.

#### **4.4.2 Facilitating two-way communication**

The sub-category of facilitating two-way communication, in the category of responding to academic needs was analysed under the code family (CF) shown in Figure 4.7 below. In this category, data were analysed to find out whether marked assignments facilitated two-way communication between learners and tutors, short turnaround times, and the provision of timely and constructive feedback. This assessed participants' views on the effectiveness of feedback to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DPE programme.

Figure 4.7: Facilitating two-way communication



**Symbol:** == is associated with; => is a cause of; <> contradicts; [] is part of

The results in this section show that, while some learners benefited from the feedback provided by tutors, others had not. Some of the learners, particularly those who had completed the DPE programme, seemed satisfied, suggesting that constructive feedback does indeed facilitate two-way communication between learners and tutors:

*Thato: After doing the assignments, tutors would mark them and show us where we went wrong ...Tutors' feedback was constructive because we discussed in class with them and they corrected our mistakes. P13:25 (203:203).*

**Boitumelo:** *After they have marked the assignments...our tutors gave us constructive feedback so that you cannot go wrong in the next assignment. P13:97 (208:208).*

Some learners with incomplete results said they had not received their assignments back from tutors, which reduced any two-way communication through written assignments:

**Winnie:** *The teacher would be coming in class, giving us marked scripts and then from there yours is not even there and then she would tell you, maybe it is mixed with scripts of another class, you run to that class, nothing! And from there you realise that in the computer also, your mark is not appearing. P7:107 (351:351).*

Winnie's views illustrate distance learners' frustrations in their attempts to get feedback from tutors. Another learner said that tutor absenteeism had resulted in some students not receiving their marked assignments during the residential session:

**Mayo:** *Tutors would collect our work for marking but when we reported back during residential session, they were not there. Some had gone to mark national examinations. As such we did not have feedback. P13:102 (215:215).*

Other learners said that, although they received their marked assignments back from tutors, it was difficult to understand the ticks in the marked scripts because the tutors had not provided comments, as one learner who had incomplete results claimed:

**Dineo:** *In some subjects, they gave me my scripts with many ticks, but...I did not understand what the ticks meant. They were meaningless. P7: 95 (174:174). There were no comments on my marked assignments and tests. I don't know the meaning of ticking. P7: 96 (178:178).*

These criticisms were confirmed by learner support coordinators at UB:

**Bonolo:** *Marked scripts rarely have constructive comments from tutors... People just make ticks...We went to Tlokweng to do ... research on tutors' comments... and feedback on... marked assignments ...there were very, very few comments. P9:119 (166:166).*

*Sego: And these are ...work-shopped people on how to do comments...It is a big setback because tutors do not give learners comments on assignments and tests... P9:119 (167:167).*

While acknowledging the lack of comments on marked scripts, one of the tutors claimed that it was easier to give comments in class than to write them on assignment scripts:

*Tiro: That is why in some cases, it is necessary to cover the assignments with them during the tutorials because sometimes it is not easy to write all the comments on each piece of work. When you talk about things like... referencing... you can't write them on a piece of work. It is better if you discuss it with them during the tutorial as to how they should write, bibliography, how to acknowledge sources, and one thing that I have found with their assignments... is lack of access to library...they can't be open because of...lack of overtime for college library staff. P12:40 (219:219).*

These comments suggest that individual distance learners did not receive the kind of support in their written assignments which they could use to judge and correct their mistakes when doing their next assignment which contradicts the role of assignments in ODL which is discussed in Chapter 2 (§5.2). At the individual level, two-way communication between students and tutors was not sustained, and the lack of constructive comments from tutors may have contributed to some learners not completing their studies:

*Boitumelo: Some people have not graduated because of the tutors. They handed their projects to the tutor and the tutor did not mark. I know of a case of a student who handed the project to a tutor and the tutor did not mark the project or portfolio, and he just switches off his cell phone so that he cannot be contacted... P13:104 (277:277).*

When asked to comment on how they ensured that distance learners received timely feedback on marked assignments, research projects and teaching assignment portfolios, tutors from Tlokweng College said there were structures for the processing of assignments, from submission to the time the learners were given feedback, as reported by one of the tutors:

***Tashata:** For timely feedback...lecturers are doing their best because if the assignments are sent to the colleges on time they...are sorted according to subjects, from subjects according to particular lecturer, and that particular lecturer will come and collect their assignments and mark, and after marking we normally don't send the assignments back to the students, they wait until they come...the first day that they go to class for that particular subject, they get their feedback.. P14:12 (200:200).*

These findings confirm that procedures and processes for the administration of assignments in colleges were enforced by the part-time coordinators to ensure short turnaround times and timely feedback to distance learners. The importance of assignments and feedback in facilitating two-way communication between learners and tutors and in the provision of remedial work was emphasised by one of the tutors:

***Tashata:** When they come, you find that the tutors have already marked their assignments, and they have already identified some of the problems which the learners have, such that those problems help tutors to prepare ... to summarise the information. And also, the tutors, they are doing a lot of... photocopying... they are giving handouts, so if this learner support service...could find a way to support the learners...if really we could follow them and find a way of knowing what they are doing, like the ODL office in Kanye, and give them even encouragement support, it would really help! P14:22 (181:181).*

These comments were echoed by a tutor from the MCE:

***Neo:** We are given their assignments, mark them and then return them to the ODL office, and discuss the corrections during the tutorials. When we return assignments we try to guide them as to how they should have performed... and how they could have done the solutions correctly. P12:39 (214:214).*

Apart from delays caused by lack of timely marking or return of assignments with constructive feedback from tutors, social problems and religious convictions may also prevent some distance learners from writing scheduled examinations, as explained by the programme coordinator at Molepolole College of Education:

***Faith:** Some would come in, and there is a death and or a funeral and they are supposed to be writing exams and because it's only that time they would come in and also religious issues where you find ...an SDA student...so she could not come to write an examination because it was on Saturday against her religious beliefs. P8:52 (178:178).*

The findings further indicate that policy statements, such as programme rules and regulations (University of Botswana, 2005b), also contributed to delays in programme completion. Regulation DPE 6.3, (University of Botswana, 2005b) stipulates that 'A student who fails a module shall repeat that module's assessment component within a period of two years.' This regulation encouraged some learners to carry forward failed modules from Level 1 to Level 4, thus increasing their workload:

***Winnie:** We were told that you can take failed modules afterwards... I decided not to write the failed ones until I had finished. P7:10 (37:37). I would suggest... for those who have not finished, they are given a chance to write subjects that they are still owing... so that ... when we go for second year everyone has finished first year modules, instead of carrying them to second year because it becomes a heavy load of work. P7:73 (355:355). You are not going to the second year with a fresh mind. P7:6 (361:361). That is what creates this problem of incomplete results... In that manner it would reduce a lot of repeating. P7:5 (357:357).*

The weaknesses of learner support services thus include delayed feedback on assignments. With this goes problems of time management, workload constraints and lack of appropriate research skills, all contributing to distance learners' inability to meet deadlines for research projects, interfering with two-way communication and delaying programme completion. A further factor which needed to be analysed in the category of facilitating two-way communication was that of record keeping which is discussed in the next section.

#### 4.4.2.1 Keeping correct and up-to-date records

Effective management of ODL should include the maintenance of correct and up-to-date records of assignments and other assessment work. In this study, data on record keeping was analysed to assess whether providers of learner support services developed and implemented procedures and processes for receiving and recording assignments, dispatching them for marking, and returning them to distance learners, and whether they communicated these administrative procedures to learners and tutors/markers. The comments from the participants, however, indicated that there was a weakness in record-keeping mechanisms, which were not clear and which were perceived as among the factors that delayed distance learners' progress and programme completion, as stated by one of the learners from the MCE:

**Thato:** *There was a problem of management and record keeping. Sometimes the ODL clerks would receive and record assignments, but if they were out of the office, they told us to throw them through the window. P13:165 (205:205).*

Asking learners to throw assignments into the office through the window, instead of physically receiving and recording them, clearly indicated poor record keeping with a possibility of loss of assignments. It also suggested that the college may not have put together correct and up-to-date records, either of learners who had submitted their assignments or those who had not:

**Denn:** *Sometimes we submitted assignments on arrival at college and went back home. Next time we came to college we were told it has been misplaced. You had to...re-write the same assignments... Management and administration of assignments was poor due to poor record keeping. Sometimes we would be asked, "to whom did you give the assignments?" after we had been told to throw them through the window of the ODL office. P13:49 (210:210).*

The careless nature of administering assignments was expressed by another learner:

**Winnie:** *The copies of assignments were just lost there in the office. So keeping of the records, it is like they are not kept in the right order... P7:62 (317:317).*

Poor record keeping was confirmed by the programme coordinator at the MCE when she remarked:

***Faith:** There were times when the students will come to hand in their assignments and ... the secretary is not there, and for a student who comes all the way from Ghanzi and doesn't find somebody it was problematic...the coordinator thought that...they can throw in the assignment through the window ...because they thought they were solving a problem. **P8:252 (86:86).***

These comments suggest a lack of efficient procedures for the administration of assignments at the MCE. Poor record keeping in the processing of assignments seems to have contributed to failure for some learners who might otherwise have been passed:

***Denn:** Sometimes they write even subjects that we have passed as fail and repeat... If you do not have a copy of the marked assignment, you are going to fail. **P13:205 (284:284).***

On occasion learners were compelled to rewrite assignments that the college had requested, but which could not be traced due to mismanagement of assignments:

***Winnie:** The assignments for year four... we were told to bring them to college immediately we received them back from tutors. Some of us took our marked scripts immediately, only to find that as the years went by, we were told that our marked assignments and the marks cannot be traced... The only thing you could do is just to write again so that you can get your certificate (very bitterly). Some of us came from very far (geographically) like me, I come over 200 kilometres, to go to Molepolole. This was very painful for us because you had to go very far to write exams when you knew you had already written, but they lost your marks. **P7:93 (56:56).***

Although the programme coordinators at the MCE seemed to understand their managerial roles, there were challenges in the administration of assignments at the college:

***Faith:** The role of coordinator is to maintain order...to take care of their wellbeing... their documentation ...but there were challenges from the coordination, because...students*

*would hand in assignments and the assignment would not be captured...coupled with the computer breaking down...to ensure that the documentation is there. P8:211 (43:43).*

It is clear that there was negligence in record keeping and a lack of accountability on the part of those in charge of the learner support services, particularly at the MCE. When asked to comment on record-keeping at the college, the programme coordinator confirmed there had been negligence, but attributed it to the high turnover of programme coordinators and the lack of proper hand-over routines, particularly during the early years of the programme:

***Faith:** I would say, yes, there was negligence, because if you look at the programme in the college, it went through... four coordinators who because of work or whatever decided to resign. ...there was no formal handovers. The documentation...was a bit scanty, such that you would find that a student would have done some work and the work is not recorded. P8:150 (61:61).*

This lack of institutional policy guidelines to regulate the coordination of DPE activities at the stakeholder institutions could be the reason why programme coordinators were not directly involved in record keeping at the MCE:

***Faith:** It may be poor record keeping but I would attribute it to ... the secretary who was not accountable...who knows how the computer programme operates...and because of that...the coordinators did not know anything about...where you entered information and it translated this way or that way. P8:95 (63:63).*

However, record keeping seemed to be better organised at Tlokweng College, as stated by two of the tutors:

***Khumo:** Even the projects cannot get lost...because you know whether they have completed. P14:34 (225:225).*

***Tashata:** What we are doing here for projects, we take the list to their supervisors...the record is there. P14:34 (227:227).*

Unquestionably, poor record keeping emerged as one of the factors which added to distance learners' workloads and slowed their progress and programme completion. It also increased workload for tutors who had to set and mark additional assessment work that had been written all over again. A number of participants noted that some of the poor record keeping was due to lack of training in ODL skills:

***Bonolo:** There hasn't been a programme for training or orientation for programme coordinators. We need something to help these people...to keep records, attendance registers... and marks. If you do not know how to operate Excel you have problems ...with computation of marks, for presentation to Examination Boards... Programme coordinators just rely on their own experiences...We need to identify activities, that coordinators do and...provide proper skills by developing an appropriate training programme for them. P9:85 (133:134). The coordinators should be made to do the certificate for distance education practitioners (CDPE) offered by UNISA, because...when you go through the course, you are able to understand what the learners go through....it makes you more empathetic to their needs. It really helps you to appreciate what you mean by distance learner. P9:50 (253:253).*

Collaborating with other organisations in the community could lead to the provision of effective learner support services as suggested by one of the learner support providers:

***Junior:** Community involvement ... will help with resource provision ...the De Beers has resourced the schools ...with... computer labs. Teachers have access to the computers.. So liaison with industry...can be formalised and monitored...where there are no resources. P1:57 (71:71).*

This participant also suggested the provision of decentralised learner support services using people who had been trained in ODL skills, so as to improve service delivery:

***Junior:** Training of education officers at the national level (regions and schools) and part-time coordinators at colleges ...for empowerment and capacity building in ODL ...because we need people that we can call on...unlike currently... If the coordinator goes*

*away, the programme is left in the lurch. This training is necessary because... there is a need for the development of/and mentoring at the school level. P1:107 (271:271).*

These views were shared by part-time staff in the DPE programme who had received training in ODL skills and found these useful, as noted by one tutor:

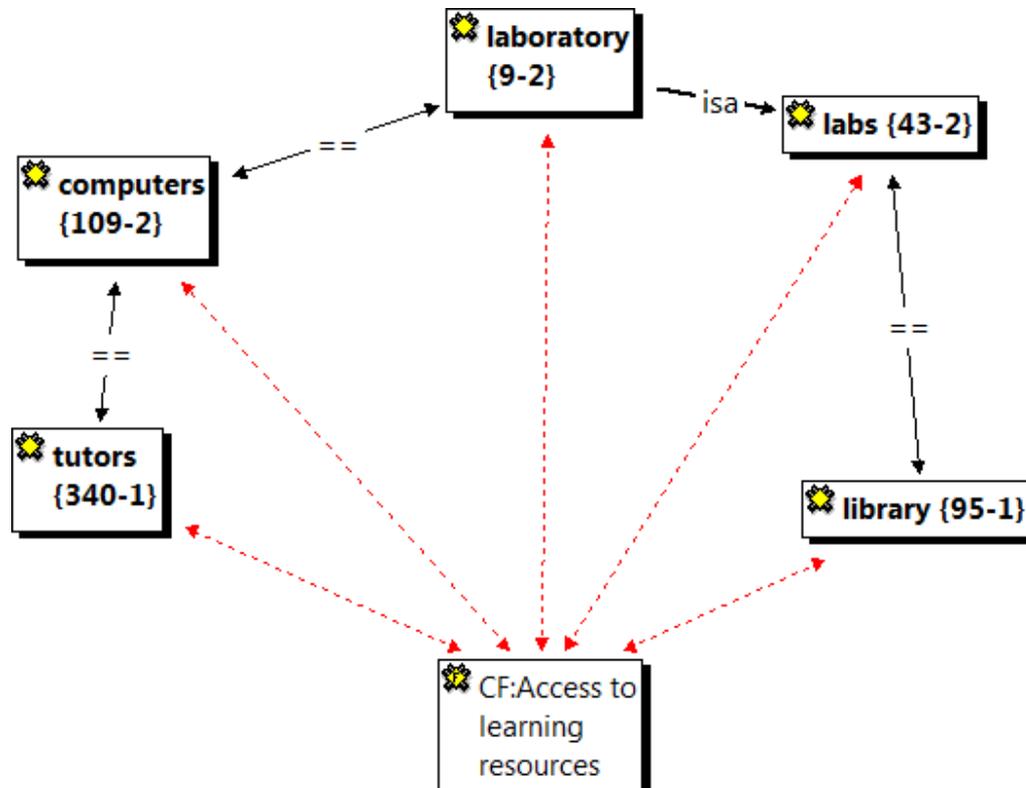
***Tiro:** The orientation was...OK. I even use some of the skills when teaching my conventional students.. how to write instructional materials.... And the way I mark the scripts for distance learners is different from the way I mark for conventional students. P12:37 (123:123).*

In summary, the findings showed that poor record keeping contributed to delayed progress and programme completion in the DPE programme. Participants also suggested that some colleges, such as Molepolole, did not have the procedures needed to record assignments from submission and marking through to when they were returned to the learners. The loss of assignments, resulting in the affected learners being asked to rewrite their work, highlighted record keeping as one of the factors delaying distance learners' completion of the DPE programme. In the next section, I discuss the sub-category of access to resources to find out how it contributed to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

#### **4.4.3 Facilitating access to learning resources**

In this section, data were analysed under the sub-category of access to learning resources in order to assess participants' views on distance learners' access to the available learning resources. Since the diploma syllabus had components which required distance learners to gain practical skills, it was important to know whether they had access during their studies to relevant learning resources such as libraries, computers, laboratories and equipment. In some of the stakeholder institutions, such as the MCE, it appeared that access depended on individual lecturers, since guidelines on such access were lacking. To determine the contribution of access to learning resources, data were analysed under the code family (CF), indicated in Figure 4.8 below:

*Figure 4.8: Access to learning resources*



(**Symbol:** == is associated with; is a : is a

In this section, participants gave different views on access to learning resources. When asked to comment on the availability of computers, laboratories and the library, one learner remarked:

***Thato:** We used laboratories and were even taken to the music room. It depended on the tutor's initiative. My tutor took us to computer laboratories. Access to computer labs depended on tutors. P13:83 (175:175).*

These views confirm that access to learning resources depended on the individual lecturer's initiative, and was not guaranteed for learners, either individually or in groups. It was difficult for learners to gain practical computer literacy skills since there was only limited access to computer equipment and only a few tutors with computer expertise of their own:

**Gorata:** *I have never used the practical part of the computer, but just theory. P13:11 (65:65).*

**Joe:** *Someone will take us there for two hours. You will move from one person to another. Most of us didn't know how to use a computer, so you stand there...with one person trying to show you, do this... do that... for around twenty minutes... another person.... It didn't help us at all! P11:66 (9185:185) ...there was only one lecturer who was able to teach all the whole classes! ...Which means that some of the lecturers who were teaching that module did not know...how to write....things using the computer but teaching... P11:73 (391:391).*

That tutors could take part in tutorials for which they did not have the required competencies suggests lack of a proper vetting mechanism to ensure they had the required knowledge and skills to teach specialised subject areas such as computer skills. The revelation that some tutors had limited computer literacy and could not assist distance learners in gaining such skills could explain why the learners felt they were not given adequate support in this area. The data revealed that lack of access to computers was compounded by the limited number of computers in the stakeholder institutions relative to the number of learners, as noted by one of the programme coordinators:

**Tashata:** *Most of our learners see the computer for the first time when they come to the colleges of education...The computers will be down the whole of two weeks, so those who are tutoring computers, they don't have access to the computers. Furthermore...we are dealing with over a hundred and something students at a time and we have only 20, 25 computers or so, and out of these...only five are working... You...distribute students around a computer and only one is clicking. That is where they get the most difficulties...when it comes to practical things. P14: 85 (158:158).*

When asked to elaborate on how they managed a computer skills course without doing the practical component, one learner remarked:

*Winnie: We did the theoretical part... P7:32 (214:214). We studied the parts by numbering them! This is a mouse...the hardware!...the types of computers, CPU (central processing unit), this one is a screen...this one is the font that can create the size of the letter, reduce it. This was too theoretical. Now, we were left with the practical part, where we would buy the computers for ourselves and practise it more at home with our little ones to help us. P7:85 (225:225).*

This makes it clear that students were not helped to acquire computer literacy skills beyond naming the various parts of the computer. Nor were they able to access and use a computer outside the residential sessions, which limited their opportunities for practice:

*Joe: You don't have computers at school, some of us, we don't know how to use a computer, so to get information becomes a problem. Or you can go...to the internet café ... when I get there, I can't request... information because ... sometimes we are afraid to ask. P11:65 (172:172).*

The need to access computers as learning resources was emphasised by one of the learners:

*Denn: Practical work needs accessibility to computers. If lessons on practical subjects are given there should not be a problem. Learners should be given access to computers. P13:128 (170:170).*

Apart from restricted access to computer resources, distance learners had only limited access to libraries and laboratories for other practical subjects such as science:

*Mayo: When we were doing module one, they said laboratories were for college students. We were not taken to the computer laboratories. We were allowed access to libraries during the working days, but they were closed during weekends. P13:42 (176:177).*

*Winnie: With science laboratories, some tried. But this depended on individual lecturers. P7:37 (237:237).*

*Mary: In science, we haven't gone to the laboratory since we started the course until we finished, from module one to four. P11:25 (277:277).*

Such restrictions on access to library and science laboratories seemed to indicate that some of the stakeholders had not committed adequate resources for distance learners. However, the situation was seen differently at the stakeholder institutions, as noted by one of the programme coordinators at Tlokweng College:

***Tashata:** We are using the duplicating machine, the computers, the printing, the art are using their own things, music are using their own melodic ...even the home economics. As we have said, these computers were meant for the conventional, and they were made to understand that it is not for them only, ODL is there..., the only problem is lack of facilities, resources in general, just like for the conventional. We don't have enough materials. Not that we are being barred from using them... P14:92 (346:346). Even the library, when our distance people are here... it is open at night... P14:28 (324:324).*

These views contrasted with those held by participants in the secondary college of education, as stated by the programme coordinator and one of the tutors at the MCE:

***Faith:** With communication and study skills, it is the module vis-à-vis the resources, because the component on computers is really out...any component which requires them to use special equipment ...Well, in some cases the facilities were there but the numbers were large. We had 150 per cohort and putting them in a classroom where there are two stoves or so many computers...would not be practical. If all science lecturers decided that they didn't want to be part of the programme... who would be accountable for the material? P8:108 (76:76).*

Commenting on lack of access to reference materials, one tutor noted:

***Khumo:** The problem of textbooks is very acute, because...they don't know which books to read. Even if you can provide the guidelines that this subject will need, the following textbooks, the fact that most of them are in the rural or remote areas, it is not easy for them to come back to town to buy or borrow textbooks. So they normally rely on the modules which are just a guide. P14:30 (45:45).*

Lack of access to learning resources raises certain questions regarding the effectiveness of learner support services in helping distance learners to cover topics which require access to laboratories, as articulated by learner support coordinators from the Kanye ODL office:

*Junior: ...how are they doing...science...It is a practical subject...in chemistry, if you say that when I mix hydrochloric acid and sodium hydroxide, I get sodium chloride...they should see...the two liquids mixing and becoming something that rests at the bottom of the tube. When you distil...it becomes ordinary salt... You can make them to taste, so that they can see clearly that it is salt. Can you just talk! talk! talk! when they are not seeing?*  
**P1:54 (221:221).**

Again, these findings suggest a lack of institutional guidelines to support distance learners' access to learning resources. They also raise certain issues for future research into the contribution of the DPE programme to improving the standard of education (Republic of Botswana, 1994) in practical subjects, when distance learners seem to have been given only limited access to learning resources. Although this study was not about equivalency between the pre-service and the in-service programmes, the participants raised concerns about what appeared to be different approaches in the provision of resources between the pre-service and the in-service programmes, as noted by one programme coordinator:

*Tashata: With the conventional students... the college buys them materials to do the practical work. But with these ones, they are not supported with any materials. They have to buy it for themselves. And at times also ...they are being downgraded because of the materials that they bought. If...they could be supported in one way or the other, by just giving them the materials that they give to the conventional students, because we are saying, it is the same thing except for the delivery mode.* **P14:30 (47:47).**

A further limitation was lack of access to tutors for supervision of research projects outside the residential sessions. The participants raised concerns about the originality of practical work when performed without adequate supervision by the programme coordinator:

***Tashata:** Take home economics ...they have to go in the lab and do the cookery, but on this programme... since the time is limited they are expected to go and do this at home... Who sees that they are really doing it? Like they are expected to come up with...dresses for children. They have to go in the laboratory and do that... Who is there really seeing that they are doing it or they are buying it? P14:98 (72:72).*

These findings reflect the need for regular contact between learners and their tutors, particularly in the supervision of practical work. But in the sub-category of access to learning resources, the data indicated that distance learners had limited access to resources such as computers, which they required to complete their studies successfully. This implies that there was a gap in the guidelines for facilitating such learners' access to learning resources.

To understand the institutional standpoint on this problem, it was necessary to get stakeholders' views about the availability and accessibility of institutional resources for ODL activities. Asked to comment on how they ensured that distance learners had access to learning resources, one of the college managers at MCE said:

***Modise:** Speaking from where I am sitting now (management position) I haven't come across a situation where I have been told that we cannot allow distance learners access to things that are allowed to conventional students. P4:38(141:141). They were assisted with whatever equipment, whatever facilities were there. P4:37 (137:137).*

These views were shared by the decision maker from Tlokweng College:

***Clem:** Everything that we provide to the conventional students, must be provided to the ODL students. P5:49 (87:87). When it comes to the computers, we do not have a computer lab...even for the conventional students... computers are not enough... but they have access. P5:88 (91:91).*

Although the institutional managers indicated that distance learners had access to institutional resources, their views were contradicted by the students themselves:

**Gorata:** *We were told...the computers were for conventional students who are training at this college ...not for the distance mode students. P13:111 (65:65).*

Another learner commented on distance learners' limited access to laboratories for science subjects:

**Mary:** *We didn't go to the laboratories...although they said the laboratories were there. I don't know why things were like that... P11:26 (419:419).*

Other participants noted that the restricted access to learning resources could have been caused by a lack of resources in some of the institutions, particularly in the primary colleges of education:

**Junior:** *The laboratories and consumables at colleges of primary education is almost zero. For instance, at... Lobatse college, you find a room ... with test tubes in a box...how are they doing the practicals? P1:54 (221:221). At the secondary colleges, there are enough laboratories...specifically for chemistry, physics, biology, home economics... art ... and music room. P1:29 (224:224).*

Although these comments suggest that resources are available in secondary colleges of education such as the MCE, lack of clear guidelines limited distance learners' access to these resources. However, other participants insisted that there were no guidelines to facilitate access to learning resources, as stated by one of the stakeholders at the Tlokweng College:

**Clem:** *When the programme was introduced, the understanding was that we were going to share resources (the conventional programme and the DPE programme) but there was a little bit of a problem, because along with this came a little package for the tutors paid on an hourly basis. So this was saying, if you want to be paid on an hourly basis, apply... and you will be paid. It could mean that those who aren't enrolling for that extra pay did not need to be there for the tutorials. P5:47 (14:14).*

It thus appears that access to human resources was constrained by lack of procedures. Another factor which emerged from the findings was that stakeholders did not seem to have explored

the possibilities of engaging other service providers, so as to give distance learners access to facilities such as libraries and laboratories for practical subjects, outside the colleges of education, as explained by one of the learner support providers at the Kanye ODL office:

***Junior:** Not many primary schools had libraries, but there were libraries in the Community Junior Secondary schools, and these teachers never used them...because they needed somebody to go to the secondary schools and say,...these people are feeding your schools with form ones, they are trying to upgrade themselves... can they be allowed to use these resources? At the secondary colleges, there are enough laboratories...specifically for chemistry, physics, biology, home economics...art ... and music room. P1:29 (224:224).*

Part-time coordinators also experienced difficulty in accessing resources such as the telephone and office space to facilitate communication, supervision and monitoring of programme activities, as confirmed by one of the programme coordinators at UB:

***Bonolo:** Getting a telephone was a problem...at Molepolole, they had to walk from here to the Library...make a telephone call or receive a fax. Tonota College was lucky to get a little office formerly used by a construction company which had a telephone line.... But other colleges, such as Lobatse, operated from a small tattered caravan which also operated as a storage of scripts, and modules. That is another big problem. P9:134 (220:220).*

This suggests that stakeholder institutions had not readjusted their institutional resources and infrastructure to accommodate the needs of the DPE programme as recommended in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§7.3). These data show that there was no coordinated effort among ODL institutions to ensure that distance learners used the learning resources, as confirmed by a programme coordinator at the UB:

***Lizzie:** Facilities like libraries are not accessible...the schools don't have computers... in the city or in large villages... where there is a library or... secondary school teachers...*

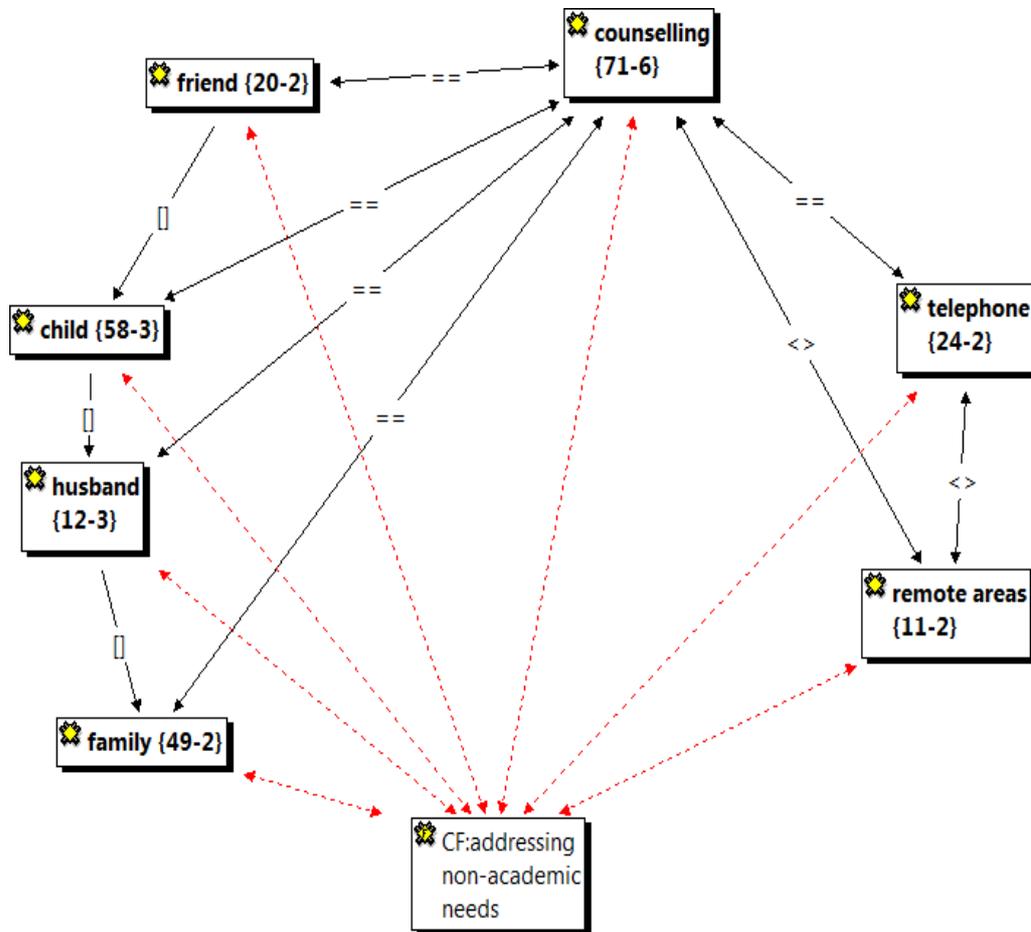
*tutor them at a fee... that's how they... help themselves ... Those in...remote areas... don't have access. P3:52 (85:85).*

From my findings, it could be concluded that lack of access to learning resources was limited by stakeholders' failure to coordinate the use of available resources at different institutions. This in turn reduced distance learners' access to the information they needed to complete their assignments, especially given the lack of library facilities near where they lived and worked.

#### **4. 5 Addressing non-academic needs**

This section addressed the sub-category of non-academic needs in the category of the provision of counselling support. Data were analysed to assess the nature of the counselling given to distance learners to help them cope with their multiple responsibilities of combining the demands of employment, workload, and family commitments, as well as resolving personal problems. In this case, the category that addressed non-academic needs was analysed under the code family (CF), indicated in Figure 4.9 below.

*Figure 4.9: Addressing non-academic needs*



**Symbol:** == is associated with; => is a cause of; [] is part of; <> contradicts)

When asked to comment on the problems they encountered in the course of their studies, one of the learners observed:

*Mary: When you are trying to study, the noise by the neighbours, ... the workload in school, those were the barriers. And the social problems, others sometimes during the month end, the head is not working properly. P11:3 (373:373).*

Distance learners encountered both academic and non-academic problems, as stated by one of the learner support providers at the Kanye ODL office:

**Tebogo:** *We listened to their grievances. Some are social problems, some are problems of learning itself, and then you would advise him/her accordingly... If it's a social problem we even go to the extent of meeting the family. If it's a married person we would ... request the husband to support the learner. Sometimes ...the school head would refuse with the days of study leave...we would ...talk to the school head ...after our intervention ..learners will ... be ...motivated to come to us when they have problems. P10:16 (34:34).*

These views were shared by one of the learner support providers from the Kanye ODL office:

**Junior:** *The counselling support that we provide, we look at the results, when ... they come out, especially during the residential session. When we get back to the Kanye ODL office, ... we draw a programme of school visits, and...visit them individually...and ask them, why didn't you submit your assignments... portfolio and the research project? What problems are you facing? What type of support are you getting from your school administration? Because at times they will be saying, it is because of the school administration... P1:8 (106:106).*

These findings confirmed that distance learners encountered academic problems such as workload and time constraints and social problems which interfered with their studies. These problems needed to be addressed through effective counselling support services. However, learner support providers maintained that they encountered logistical constraints when they tried to contact students at their work stations, as maintained by one of the providers from the Kanye ODL office:

**Tebogo:** *To communicate with those in remote areas,...we even used the clinics, the hospitals ...to talk to the head teacher or to the learners...That is how we followed up some of those who were in these areas. P10:21 (88:88). Some would climb the sand hill in the Kgalagadi to make or receive telephone calls. P10:40 (86:86). ... Some used trees... in the Kgalahadi... and...the Okavango. (10:21 (96:96).*

Communicating with distance learners, particularly those based in remote areas, could be complicated by lack of telephone network, as noted by one of the learner support providers:

**Junior:** *We used to report about ...a teacher ...in the sand dunes in... remote areas... we would ... talk through Roger, Roger, and say at a particular time, I will be up on the sand dune, then we would phone from the office, and then she would relate her problems to us. Or...when she is in Tsabong, they would be...using South African networks, like ... Vodacom and any other that they can find at Tsabong and beyond. P1:16 (34-34).*

However, the findings showed that distance learners found family members, such as spouses and children, as well as friends, employers and peers to be useful as sources of emotional support, saying that such support enhanced their motivation to persist:

**Winnie:** *In my case...my family was extremely helpful. That is how I passed ...because when I went to the class... I could... remember what the child had taught me... and then I would get everything right. P7:26 (275:275). Friends... would help with homework. The secondary school teachers would really help in some subject areas. Even in other primary schools, some teachers were really helpful. P7:26 (279:279).*

Another learner stated that the help given by a family member who was a secondary school teacher was very useful:

**Boitumelo:** *I was ... helped by my son who is a teacher at a secondary school teaching Science and Maths, even with English grammar, literature, everything...there was academic and emotional support from family members. P13: 19 (232:232).*

Employer support was also found to be useful in the administration of assignments:

**Mary:** *The employer would allow us some time to hand in assignments because those ones, you cannot hand them after hours. P11:96 (262:262).*

These learners had academic support from their children and friends, and administrative support from their employers. However, students did not always receive counselling support from the collaborating institutions as admitted by the programme coordinator from the MCE:

***Faith:** The academic and assessment is OK. But the counselling support ...is lacking because ...who is supposed to counsel? During those two weeks ...we would be running around to get them tutored and assessed... We tried to do it but...the structures are missing. **P8:23 (52:52).** The regular students...are using the guidance and counselling department in the Dean's office, but for the distance learners, they are not available because it... is optional... If the Dean chooses to ...take leave when schools close ... distance learners will be the responsibility of the coordinator. **P8:23 (53:53).***

These data reinforced the need to improve the provision of counselling support by involving the relevant departments in the stakeholder institutions:

***Faith:** Manpower for learner support, especially for....the counselling part of it...the education centres could also be used to provide support ... in the field or any other form of support which they can get when they are no longer in the colleges. **P:8:77 (249:249).** For future cohorts... the Dean of Students and the Counsellor...should deal with those problems... because I'll be doing the administrative part and at the same time if a student needs counselling I have to be there, and I am not qualified in counselling ... For you to be able to counsel you need to have that close association with the students. **P8:225 (55:55).***

To improve counselling support, some participants suggested identifying the counsellors who would be available to assist distance learners:

***Lizzie:** I just wish we had at least one counsellor per college or per region, because we have people trained in counselling ...in the colleges...it would benefit ...if we could engage them as part-time counsellors whenever the students need that kind of counselling. **P3:18(34:34).***

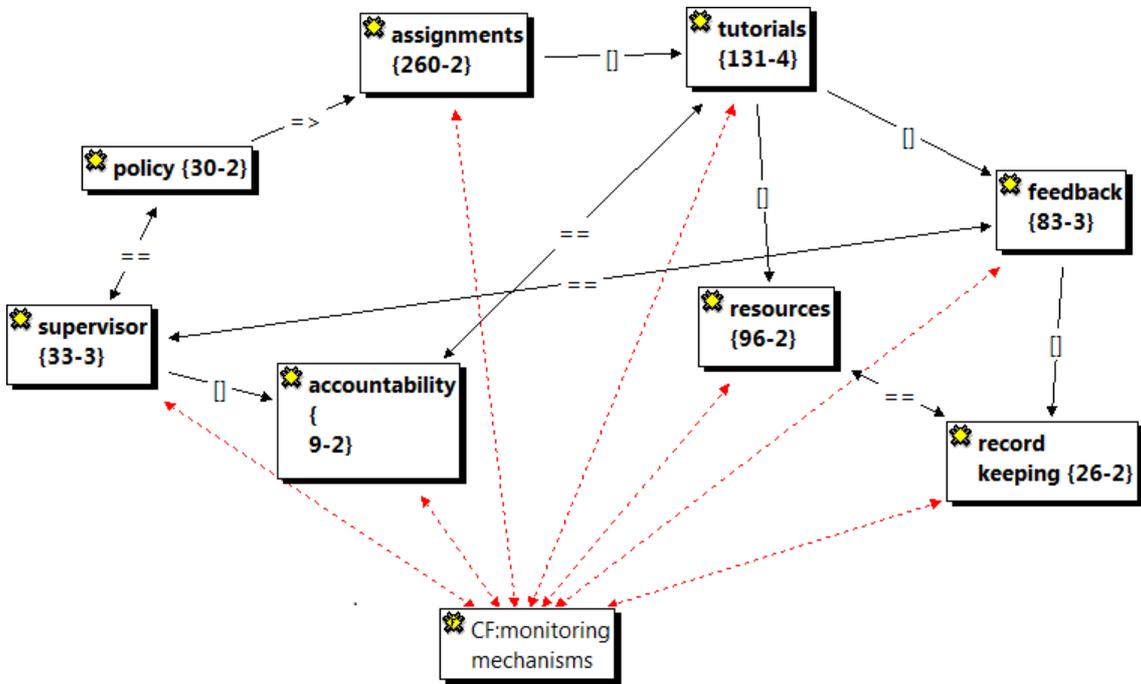
In summary, the findings analysed in the sub-category of non-academic support show that distance learners received emotional support from their families, children and friends, but only limited counselling from the ODL institutions. From this I drew the conclusion that such

institutions did not demonstrate empathy towards distance learners as proposed in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§7.2).

#### 4.6 Monitoring and supervision of learner support implementation

The sub-category of monitoring mechanism in the category of the provision of administrative support services was discussed under the codes indicated in Figure 4.10. In this sub-category, data were analysed under these codes to find participants' views on the contribution of learner support monitoring mechanisms to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

*Figure 4.10: Monitoring mechanisms*



**Symbol:** == is associated with; ==> is a cause of; [] is part of

The data were analysed to assess the monitoring mechanisms that were in place to ensure that academic advisory functions such as attendance and conducting of tutorials and the maintenance of accurate records were monitored to ensure the provision of effective learner

support services. The conclusion was that tutorial attendance was not adequately monitored as admitted by one of the MCE programme coordinator:

***Faith:** Personally we take it that these are adults who do not need to be followed up...the idea of tutorials is to augment what they have been reading and if they understand so... we have not had any monitoring mechanisms to ensure that they really do attend. P8:121 (66:66).*

From these comments, it could be concluded that there was a weakness in some of the colleges, such as the MCE, in tracking distance learners' tutorial attendance, ensuring that they took part in discussions of content with their tutors, receiving feedback on marked assignments and writing scheduled tests and examinations. However, monitoring academic support and tracking learners' attendance at tutorials appeared to be different at the Tlokweng College as noted by one of the tutors:

***Khumo:** Here we are given a list...of students, so that we follow them up on a regular basis and we guide them, looking at what they are supposed to learn... P14:150 (221:221).*

As explained in Chapter 1, tutorial and assessment functions were located at colleges of education so that distance learners could have access to tutors and other facilities which were overseen by the college principals. However, the participants indicated that the involvement of senior management in the supervision and monitoring of tutorial, feedback and record-keeping functions to ensure accountability by service providers was different in the two colleges of education. When asked to comment on how tutorial and assessment functions were monitored at MCE, the programme coordinator said:

***Faith:** We only followed ...up... those who owed projects... portfolios... because we want them to finish up. P8: 186 (160:160). It's them that should take the initiative to ensure that they learn. 8: 235 (68:68).*

Programme ownership and accountability at Tlokweng College of Education thus appeared to be different from the MCE, as expressed by one of the tutors and the programme coordinator:

***Khumo:*** *When the programme started, we were told that this is...our baby...the attitude that we have is that this is our programme and therefore we should make it a success.*  
**P14:81 (52:52).**

***Tashata:*** *Management really supports us....* **P14:43 (364:364).**

Asked to comment on the support tutors had from college management in integrating the DPE programme with other college activities, one of the tutors from MCE remarked:

***Tiro:*** *Even when you seek assistance from reprographics we don't see them...Who is responsible? Even if the work is not done, I cannot accuse him or her the way I would do if they refused to do work for my pre-service students.* **P12: 53 (336:336).**

There appeared to be no monitoring procedures for receiving, recording and dispatch of assignments, both for marking and returning to learners. If such procedures existed, they did not appear to have been communicated to tutors and learners. Commenting on the processes for setting and moderating examinations, converting marks and maintaining correct records, one of the programme coordinators at UB remarked:

***Lizzie:*** *There are so many challenges...people don't take it seriously ... because...the test when it comes...the day it is to be administered ..it has a mistake...you have to...correct a mistake ...this ...moderation process is supposed to make sure that mistakes are taken care of before the paper gets to students...When it comes to assessment, we need to do a lot of work.* **P3:141 (96:96).** *They don't convert marks. Someone gets 45/60 and then they just put 45, so you assume it's 45%... So if there is no one to check, that student could fail... to pass you need a minimum of 50%.* **P3:140 (77:77).**

Other factors which constrained the supervision and monitoring of DPE functions were related to the fact that programme coordinators were limited in ensuring that tutors did their work as required, as stated by the DPE programme coordinators at UB:

***Lizzie:*** *If there is a tutor within the colleges who is marking and they are not delivering, because the coordinator has no authority over that person, they are colleagues; they are*

*at the same level... they go to the Deputy Principal ... who has the authority, or even the Principal. P3:61 (59:59).*

In summary, the findings in the sub-category of monitoring mechanism in the category of administration of learner support services established that there was inadequate supervision and monitoring of learner support functions in stakeholder institutions. It was also noted that the involvement of senior management in these functions differed from one institution to another. Policy documents in the form of the MoU did not facilitate the coordination of learner support services in these institutions. Participants suggested collaboration with the community and non-governmental organisations to facilitate the sharing of resources with distance learners in the DPE programme. In the next section, data were analysed in order to answer the research question which sought to assess the role of stakeholders in the provision of learner support services and opportunities for improvement in the DPE programme.

#### **4.7 Stakeholder roles and responsibilities**

To assess stakeholder involvement in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme, I analysed the data in three sub-categories under the main category that dealt with stakeholder roles and responsibilities, as indicated in Table 4.3. below.

***Table 4.3. Stakeholder participation***

<b>Theme: Stakeholders' participation in the provision of learner support services</b>			
<b>Meaning units</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Sub-categories</b>	<b>Category</b>
<p>Ensuring supervision and monitoring of learner support services in stakeholder institutions.</p> <p>Supervision of learner-tutor and learner-learner contact during tutorial sessions.</p>	<p>Academic support Counselling support Administrative support</p> <p>Supervision</p>	<p>Roles and responsibilities</p>	<p>Stakeholder involvement</p>

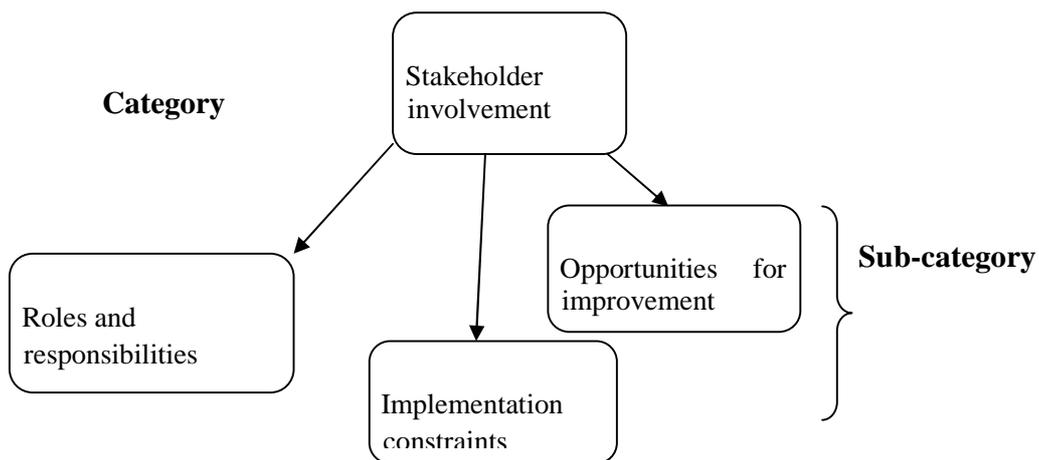
<p>Facilitating access to learning resources.</p> <p>Stakeholder collaboration and cooperation to enhance provision of effective learner support services.</p> <p>Implementation of policy guidelines.</p>	<p>Resources</p> <p>Programme ownership Communication</p> <p>Policy</p>		
<p>Learner-tutor interaction inhibited by tutor absenteeism and delayed feedback.</p> <p>DPE not perceived as core activity of stakeholder institutions.</p> <p>Ownership of DPE activities in stakeholder institutions not adequate.</p> <p>Lack of clear policy guidelines on resource sharing in stakeholder institutions.</p> <p>Lack of clear guidelines to facilitate supervision of part-time staff.</p> <p>Limited contact and interaction between learners, tutors and ODL institutions due to physical distances.</p> <p>Limited information about transferred teachers for follow-up.</p> <p>Shortage of staff to provide learner support in between the residential sessions.</p> <p>Payment structures which did not remunerate functions other than tutorials and assessment.</p>	<p>Absenteeism Feedback</p> <p>Recognition</p> <p>Barriers</p> <p>Resources</p> <p>Study centres</p> <p>Transfer</p> <p>Payments</p>	<p>Implementation constraints</p>	



#### 4.7.1 Management processes and procedures

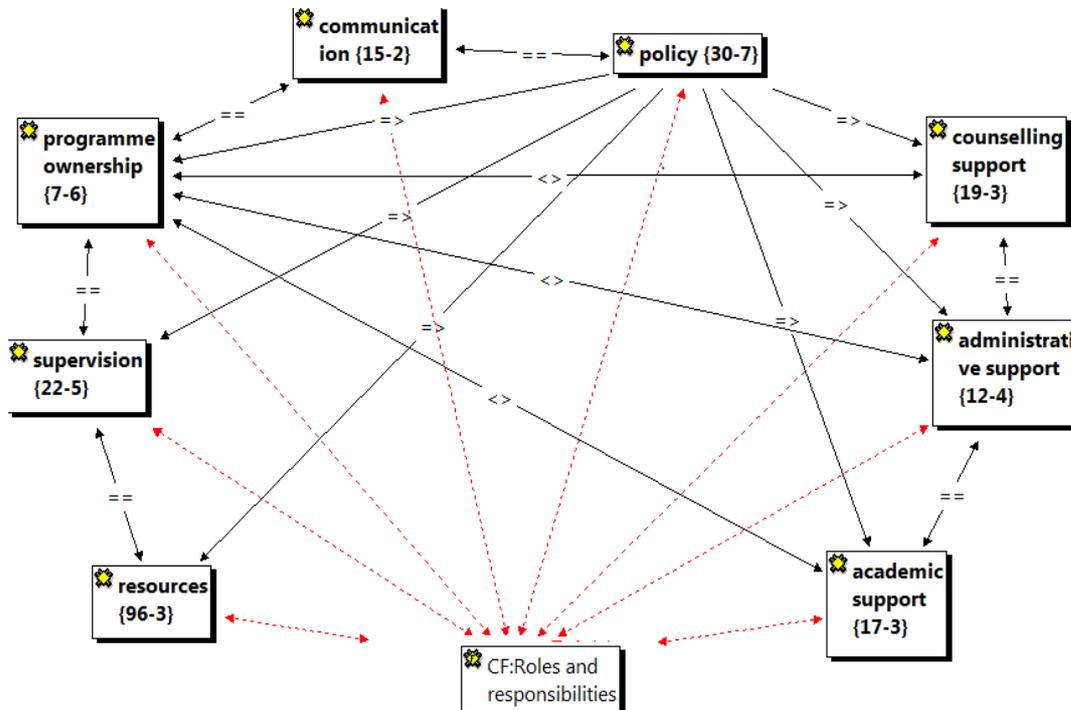
In Chapter 1 (§2.3), it was noted that one of the functions of administrative support is to ensure that there is adequate interaction between learners, tutors and other learners. In this section, data were analysed under the category of stakeholder involvement in the implementation of learner support services in order to answer the research questions which sought to assess the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and the barriers encountered during the implementation of learner support services. As indicated in figure 4.11, the first sub-category addressed the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders while the second sub-category dealt with the constraints on implementation. The third sub-category dealt with opportunities for improvement.

*Figure 4.11: Stakeholder involvement*



As explained in Chapter 1 (§2.3), the DPE programme was a joint venture, in which different stakeholder institutions were responsible for the development, implementation and management of all the activities of the programme. This section examines how the stakeholders administered and managed learner support services in order to ensure their effectiveness. In the sub-category of roles and responsibilities, data were analysed under the code family (CF), as indicated in Figure 4.12.

Figure 4.12: Roles and responsibilities



**Symbol:** == is associated with; => is a cause of; <> contradicts; [] is part of

In this section, I investigated the existing management processes and procedures in stakeholder institutions to determine whether they facilitated the coordination and supervision of different functions of learner support services, such as conducting tutorials, administering assignments, and keeping records. Asked to comment on how learner support services were conducted at Tlokweng College, one of the managers remarked:

*Clem: We run a diploma programme using two modes... The students...who come through the distance mode...are not any different except they only come for tutorials for two weeks at a time at the end of every term. In terms of support for them, it is really the same support that I give...the conventional ones. P5:62 (07:07).*

The institutional manager at the Tlokweng College perceived the DPE programme as part of the other college activities that dealt with the pre-service programme. These views were shared by the manager of the MCE, which also hosts distance learners for tutorial sessions:

***Modise:** Distance learners are coming to an institution that is running, and... whatever is available in the areas that they have to undertake, they have to access and in my view, it is exactly what was happening. If something was not there...for the conventional students, there was no way distance learners could access them. P4:37 (137:137).*

These responses suggest that all the services at stakeholder institutions that were required for the ODL programme were available to distance learners. Commenting on the management of support activities, the institutional manager at the Tlokweng College stated that the supervision of learner support services was one of his responsibilities. His brief included ensuring that tutors were available to conduct tutorials:

***Clem:** Anyone who commits himself/herself as a tutor...becomes my responsibility. And once you enlist to be a tutor, I will demand that if you do not attend your sessions, I be informed...by the coordinator...Things come to this office when they are really bad. I have not been informed of people not attending tutorials, or not supervising projects. P5:69(29:29).*

Thus, while the supervision of learner support is carried out by the programme coordinator, the college manager is ultimately responsible for these activities. Commenting on procedures to ensure that learner support services were provided as scheduled, the MCE manager remarked:

***Modise:** There is a specific officer assigned to ensure that this programme is implemented ...the coordinator...who ensures that the timetables are adhered to and...the tutors take...groups in terms of...delivery and assessment and availability of the necessary facilities. Those are the people who are involved in the processes...P4:3 (21:21). I participate in...ensuring that the environment is ready for their involvement... P4:45 (09:09).*

It appeared that the manager at the MCE was not directly involved in the management and supervision of learner support services at the college. This could explain why there were no procedures for administering tutorial support and processing assignments at the MCE, as compared to Tlokweng College. This view was shared by one of the tutors at the MCE:

***Puso:** Look at MCE ... I have been in this programme ever since it started. I don't remember Mr X... (giving the name of the Deputy Principal Academic MCE) being part of this...even when we are approving the results... P12:53 (327:327). ... because...when the exams are written Mr X (referring to the Deputy Principal Academic) is supposed to be up on his feet to ensure that things are going right. I have always seen the coordinator's role to be very difficult because...you are carrying this whole thing...he was supposed to be covered by the administration. P12:53 (330:330). Primary colleges... look at...Tlokweng ...they are running it alongside the pre-service...They are really giving it a lot of attention. P12:60 (302:302).*

Participants' comments about stakeholder involvement in the secondary college suggest that there was less involvement in the supervision of learner support activities, as compared to the primary college of education. These views could explain why the completion rates for Tlokweng College were higher than at the MCE as illustrated in Table 1.1 in Chapter 1 (§2.1). Modise commented on the actions taken against tutors who did not attend scheduled tutorials:

***Modise:** I don't know if there are any procedures relating to that...I am just hosting people who come from elsewhere to deliver. Some of them happen to be lecturers in this institution but given the diversity of the personnel, it has never been possible to us to know... how we ... treat them when they are in the programme. P4:17 (28:28).*

This appeared contrary to the requirements of the 2007 MoU of UB and MoESD which expected management in stakeholder institutions to supervise tutors, markers and all other part-time staff, as well as manage and supervise all DPE learner support activities. However, according to one of the managers from the MCE, their supervisory roles were limited by the fact that part-time staff were not under the authority of institutional managers:

*Modise: Some tutors come from secondary schools...the private sector... from their own employing agencies... to deliver tutorials and assignment processes. You are likely to find problems when you attempt to deal with that individual...it is necessary that we work with necessary laid-down conditions for that particular programme. But that has been absent. P4:29(92:92).*

This suggests that stakeholder institutions do not have guidelines enabling them to supervise learner support activities in their institutions through the MoU. This could further explain distance learners' reactions to the frustrations they experienced because of the frequent changes of tutors and the lack of feedback on their assessment work, which were analysed in this chapter (§4.3 & 4.4). The findings also showed that stakeholder institutions did not understand their roles and responsibilities, which included facilitating learner-tutor and peer interaction, helping to reduce feelings of isolation emanating from physical separation between learners, tutors, other learners and the ODL institution, as discussed in the definitions of ODL in Chapter 2 (§2.3). Commenting on the need to reduce distance learners' isolation, a learner support coordinator from the UB remarked:

*Bonolo: Distance learning is a very isolating mode of delivery and therefore tutorials are meant to interrupt the isolation because it gives learners opportunity to interact with their peers and their tutors, and the institution, because when they come for tutorials that is when they are able to address issues related to tutorials and assessment. P9:59 (77:77).*

Providing counselling support is a further responsibility of stakeholder institutions as outlined in the 2007 MoU of UB and MoEDS which was discussed in Chapter 2 (§2.7). However, the data indicated that stakeholder institutions did not encourage the responsible departments to ensure that distance learners received non-academic counselling to help them deal with their personal and emotional problems. Because of logistical constraints, the support services at stakeholder institutions did not include counselling, as noted by a learner support coordinator from the UB:

***Bonolo:** Colleges were supposed to extend all the services to distance learners, but practically speaking...if Counselling Department is not participating, then there is no way counselling can be available to distance learners...coordinators...provide counselling...on academic regulations...it's been a voluntary thing. P9:16 (97:97).*

Bonolo also said that the reason why distance learners were unable to receive counselling in colleges was because DPE activities were not recognised as part of the college activities:

***Bonolo:** The mainstreaming is still a big problem...recognition...where ownership is concerned...when it comes to personal counselling ...the counselling centre is not open to distance learners...when the counsellors are not participating in distance education. P9:16 (97:97).*

This suggests that the 2007 MoU of UB and MoEDS, which recommended the integration of DPE activities in the management of stakeholder institutions so as to ensure infrastructural adjustments in these institutions, was not implemented. Such adjustments could have addressed traditional power structures in order to integrate ODL activities with other institutional activities. This was confirmed by the findings which revealed that the DPE activities were not viewed as part of the core business of the stakeholder institutions and that participation by institutional staff was optional and voluntary.

The other factor in the sub-category of stakeholder roles and responsibilities was concerned with the decentralising of learner support services and assessing the type of support needed by distance learners in the regions where they lived and worked, both before and after the residential sessions. Asked to comment on their roles in support services in the DPE programme, officers from the Kanye ODL office said that one of their responsibilities was to keep in contact with distance learners in between tutorial sessions and to encourage them to attend scheduled tutorials:

***Tebogo:** If somebody doesn't come ... we follow them up to... check why they didn't turn up... we have records...we follow them up by telephone and request them to go and meet their coordinator at the college and discuss. P10:54 (80:80).*

These comments highlight the limitations in the provision of administrative support manifested in the form of poor service delivery, including poor record keeping, which contributed to incomplete results and slowed down distance learners' progress and programme completion. To remedy this, participants advocated for efficient administrative support, starting from admission and continuing through registration, tutorial delivery, assessment and records management, and addressing distance learners' complaints. The way such problems were handled could make the difference between a student persisting with an academic programme or withdrawing from it. Such a system was not implemented in the DPE programme. A further limitation was associated with ownership of the programmes by the institutional managers as noted by one of the learner support coordinators at the UB:

***Bonolo:** Support depends on the ownership of the programme from the college management. Where there is support of the college principal, learners access most of the services, and are assisted. P9:19 (97:97).*

My findings revealed the gap between what was expected from the service providers and the reality on the ground.

#### **4.7.2 Policy guidelines and the implementation of learner support services**

As indicated in Chapter 1 (§2.3), the implementation of the DPE programme was a joint venture between two government bodies, UB and the MoESD. The UB intended to fulfil the requirements of various government policies. Commenting on the pressure exerted on the stakeholders, one of the participants remarked:

***Junior:** This was pressure from the RNPE of 1994, that the new requirement is now the Diploma in Primary Education...and then the capacity of the colleges...was not enough to allow everybody. P1:142 (57:57).*

This conclusion was shared by one of the learner support coordinators from UB:

***Bonolo:** This is a Ministry of Education policy to upgrade all PTC holders to the diploma level until this group is completely trained. P9:115 (31:31).*

However, although the 1994 RNPE (Republic of Botswana, 1994) recommended upgrading PTC holders through in-service training, a policy gap opened up because the RNPE did not elaborate on how in-service training via the ODL could be implemented:

***Junior:** The Revised National Policy on Education was silent about policy on ODL. There should be a policy on ODL ... because many other programmes are coming, and so we can use this one as a springboard. P1:146(269:269).*

These conclusions are supported by studies in the literature review in Chapter 2 (§2.8), which call for an ODL policy to facilitate the integration and mainstreaming of ODL activities as a core business of educational institutions. It emerged from the findings that there was a need for the main stakeholder institutions to collaborate with other institutions in implementing the DPE programme, coordinating service delivery and facilitating access to the resources in these institutions. Despite the existence of the 2007 MoU of UB and MoESD, my findings showed that the stakeholders were not agreed on guidelines for implementation, as admitted by one of the institutional managers:

***Modise:** Superficially...something came...to try and see if the situation could be normalised, by way of the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA). But that has not helped...it was just a paper that was trying to delineate roles...there are still controversies surrounding who does what. Things have not yet been resolved. P4: 23 (36:36).*

This view was shared by one of the programme coordinators:

***Tashata:** It is not binding anybody... P14:151 (336:336).*

The data indicated that institutional managers did not have control over staff members who provided academic support, which in itself complicated the management and supervision of learner support services in the DPE programme. Commenting on the supervision of tutorials at the MCE, the programme coordinator said:

***Faith:** The college management cannot...discipline anyone...because the tutor is not under the Principal ... When the tutor was hired, the Principal was not involved in the hiring...The tutor had not signed a contract... P8:156 (80:80).*

This respondent further maintained that the DPE programme was perceived as belonging to some, rather than all, of the colleges:

***Faith:** This programme is...for the primary colleges...the ...secondary colleges ... look at themselves as babysitters ....the issue of ownership...it's like ... these are not my...students...I am helping. I am babysitting...It could be management...even...the lecturers or even the coordinators because...when it started the Principals of secondary colleges were not involved... P8:303 (57:57).*

As explained in the literature review, the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD was meant to harmonise stakeholder involvement in the implementation of learner support services in the DPE programme. My findings suggest that support services in the DPE programme were not developed as a total system with equal attention paid to all its components, taking in admission, registration, tutorial delivery, assessment systems, and management of records, and including the Students' Representative Council (SRC) as suggested in Chapter 1 (§2.3). This could have given learners and tutors a voice for their grievances, as well as offer a way of involving learners in the provision of effective learner support services.

The Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a), discussed in Chapter 2, did not facilitate the implementation of learner support services in the DPE programme. Although Item 9.8 (Learner Support Services) of this policy underscores the need for consistent and efficient administrative, academic and infrastructural support as an integral part of distance learners' experiences, the findings show that this was not implemented in the DPE programme. The omission could have been complicated by the fact that the UB did not have its own network of learner support services for ODL programmes, but relied instead on collaboration with other institutions.

One of the aims of Distance Education Mainstreaming (University of Botswana, 2005a) was to enable UB, in collaboration with other institutions, to reach distance learners regardless of their geographical location. Through this policy, the ODL programmes would be aligned and integrated with the rules, regulations and administrative decisions of the University in order to meet the needs of distance learners. Despite the good intentions of the UB Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a), participants made it clear that this policy did not embrace the learner support activities of the DPE programme:

***Bonolo:** The distance education mainstreaming policy is...for the programmes... offered at the University...owned by the faculties. For the DPE, I don't think there was any policy...guiding as to how this was going to be happening. P9:116 (201:201).*

My evidence further showed that the DPE Programme by Distance Mode Special Regulations (University of Botswana, 2005b), which were meant to facilitate distance learners' progress instead created delays in programme completion. Special Regulations DPE 6.2 and DPE 6.3 (University of Botswana 2005b), which allowed distance learners with failed modules in one level to progress to the next level, created delays by slowing down activities such as record keeping:

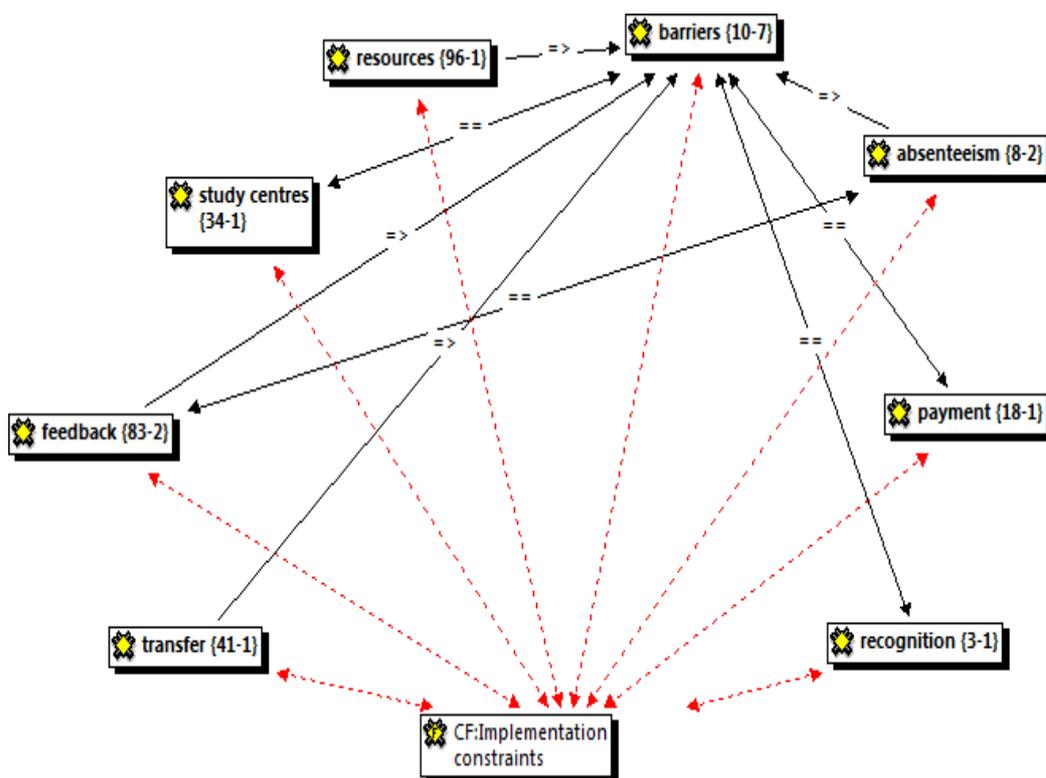
***Faith:** The regulations need to be revised...to allow them not to progress if they have not completed a module...because it helps even in record keeping... you find me opening Module 1, Module 2, Module 3, Module 4, at times in the process you get confused...and...you could enter marks for Module 1 in Module 3, because sometimes you have a student doing both. P8:365 (91:91).*

These statements confirm that although there were policy documents describing stakeholder participation in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme, the stakeholders themselves were far from clear about their roles and responsibilities. The findings suggest that stakeholders needed clear policy guidelines to facilitate academic advisory functions and access to resources, so as to achieve the objectives of the DPE programme.

#### 4.8 Implementation constraints

The sub-category of implementation constraints looks at the hindrances that were encountered during the implementation of learner support services. The aim was to gain an understanding of the research question, *What were the barriers to the implementation of effective learner support services in the DPE programme, and the opportunities for improvement?* This question was addressed in two parts. The first part concerned the sub-category of barriers related to implementation constraints and was analysed under the network of code family (CF), indicated in Figure 4.13 below. The second part of the question, dealing with opportunities for improvement, is analysed in Figure 4.14.

*Figure 4.13 Implementation constraints*



**Symbol:** == is associated with; => is a cause of

The constraints related to monitoring of feedback, absenteeism and lack of access to resources in the code family (CF) 'implementation constraints' are discussed together, since they are

related as shown in Figure 4.13. In this section, the findings indicate that lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms contributed to tutor absenteeism, frequent changes of tutors, loss of assignment scripts and poor record keeping, which also inhibited the provision of timely feedback, leading to incomplete results and delays in programme completion. Apart from management constraints, lack of planning of the DPE curriculum to determine distance learners' content workload, coupled with their other responsibilities, could reduce learners' motivation to persist on the programme, as noted by one of the institutional managers:

***Modise:** You needed to recognise that you are enrolling mature entrants...people who already...are employed...who have...gone through some processes of learning, in the same area. So when...they designed the curriculum...they regarded them as new.... So we overcrowded the academic programme and that alone meant that the environment was very stressful, they are teaching...marking. Instead of developing interest in the learning, they developed some kind of disinterest. P4:13 (116:116).*

Further factors that emerged from the interviews were the lack of empathetic management structures and of commitment by part-time tutors to the support services, as confirmed by one of the learner support coordinators:

***Bonolo:** Until this ODL is given recognition as the conventional programme, the activities will be compromised because of lack of management structures in the colleges.... if in ODL the Deputy Principal and the Principal were following people, things would improve... because...sometimes somebody just wants to make money..., from the part-time programme. P9:141 (153:153).*

Similar views were expressed by distance learners who reported that part-time staff was not committed to their work, which was reflected in tutor absenteeism, frequent changes of tutors, and lack of feedback due to the loss of scripts. There was also a lack of commitment in the supervision of research projects, as noted by one of the institutional managers:

***Modise:** There has been very little commitment from the tutors... to the extent that ...the amount of input from the tutors...particularly when you look at the projects and...the*

*portfolios sometimes they were questionable...there wasn't sufficient supervision provided by the tutor. P4:28 (92:92).*

Another institutional manager from Tlokweng College attributed absenteeism and lack of commitment to the fact that participation in the DPE activities by the staff in the stakeholder institutions was voluntary:

*Clem: I can't insist they participate in the tutorials...Some lecturers do not want to do this tutoring, and there is not much you can do as long as they have not entered into an agreement to do so, because there is extra pay for it. P5:65 (11:11).*

Another factor which could explain participants' views on the lack of commitment by some of the tutors was the failure to monitor the DPE programme activities as stated by one of the interviewed officers from the Kanye ODL office:

*Tebogo: The problem is lack of monitoring and evaluation, coordination inclusive ... one of the students ...gave me the letter...calling her... to collect her money for the research project when she had not even gone for second year in the programme... So the coordination, the monitoring... especially, the colleges, CCE and TT and D, nobody cares. P10:109 (181:181).*

These limitations suggested there was a gap in the monitoring of DPE support provision which needed to be filled. It also emerged that there was only a limited follow-up of distance learners who were scattered in schools all over Botswana. Failure to share information about transferred teachers who were also distance learners further inhibited the provision of effective support services in the DPE programme, as stated by some of the participants:

*Lizzie: We don't work like a system because it's a partnership. You find that a teacher is registered in Tlokweng College in Gaborone...then without notice...they are told...you will be teaching in...Maun...800 and something kilometres from the college where you are registered. It disrupts the student's studies... so we don't function as a system...you can't just transfer them at will. P3:68 (43:43).*

These views were shared by one of the learner support providers from the Kanye ODL office:

***Tebogo:** Those people are suffering. P10:115 (204:204). When the students go to residential sessions they are with their tutors, when they are out there in their schools they are on their own ... see students...when you are visiting a school for something else... there is no personnel that is...supporting ODL learners, especially at the Kgalagadi area where...there is no communication. P10:29 (183:183).*

Other factors which may have contributed to poor monitoring of DPE learner support activities include a lack of proper briefing about the roles and responsibilities of institutional managers:

***Modise:** The other challenge that has been of concern is that...when the spill-over was done...there wasn't any proper and systematic way of doing it. It was only an expectation that college management had to be involved, which is another mistake...and the programme itself had personnel appointed and paid for overseeing it. It was only...when there were problems that ...institutions started to step in...which was unfair because it wasn't done properly. P4:19 (92:92).*

These views were echoed by another participant, who indicated that the stakeholders were not adequately informed or prepared for their roles and responsibilities in carrying out the DPE learner support activities:

***Clem:** Lack of knowledge about the distance mode, ODL, is in itself a barrier. We don't know what it is, we don't know the difference between the lecturer who teaches students every day for three years and the one who teaches ODL students only for a number of hours during the residential session, and the rest of the time the students are on their own. P5:57 (151:151). We didn't do a pilot for the ODL, whereas for the conventional diploma we did a pilot, evaluated, and then implemented it full scale...in 1995. P5:25 (157:157).*

These comments suggest that some of the stakeholders did not have knowledge and skills in ODL. As a result, it was difficult for them to implement effective learner support services, as confirmed by one of the officers from the Kanye ODL office:

**Lorato:** *The other barrier is the changeover of the directors at TTD. At times one director will have a vision towards the whole programme and the coming in one will have a different vision. So the turnover of the directors...really hinders the progress of the programme. We had so far five directors since 2005...with different views. P10:85 (184:184).*

Staff from the Kanye ODL office said that because of the lack of consistent supervision and monitoring of research projects, it was difficult to determine whether some of the learners had carried out the research projects on their own, or if they had asked other people to assist them:

**Tebogo:** *Because of lack of support...some students end up plagiarising. They will ask someone to do the work for them. And at the end of graduation a student is empty...because all the work is either done by her child in the house or she would rather prefer to pay money to somebody...they are not confident. P10:115 (200:200).*

Doubts about the originality of research projects were shared by another participant:

**Lorato:** *They don't fear to pay out P1,000. P10:115 (201:201).*

Asked to elaborate on how they could prove that such plagiarism was taking place in the writing of research projects, one of the officers explained:

**Tebogo:** *The student herself will say... these things, I did 1, 2, 3 myself. After all, I got the certificate at the end of the day. The other students will tell us, student so and so has been hiring so and so to do the work for her. And the school heads themselves would say, your student is just as good as not enrolling in the programme and such student...would have passed...and graduated. P10:115 (204:204).*

Uncertainty about the originality of the research projects, arising from a lack of continuity in the supervision between the residential sessions and the monitoring of learner support by the stakeholders, could also raise questions as to whether distance learners acquired appropriate research skills from the DPE programme. These doubts were shared by one of the tutors, who warned that:

*Neo: It is difficult to prove that somebody had cheated. But you can see that this person... the way it has been written... and the kind of student that you know... you don't expect that kind of work from them, but how do you prove that? P12:84 (68:68).*

Thus the limited supervision of research projects and other practical subjects emerged clearly as a weakness in the provision of effective learner support services. One of the tutors confirmed that the lapse after learners met their tutors for the supervision of research projects could be one of the factors which contributed to cheating:

*Puso: Maybe the strategies that are put in place do not really discourage cheating. This issue of a lapse...with no contact... then we have people after a long time...they can actually cheat because they are given more room to cheat. P12:5 (105:105).*

In summary, despite the existence of the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD, which mandated the stakeholders to create a network of study centres, contact with distance learners in between the residential sessions was limited since support services were not available near where they lived and worked.

#### **4. 8.1 Payment as an incentive for services delivery**

The last factor which was analysed in the sub-category of implementation constraints dealt with payments for part-time activities. Part-time tutor/markers and programme coordinators in the DPE programme were financially compensated as an incentive (University of Botswana, 2002). However, the payment structure constrained the provision of other services, such as counselling support and logistical support in stakeholder institutions, which were not allowed for in the payment structure as stated by a programme coordinator at the MCE:

*Faith: Guidance and counselling department in the Dean's office...was not available because the distance at...the college is optional...they attach distance with financial gain. If I'm there as a Dean, what am I benefiting?...as a coordinator ...as a tutor you are getting something. P8:31 (183:183).*

The ability of other members of staff in stakeholder institutions to provide services such as counselling support was also constrained by the payment structure, as explained by one of the institutional managers:

***Modise:** Other members of the hosting institution started feeling agitated by the fact that those who delivered the programme were paid for the services, but those who supported the programme were not paid, although they were expected to participate in the same way, and that created some kind of dissatisfaction...because they didn't deliver the most efficient service. In a sense, that affected the delivery of support...on the programme.*

**P4:15 (99:99).**

These views were shared by one of the learner support coordinators when commenting on attempts to access non-academic services, such as photocopying or cleaning:

***Bonolo:** Sometimes it was so difficult that if you asked even a cleaner to clean hostels...they would say... no! no! these are distance learners!! Lecturers are paid...sometimes you could not photocopy for distance learners since people would ask, why are lecturers paid and I am not paid? **P9:127 (237:237).***

The data further revealed that the payment structure remunerated different activities piecemeal, such as tutorials and assessment, but did not facilitate effective service delivery, as noted by one of the institutional managers:

***Modise:** The nature of the payment also contributed...a lot of problems for the programme. You would... pay for every single...activity that the tutors undertake. You are not looking at the desired outcome...because in the process you may find that those pieces are done by different people. That is making the coordination of this programme very difficult. **P4:39 (76:76).***

The stakeholders needed to reinforce accountability in service delivery, by demanding evidence of task completion before responding to a claim for payment, as stated by the learner support coordinator from UB:

**Bonolo:** *With UNISA...they have designed a form asking the tutor/marker to identify strong areas, and then weaknesses and then recommendations on an official form and then afterwards you put the marks and sign, and then you send to the next person who signs. So that marking is officialised and that form is attached to the payment claim form. P9:88 (172:172).*

Delayed payments discouraged members of staff in stakeholder institutions from participating in the DPE programme, as stated by one of the tutors:

**Neo:** *Payments are not timely. They are not made on time, and as a result you find that some people have dropped out. P12:57 (344:344). ...because they are dissatisfied with the service... P12:57 (345:345).*

These views were shared by another tutor:

**Khumo:** *The major barriers...this financial issue... That is a support service on its own... that is our timely feed-back...when they say two weeks for the ... marks ...we want two weeks...for that money. P14:57 (370:370).*

However, another institutional manager suggested that instead of paying for part-time activities, it would be better to strengthen those institutional resources which are also available for use by distance learners:

**Clem:** *You get paid for tutoring, invigilation and setting, marking exams...which teacher gets...paid for setting tests? I would suggest that...the conventional programme facilities be improved because the ODL students will also benefit ...because they utilise these resources, such as equipping computer labs, and science laboratories. P5:92 (139:139).*

In this sub-category, while payments for part-time activities were viewed as an incentive for institutional staff to participate in the DPE programmes, the payment structures and delays in payments discouraged some of the staff from offering their services. The management and coordination of payments for part-time activities thus emerged as another of the weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme.

In concluding the analysis of the sub-category in the code family (CF) implementation constraints, the evidence revealed various factors that hindered the implementation of effective learner support services, some of which are summarised here. There was a lack of clarity among stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities in the management of the support services, including access to learning resources. Also, participants attributed poor service delivery, such as tutor absenteeism, to limited monitoring by the stakeholder institutions. This in turn was attributed to lack of ownership and recognition of the DPE programme as part of the activities of the institutions. Payment for part-time tutoring was meant to be an incentive, but did not apply in all cases, and staff who were not covered in the payment structure were reluctant to serve on the DPE programme.

#### **4.9 Opportunities for improvement**

The last part of the research question related to participants' views on improvements that could be implemented in order to provide effective learner support services in the DPE programme. To answer this question, data were analysed under the code family (CF) which dealt with opportunities for improvement, as indicated in Figure 4.14 below.



***Elizabeth:** We need more support from...our senior management...and from education officers...at education centres. We have to make full use of them...because education centres ...are manned by people who have Masters Degrees, and some have doctorates (Ph.Ds). They have retired...we could use them...for project supervision so that we minimise the travelling from faraway places. Let's utilise them, ...to supervise, so that learners can complete their projects. P2:46(93:93).*

These findings confirm participants' views that some distance learners were not completing their studies because only limited academic support was provided outside the vacation tutorial sessions. This was especially so in the supervision of research projects, which was hampered by the long distances between the learners and supervisors of their research work. To improve the situation, one of the participants recommended that the programme be transferred to a government institution whose main responsibility would be to run ODL programmes:

***Modise:** You already have existing distance education institutions. Take BOCODOL, for instance, they are running distance education courses. This could be one of those courses that they run ...all the logistics would be left with BOCODOL... so they can use whatever support structures that are already in existence. P4:2 (189:189).*

These comments indicate that there was a clear need for more direct interaction between learners, tutors and other learners in study centres, such as the education centres, where distance learners could meet and discuss content with their tutors and with other learners. To improve the supervision of research projects, another participant suggested increasing access to the required resources and using technology to facilitate communication between learners and their research project supervisors:

***Betty:** They should have...access to e-mail...access to technology...ICT resources, technologically because distance education requires a lot of technological resources. P6:3(88:88). We need more supervisors and we need technology for them to be able to be sending their research projects to their teachers ... through e-mails so that there is*

*constant follow-up, not to be meeting a teacher after three, four months when there is nothing that has been going on in supervision. P6:35 (92:92).*

The same participant suggested giving distance learners greater access to libraries:

***Betty:** To me, it is lack of resources ...they need staff to supervise students, they need access to libraries...They need transport to travel up and down... some of them in real, real remote areas... human resources. P6:3(88:88).*

For the stakeholders, the implication of these findings was that they needed to explore the available human resources and technology to implement decentralised support services at study centres which are both flexible and accessible to distance learners. The participants acknowledged the potential of the DPE programme in upgrading PTC holders, but would like to see more consistency, for example by making some of the activities, such as the coordination of support services in stakeholder institutions into full-time jobs, as maintained by one of the learners:

***Joe:** We need focus... this ...DPE can help to upgrade teachers...let's have the programme which is focused. It has all the facilities, teachers are there! Not just bringing someone...as part time...when we are here... she can coordinate all these activities but from there, it just... stops...even if it is a distance programme, let it have its own staff, who can actually facilitate this thing... If there is staff, the number of years can be reduced, from four years. P11:82 (399:401).*

These views were shared by another participant who proposed that, to improve and coordinate the management and supervision of learner support services in stakeholder institutions, the role of the part-time DPE coordinator could be converted to a full-time position at the level of a head of department:

***Bonolo:** We are recommending that the Ministry of Education recognise the ODL office as a full-time establishment with its own staff, secretaries, telephones... If this programme can be recognised...some of the problems we are experiencing in learner support can be*

*reduced or ...eliminated. This office can be pegged ...at the level of a Head of Department so that the coordinator can be presenting his/her own results just like any other head of department. But now ODL exists just as an afterthought in colleges. P9:132 (111:111).*

Another participant called for staff who could match the criteria for effective learner support services as explained in Chapter 1 (§1.2.3):

***Pearl:** There is a lot of workload for them, that is why they don't attend to, and address everything that we need. There is a workload problem. So better they face one area, because of this workload. P11:82 (399:399).*

In addition to training service providers, the findings also stressed the need for stakeholders to provide physical resources in the form of an enabling environment, for example by making office space available for ODL activities:

***Junior:** It should be...a conducive office with facilities... a special computer, with functions that will allow for the analysis of results, and specific programmes, telephone, fax, photocopying facilities... and tea, so that coordinators do not waste time roaming about looking for tea. P1:165 (248:248).*

In concluding my analysis of the findings under the sub-category of opportunities for improvement, I isolated a number of factors that could facilitate the provision of effective learner support services. Staff who are engaged in such services should be trained and committed to the DPE programme, and should be employed full-time in coordinating these activities. Distance learners should have access to the required learning resources and technology to ensure regular communication between them and their tutors, particularly in the supervision of research projects. Decentralised support services should be introduced at study centres, such as education centres and secondary schools, coupled with the training of learner support providers in ODL skills.

#### 4.10 Need for empathetic learner support services

The findings further indicated that learner support providers needed to understand the particular circumstances of distance learners so that as one participant noted, they could be: *more empathetic to their needs*,. **P9:50 (253:253)**. In this regard, I needed to understand the implication of theories of ODL and the constructivist theories in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme.

The theory of distance education based on empathy by Holmberg (2003) which was discussed in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.5), urges supporting institutions to enhance empathy by mediating and facilitating frequent communication between learners and those who provide support services. This theory indicates that ODL institutions should ensure learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction, and timely feedback through short turnaround times, preferably between 14 and 21 days. The data in this chapter showed that distance learners were satisfied with tutorial sessions when tutors did not change too frequently and when constructive feedback was given on assessment work. It also emerged that distance learners needed timely feedback in order to judge their own progress. However, the findings also revealed that poor management and supervision of learner-tutor interaction contributed to tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials and delayed feedback on assessment work, thus delaying the learners' programme completion. The limited access to learning resources also suggested that stakeholder institutions did not empathise with the circumstances of distance learners.

There was a clear need for learner support providers to give distance learners study skills which would enable them to learn at anytime, anywhere. But, creating independent learners was hampered by the limited learner-tutor interaction, which took place only during school vacations and was almost absent in between the residential sessions. This suggested that learner support services did not facilitate interaction or frequent communication between learners and service providers. The findings further stressed the need for support providers to be trained in appropriate ODL skills so that they could offer effective academic, counselling and administrative support. I found that participants were satisfied with tutorial techniques which encouraged discussion of content with the tutor as a facilitator. Stakeholders have a

responsibility to select and implement the most empathetic and appropriate academic support approach, one which would enable learners to construct knowledge relating to their own experiences and their environments.

#### **4.11 Discussion of the findings**

This study explored participants' perceptions, views and opinions on the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DPE programme. The discussion of the findings is guided by three themes, *satisfaction*, *accessibility and responsiveness*, and *ODL policy gaps*, in the implementation of learner support services. The theme of *satisfaction* emerged from distance learners' perceptions of the usefulness of learner support services in meeting their expectations, while the theme of *accessibility and responsiveness* derived from participants' views on the strengths and weaknesses of support services in meeting distance learners' needs. The theme of *ODL policy gaps* emerged from perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and intermediaries in implementing learner support services. These themes are further related to the criteria for the provision of effective learner support services which were explained in Chapter 1 (§2.3).

##### **4.11.1 Satisfaction with learner support services**

In this section, the findings are examined to assess participants' views about distance learners' satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with learner support services in the DPE programme. The data found that distance learners were motivated to enrol in the DPE programme to increase their knowledge and skills in their subject areas, to gain higher qualifications, and to improve their morale and confidence in the teaching profession. They saw obtaining further qualifications as a ladder which would elevate them to teach higher classes, such as standards six and seven, help them improve their social status and gain recognition and respect from their colleagues. They would also get a chance for promotion and a higher salary upon graduation. They also appreciated the opportunity to acquire study skills which they could apply in leadership roles, such as school and/or departmental heads. Those who were already in positions of leadership appreciated the chance to improve their academic and professional

qualifications, not least because these would help to protect them from the insecurity of competition from younger and more qualified teachers who worked under them in primary schools.

The findings showed that distance learners saw the major role of learner support services as assisting them in carrying out their studies successfully. Interacting regularly with tutors and other institutional resources was perceived as necessary, especially since they were studying in lonely environments where they were isolated from their tutors, from each other and from the stakeholder institutions. It also emerged that distance learners appreciated tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction, in which tutors explained and clarified difficult concepts, discussing content and helping them to arrive at meanings in their subject areas. Learners also appreciated timely feedback and constructive comments on assignments since these helped them maintain two-way communication with their tutors. This feedback enabled them both to study individually and to conduct discussions in self-help study groups. Learners who received timely and constructive feedback were empowered to judge their own learning progress and avoid similar mistakes when doing their next assignments. Those who had access to learning resources, such as libraries, computer and science laboratories, gained skills in science and other practical subjects. To cope with personal problems, distance learners resorted to and obtained support from their family, children, friends and their employers.

While in theory distance learners appreciated the provision of learner support services, in practice they experienced frustration in gaining access to such services. Analysis of learner profiles showed that they were a heterogeneous group in terms of their diversity in age, academic backgrounds, work experience and geographical location. The findings indicated that these factors were not taken into consideration in the planning stage resulting to the implementation of unresponsive learner support services. This claim is reflected in learners' views about difficult content in subjects such as maths and science which did not appear to be planned for in the provision of academic support. The identified needs of known distance learners in terms of their demographic profiles, previous educational backgrounds, geographical locations and learning styles, were not addressed. It was clear that the learner support providers did not have information about learner expectations and needs. From this, it

could be concluded that distance learners' needs for academic counselling and administrative support were not known and therefore not met.

Lack of access to tutors due to frequent absenteeism and change of tutors during scheduled tutorials resulted in learners not receiving explanations of difficult content or feedback on their assignments regularly. Tutor absenteeism and frequent change of tutors during residential sessions were frustrating experiences for distance learners, interfering with the logical flow of content since there was no proper handover of tutorial groups from one tutor to another. Learners who did not receive feedback on assignments due to losses and poor record keeping were forced to rewrite the lost assignments, which increased their workload. Thus tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, failure to provide timely and constructive feedback and comments on assessment work, and loss of scripts due to poor record keeping, were among the factors that contributed to incomplete results and delayed programme completion for distance learners. Effective supervision of research projects was also hindered by lack of access to tutors and other learners outside the residential tutorial sessions, a factor that inhibited learners with incomplete results from completing their compulsory research projects.

Giving feedback on assignments and other practical activities, such as research projects, is part of the tutorial function in ODL. Distance learners were dissatisfied with the use of non-participatory tutorial techniques such as reading the modules out in class, because this approach did not take account of their characteristics as adults and their work experiences. Students were unable to judge their own progress because of the lack of constructive comments and the failure to explain the marks awarded. Poor record keeping and careless conversion of marks also contributed to mistakes in the final results, which retarded the progress of the affected learners. The findings indicated that there was negligence in the management, supervision and monitoring of the academic support services in some stakeholder institutions, particularly at the MCE, where there appeared to be no procedures for the administration of assignments, compared to Tlokweng College of Education.

Studying through the ODL mode is an individual activity for which distance learners need to find convenient places to study, such as the library. In this study, the findings established that

these learners had trouble finding quiet places to study, either at their places of work or at home. In some instances, lack of support from uncooperative spouses interfered with their progress. Those working in remote rural areas with no libraries for reference and no electricity found it difficult to do their assignments and/or study at night after work because of fatigue, a factor which emerged as one of the causes of incomplete results. During the residential sessions, distance learners at the Tlokweng College of Education had access to the library in the evening up to 10.00 p.m and during the weekends, while learners attending tutorials at the MCE could only use the library in office hours during the week. This experience was frustrating for distance learners at MCE, who could not use the library because they were attending tutorials when it was open. This rigidity in the control of resources was not in line with the philosophy of ODL, in which flexible learning requires institutions to relax their scheduling to suit the circumstances and contexts of distance learners. The findings further showed that limited supervision and monitoring of tutorial support by senior management in some of the stakeholder institutions contributed to the weaknesses in the learner support services in the DPE programme. It could be inferred from this that poor management in these institutions added to delayed feedback, loss of assignment scripts and poor record keeping, leading to delays in completion for distance learners.

Being teachers, parents, spouses and part-time students meant that distance learners carried multiple responsibilities and heavy workloads, which competed for their time and could interfere with their progress. This raises the issue of the need for employers to support distance learners by allocating them study leave. The physical distances between students and their tutors and other learners, as well as lack of public transport and of telephone networks, made frequent contact outside residential sessions difficult. These challenges were among the factors that led distance learners to believe that the nature of academic, counselling and administrative support provided hindered rather than helped their progress and programme completion in the DPE programme.

#### 4.11.2 Accessibility and responsiveness

The theme of *accessibility and responsiveness* stems from participants' perceptions about the accessibility and appropriateness of learner support services in facilitating distance learners' successful completion of the DPE programme. As discussed in section (4.11.1) above, the main strength of learner support services was the provision of academic support in form of learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction, enabling distance learners to benefit from discussion of content with their tutors and other learners. The provision of two-way communication through feedback and comments on assignments and the supervision of research projects to enable learners to judge their own progress emerged as further strengths of learner support services. Participants also indicated that support providers or intermediaries were expected to maintain order through proper documentation, keeping correct records and ensuring that distance learners had access to learning resources. Yet another strength was in facilitating distance learners' access to resources such as libraries, computers and science laboratories, particularly necessary for the acquisition of skills in practical subjects. Despite these strengths, the findings identified weaknesses which interfered with the *accessibility and responsiveness* of learner support services and hindered progress and programme completion.

Lack of access to tutors during scheduled tutorials and in between the residential sessions and the use of tutorial techniques which did not facilitate discussion of content (see § 4.1) of this chapter, emerged as indicators that the existing academic support was not responsive to the needs of distance learners. The fact that some tutors did not involve these learners in active discussions, but instead read the module during tutorial sessions, further deterred learners from attending tutorial sessions. Tutors who were not competent in computer literacy and research skills were perceived as incapable of helping learners to acquire such skills.

The support services also failed to address the physical distances between learners, tutors and other learners or to provide decentralised support at regional centres. Lack of a network of support close to where the learners lived and worked hindered learner-tutor and learner-learner contact, particularly for those in remote areas characterised by poor public transport and poor telephone networks. Although there was evidence that distance learners needed counselling on

non-academic problems, such support was inadequate in the DPE programme. Lack of guidelines to facilitate access to services at stakeholder institutions (see §4.6 & 4.7 above) raises concerns about the execution of stakeholder roles, responsibilities and their commitment to the monitoring and supervision of support services.

That distance learners had limited access to learning resources such as libraries, computer and science laboratories and reference materials, emerged as one of the factors that contributed to delays in programme completion (see §4.3 & 4.5). This raises the issue of commitment to the provision of effective learner support services at institutions such as the MCE, where access to libraries, computer and science laboratories was limited, although the facilities were available in the college. In contrast, at the Tlokweng College of Education, access was constrained by lack of resources. In this context, participants suggested that stakeholders liaise with other institutions for the shared use of resources so as to complement government initiatives in providing learning resources. Partnerships could be forged with the community and other institutions to facilitate shared use of resources. An example is the De Beers mining company in Botswana, where learners teaching in nearby schools benefited from resources offered by the company.

Barriers to the provision of learner support services constrained and slowed distance learners' progress and programme completion. The major roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved the management, supervision and monitoring of academic, counselling and administrative support services in order, as one participant put it, to *...maintain order...to take care of their wellbeing*. **P8:211(43:43)**. This would ensure that tutors attended scheduled tutorial sessions and provided timely feedback on assessment work and that distance learners had access to the required resources. But, the stakeholders encountered various challenges and barriers to the creation of support services that would be responsive to the needs of distance learners.

There were no measures to address tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, although this caused frequent changes of tutors. This was coupled with the loss of assignment scripts due to poor record keeping and delayed feedback on assessment work. Stakeholder institutions had

not developed measures to ensure continuity of care and follow-up when there were changes of tutors. Due to lack of contractual agreements, institutional managers found it difficult to discipline part-time staff for failing to attend scheduled tutorials or for delaying feedback on assignments. This omission in the planning of the DPE programme was addressed by Haughey (2003) and Wolcott (2003) who advise stakeholder institutions to make contractual agreements with part-time staff in order to clarify their roles. Holmberg (2003) stresses the need for the institution to mediate between learners and part-time staff so as to ensure relevant and responsive academic support. The findings showed that at the time of this study, no such processes and procedures were in place in the stakeholder institutions relating to the DPE programme.

The other barrier to responsive learner support services resulted from perceptions that participation in DPE activities by members of staff in the stakeholder institutions was voluntary and/or optional. Although academic and counselling support emerged as vital for enhancing distance learners' progress and completion, their needs were not understood or considered to be part of the core business of these institutions. Failure to recognise the DPE programme stemmed from a lack of shared goals and rules among academic and administrative staff. Among staff in stakeholder institutions at present there is no common understanding of the needs of distance learners, which explains why tutors find it difficult to access services such as photocopying of learning materials for such learners (see §4.7).

#### **4.11.3 ODL policy gap**

Although policy documents such as the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD outline the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the implementation of learner support services, this policy did not bind anyone to the provision of such services in the DPE programme. This was reflected in the view of the participants that no one seemed to care whether tutors failed to attend scheduled tutorials, delayed marking or lost distance learners' assignment scripts. I interpreted this as a manifestation of lack of empathy for these students' special circumstances, contexts and learning needs. My findings also highlighted policy gaps and a lack of institutional guidelines as a major setback to distance learners' access to learning resources.

Further, although the MoU articulates the need for decentralised support services at designated centres, there was no indication of when, how and by whom these were to be put in place. Similarly, the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a) did not facilitate the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme because it was limited to ODL programmes offered by various faculties at UB. Although the need for policy guidelines in ODL was emphasized in the reviewed literature (Simonson & Bauck, 2003; Snowball & Sayish, 2007; Wolcott, 2003;), the stakeholders did not have policy guidelines to facilitate distance learners' access to learner support services in the DPE programme.

To improve the provision of such services, the participants offered a number of suggestions for consideration by stakeholders. The findings suggested that there was need to establish support structures and resources at study centres near where learners live and work in order to strengthen learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction. Part-time staff in stakeholder institutions and at regional study centres should be trained in ODL skills so that they understand the circumstances of distance learners and be empowered to support them. Participants also called for organised and supervised self-help study groups at designated study centres, such as the education centres and secondary schools, where distance learners could interact with tutors and other learners in between the vocational tutorial sessions, particularly in the supervision of research projects and facilitate access to learning resources. The findings concur on the need to improve communication between learners and their tutors through the use of various technologies such as e-mail and mobile telephones to enhance interaction, particularly in the supervision of research projects. This suggestion has implications for stakeholders to make technology available for use in enhancing interaction between learners and their tutors.

#### **4.12 Summary and conclusion**

In this chapter, the findings were discussed in the context of participants' perceptions about the effect of learner support services on distance learners' progress and programme completion, as outlined from §4.4 to §4-9. A summary of the findings is given below on the basis of the participants' responses to each of the research questions that guided this investigation.

#### **4.12.1 Distance learners' perceptions about the effectiveness of learner support services**

In this study, distance learners appreciated the opportunity to gain further qualifications which they perceived as an avenue for improving their knowledge and skills, becoming more effective as classroom teachers and managers in their institutions. They also appreciated the fact that the DPE programme opened avenues for promotion, reassignment to more challenging duties and responsibilities, and salary increments which could improve their social status in primary schools. Distance learners who had completed their studies indicated their satisfaction with the learner support services provided, although they agreed with those who had not completed their studies that lack of access to tutors and delayed feedback frustrated many students. Further, learners who had contact with teachers and received feedback on assignments were satisfied with this form of academic support. However, those whose tutors were absent and/or kept changing were angry and bitter about their experiences (see section 4.2.1) above. The potential of the DPE programme was acknowledged by one learner who noted however that it needed to be restructured:

*Joe: We need focus...this...DPE can help to upgrade teachers...let's have the programme...with all the facilities...and its own staff, who can actually facilitate this thing ...the number of years can be reduced from four years. P11:82 (399:401).*

These comments express distance learners' views about the viability of the programme and the challenges and difficulties they encountered with the support services. Distance learners' views are noted by tutors and other service providers when they recommended the provision of decentralised learner support services and the use of retired but qualified people so as to improve contact between learners and the tutors.

#### **4.12.2 Perceptions about strengths and weaknesses of learner support services**

The findings indicated that the main purpose and strength of learner support services was to assist distance learners to go successfully through the programme of study. A major weakness which emerged was that the learner support services did not address the diversity of distance learners who were a heterogeneous group in terms of age, educational background, and work

experience, as discussed in Chapter 1 (§2.1) and Chapter 3 (§4.2). Some learners had been out of school for more than 20 years which indicated that they needed assistance in study skills, particularly in conducting research and using a computer. Although the data show that learners with complete results benefited from contacts with tutors and other learners, for other students, limited contact with tutors and other learners, together with lack of access to learning resources, were major weaknesses which slowed down their learning and contributed to their incomplete results. Delayed feedback (in some cases up to four months) was another weakness. Holmberg (1985), Melton (2002), Robinson (1995) and Welch & Reed (n.d) recommend that feedback, which is a measure of quality in ODL, should be given between 14 and 21 days from the date of submission of assignments. Learner support services were also offered in a haphazard manner in stakeholder institutions due to lack of policy guidelines and management structures for regulating tutorial support and feedback mechanisms.

#### **4.12.3 Perceptions about stakeholder roles and responsibilities**

Learner support services were not perceived by the providers as the core business of stakeholder institutions. Lack of mainstreaming of the DPE programme as part of the activities of stakeholder institutions explains the lack of commitment in the provision of academic support by tutors who failed to attend scheduled tutorials or provide feedback on assignments. Loss of assignments and wrong conversion of marks contributed to delays in programme completion and/or failure of some learners. This shows a failure by the stakeholder institutions to facilitate effective management, supervision and monitoring of their learner support services. There was limited learner-tutor and learner-learner contact and limited or non-existent access to learning resources outside the scheduled tutorials. There was also no decentralised learner support services designed to reduce physical distances between learners, tutors and the staff in the stakeholder institutions. The absence of policy and related implementation guidelines to facilitate the provision of academic support limited institutional managers in their efforts to supervise and monitor tutorial activities, such that part-time tutors were not called upon to sign contractual agreements defining their roles and responsibilities. This deficiency in policy provision emerged as one of the constraints that hindered the introduction of effective academic, counselling and administrative support. Although the part-time staff who had

received orientation in ODL skills said they had benefited from the training, the stakeholders who had not acquired ODL skills admitted they were not adequately prepared for their roles in the management and supervision of learner support services.

#### **4.12.4 Barriers inhibiting implementation and opportunities for improvement**

Limited supervision of research projects emerged as one of the major barriers that slowed distance learners' progress and programme completion. Restricted contact between learners and their tutors, working in remote areas with little or no public transport or network connectivity, together with institutional barriers such as being denied permission to attend tutorial sessions emerged as some of the major barriers that hindered contact between learners and their tutors. The findings revealed that there is a need for more organised and sustained interaction between learners and their tutors at designated study centres in order to monitor learners' progress regularly. As advised by Melton (2002), Rashid (2009) and Rennie & Mason (2007), there is need for the existence of decentralised learner support services near to where distance learners live and work so that learners can access them individually or in groups. This can be made possible by sharing resources with other institutions such as community secondary schools and education centres near where distance learners live. Communications technology (ICT), such as e-mail, should be introduced to facilitate regular communication between distance learners and their tutors in the supervision of research projects. Participants also thought that qualified retired people could be used to help distance learners in their research projects, but would first require orientation in ODL skills to empower them to offer effective support in the DPE programme.

#### **4.13 Conclusion**

The data analysed in this chapter indicate that academic, counselling and administrative support are vital components in distance learners' progress and programme completion. Lack of access to tutors, delayed and/or lack of feedback on assignments, and infrequent supervision of research projects slowed distance learners' progress and programme completion. The findings indicated a need for more regular contact between learners and their tutors through

technology, in order to enhance communication and improve programme completion. Lack of clear policies and management structures emerged as the main limitation to the implementation of effective learner support services in the DPE programme.

In Chapter 5, I present the main conclusions and recommendations.