

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES TO DISTANCE
LEARNERS IN A PRIMARY EDUCATION DIPLOMA: A CASE STUDY IN
BOTSWANA**

by

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DECLARATION

“I declare that the thesis which I hereby submit for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

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**at the University of Pretoria, is my own work
and has not previously been submitted by me for
a degree at this or any other tertiary institution”.**

Judith Wanene Kamau

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my late brother Mr James Muthike Karuri who persistently and consistently helped my parents to raise my school fees against very heavy odds until I finished my secondary education. Thank you my brother for your love for me. Without your foresight, I would not have gone beyond Form 2 level of secondary education. Please continue to rest in peace.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AIOU	Alama Iqbal Open University
ACE	Advanced Certificate in Education
BGCSE	Botswana General Certificate of Education
BNLS	Botswana National Library Service
BOCODOL	Botswana College of Distance and Open learning
CAD	Centre for Academic Development
BODOLA	Botswana Distance and Open Learning Association
CCE	Centre for Continuing Education
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
DDE	Department of Distance Education
DE	Distance Education
DEASA	Distance Education Association of Southern Africa
DPE	Diploma in Primary Education by distance mode
EFA	Education for All
DVET	Department of Vocational Education and Training
HE	Higher education
ICCE	International Council for Correspondence Education
ICDE	International Council for Distance Education
IGNOU	Indira Gandhi National Open University
LINC	Learning International Network Consortium
MoESD	Ministry of Education and Skills Development
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NADEOSA	National Association of Distance Education Organisation of South Africa
NAMCOL	Namibia College of Open Learning
n.d	no date
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
OUT	Open University of Tanzania
PL	Primary Lower
PU	Primary Upper
PTC	Primary Teacher Certificate holder
RNPE	Revised National Policy on Education of 1994
SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
SDA	Seventh Day Adventist
SMS	Short Messaging system
TT &D	Department of Teacher Training and Development
UBAI	Unified Board of Affiliated Institutions

UB	University of Botswana
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNISA	University of South Africa
ZOU	Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract

This study was motivated by my desire to understand participants' perceptions about the effectiveness of learner support services and their contribution to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DPE programme in Botswana. The investigation was carried out to find out why despite the provision of learner support services, there were low completion rates and high incomplete rates in the final year (2002/2003 cohort) of the DPE programme. The study also intended to understand the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services and make recommendations for improvement. A qualitative case study research design was applied. Group and individual interviews were conducted with participants. Data were analysed using Atlas ti computer software which simplified the management of the large corpus of data generated during the fieldwork.

The study found that there was need for sustained learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction and regular communication with the supporting institution during the learning process. This would require planning and aligning learner support services to identified learner needs, access to learning resources including the existence and application of effective monitoring and supervision mechanisms for academic, counselling and administrative support in order to ensure commitment and accountability of learner support providers. In order to reduce isolation which is created by the physical separation between learners and service providers, the study recommended a structure for the provision of decentralized learner support services that are as close as possible to where distance learners live and work for ease of access.

The study further found that there is need for policy guidelines and management structures to facilitate the provision of effective learner support services for the benefit of distance learners.

Key words: Learner support, distance learners, diploma in primary education, academic, counselling support.

Chapter One

Background and context of the study

1.1 Introduction

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

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

1.2 Background to the DPE programme

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

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

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

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

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

1.2.1 Learner support in the DPE programme

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

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

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

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

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

1.2.2 The teaching-learning system

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

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

Table 1.2: DPE Programme Structure

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

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

1.2.3 DPE programme implementation

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1.3: Criteria for effective learner support services

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

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

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

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

1.3 ODL definitions and learner support services

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

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

1.4 Theoretical framework

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.5 Problem statement

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

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

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

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

1.6 Purpose and rationale of the study

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

1.7 Focus of the study

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

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

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

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

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

1.8 Research questions

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

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

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

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

1.9 Qualitative research design

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

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

1.9.1 Research sample

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

1.9.2 Data collection sites

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

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

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

1.9.3 Data collection methods

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

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

1.9.4 Data analysis and interpretation

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

1.10. Ethical issues

1.10.1 Informed consent

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

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

1.10.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

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

1.10.3 Credibility and dependability

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

1.11 Significance of the study

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

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

1.12 Limitations of the study

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

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

1.13 Conclusion and summary

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

1.14 Organisation of the study

The study is organised in five chapters as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

In the next chapter, I explore the literature review.

Chapter Two

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

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

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

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

2.2 Contextualising learner support services in the ODL discipline

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3. Meanings of learner support services

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.4. Development of ODL as a field of study

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

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

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

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

2.5 Theoretical underpinnings of ODL

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

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

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

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

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

2.5.1. Theory of independence and autonomy

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

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

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

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

2.5.2 Theory of interaction and communication

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

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

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

2.5.3 Theory of industrialisations of teaching

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

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

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

2.5.4 Theory of distance education based on empathy

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

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

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

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

2.5.5 Constructivism and learner support services

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.6 Learner profiles as a basis for determining learning needs

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.6.1 Effects of learning challenges on programme completion in ODL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.7 Role of learner support services in ODL programmes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.7.1 Academic support in ODL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. 7. 2 Counselling support in ODL

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

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

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

2.7.3 Administrative support and stakeholder involvement

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

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

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

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

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

2.7.3.1 Determining access to learning resources

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

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

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

2.7.3.2 Providing decentralised learner support services

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

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

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

2.8 ODL policies and the provision of effective learner support services

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part-time staff support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To equip part-time tutors, study centre coordinators and other staff with skills in ODL to enable them to execute their responsibilities adequately.
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Although the 2005 ODL Mainstreaming Policy of UB intended to provide learner support services in rural centres, it was not accompanied by any guidelines to facilitate its interpretation and implementation (Kamau, 2008, 2009). As noted by Motswagosele and Marakakgoro (2009), the policy seemed to cater only for internal academic departments of the UB and not the DPE programme, which is accredited by UB. In pursuit of expanded educational opportunities, UB introduced the Articulation and Recognition of Prior Learning Policy (University of Botswana, 2009). This policy recognises prior learning and lifelong learning, through which learners could be granted credits in terms of their current knowledge, skills and life experiences, regardless of where and when these were acquired. This policy was relevant to the present study, in determining whether prior learning was considered during the implementation of learner support services in the DPE programme, and as such represented a further knowledge gap. Despite the existence of these policies, UB did not appear to have developed elaborate and decentralised learner support services of the kind offered by BOCODOL to support its distance learners (Dodds, et al., 2008; Kamau, 2009). In recognition of this shortcoming, Tony Morrison sought assistance, from the MoESD in 1999, in the letter below:

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

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

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

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

2.9 Role of technologies in the provision of learner support services

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.10.1 Limitations in the implementation of effective learner support services

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.11 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three

Research design

3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme. This puzzle drove me to record the participants' perceptions, views and opinions about the contribution of such services to distance learners' progress and completion. In this chapter, I describe the research design which I chose to help me solve the academic puzzle. I give the rationale for using a qualitative research approach, the research context and the criteria for selecting the research sample, the methods I used for data collection, the ethical considerations involved, and the logistics I put in place to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility and dependability of the findings. I also offer a justification for choosing content analysis as the most suitable strategy for data analysis and interpretation. The research design enabled me to collect data to answer the research question which intended to understand: *The effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in a primary education diploma in Botswana*. In seeking solutions to this academic puzzle, I formulated four research questions:

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

In the next section, I discuss the traditional research approaches and give a justification for why I found the qualitative interpretative approach the most suitable for this study.

3.2 Research approaches

Two types of approaches are used in educational research, the quantitative or positivist approach and the qualitative or interpretivist approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The qualitative-interpretivist approach posits that knowledge and reality are socially constructed and are given meaning and interpretation by people through the sharing of experiences (Beck & Kosnik, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Further, this approach is characterised by the concern for the individual and the subjective human experience, seeing reality as it is experienced by people in real and natural settings. As such, it seeks to interpret reality by drawing on participants' own experiences of the situations in which they live (Creswell, 1998). The interpretivist approach is therefore context-specific, applying techniques and processes for which meanings cannot always be experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency, as is the case in the positivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

I chose the interpretivist approach because my research question focused on participants' perceptions about the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the DPE programme in Botswana. My aim as a researcher was to facilitate the construction of knowledge from the participants' perspectives, as they understood the phenomenon under investigation in their natural settings. I needed to interact with the participants and listen carefully to them in order to record and explore their perceptions, attitudes, opinions and experiences with the support services in the DPE programme, since they were the primary source of data. It was from this perspective that in the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, (§ 2.5), I made a case for learner support services which are designed to develop independent learners who would be capable of constructing their own meanings, as contended in the theories of ODL and constructivism, discussed in detail in sections (2.5.1 to 2.5.5).

The interpretive approach contends that knowledge can be presented in different ways, other than as a single objective reality as in the case of positivist approach (Creswell, 2003; Denzin

& Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Further, interpretivists believe that reality is subjective and determined by people, rather than by objective and external factors. As such it cannot be measured objectively through the proving of hypotheses and statistical measurements, except with rigour in research methods (Patton, 2002). The interpretivist approach focuses on how people make sense of the world and uses the case study as the most natural mode of reporting their interpretations and the meanings they derive from their life situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was on this assumption that I selected the case study approach and used semi-structured interview questions to collect data in both individual and group interviews. I used fewer respondents than would have been the case had I taken a quantitative approach, which depends on larger samples. In adopting an interpretivist approach, I assumed the role of a human instrument and became part of the learning process. I recorded the what, where, why, when and how of the phenomenon by collecting in-depth data from a small but information-rich sample of participants, which as indicated in the reviewed literature, renders the issue of numbers meaningless (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Trochim, 2006; Voeten, 2006).

I did not select the quantitative or the positivist research paradigm because it would not have answered the research question. The quantitative-positivist approach assumes that knowledge is objective and that its judgment is based on the observation of external reality, with the researcher playing the part of an observer (Patton, 2002). The positivist view defines life in measurable terms, rather than in terms of inner experiences, and uses quantification, experimental designs and statistical measurements to test pre-formulated hypotheses (Cohen et al., 2007; Hall & Hall, 2004; Jones, Vasti & Arminio 2006). Reality is perceived as existing independently of the observer (researcher) who observes social phenomena objectively and proceeds through the application of laws that are deduced from a hypothesis to confirm or refute the truth of a proposition (Creswell, 1998). In the interpretivist approach, however, the researcher interacts with the knower (the participants) in an inseparable manner (Cohen et al., 2007). To generalise findings on social behaviour in the positivist approach, it is necessary to select samples of sufficient size from which inferences about the wider population can be drawn (Patton, 2002).

The positivist and interpretivist research approaches seem to agree that reality exists, but differs in the methodology for investigating this reality. The positivist approach treats reality as objective and external, while the interpretivist approach stresses subjectivity and multiple realities. The present study sought an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions of the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress in the DPE programme. As such, it dealt with the real experiences of distance learners, tutors and stakeholders in their natural settings, which could only be investigated through an interpretivist approach. The interpretive approach was appropriate for this study since it allowed me to explore participants' subjective interpretations of the effectiveness of learner support services. The respondents included both distance learners, who were the recipients, and tutors and other stakeholders who were involved in the provision of support services in the DPE programme. My aim was to listen to the participants and interpret their reality, treating it as a subjective concept from their point of view, rather than as one which needed to be measured quantitatively. Researching a complex phenomenon of this nature, involving multiple players and influences, meant that a simple cause-and-effect approach of the kind commonly used in quantitative research (Cohen et al., 2000; Gatsha, 2007), would not adequately have addressed my research question.

3.2.1 The case study

Reviewed literature (Cohen et al., 2007) contends that case studies are carried out in organisational and institutional settings, often to explain events in real life contexts, and are defined by participants' roles and functions in a particular situation. As such, there is resonance between case studies and the interpretive approach. By seeking to understand the perceptions of participants, a case study blends description of events with analysis (Cohen et al., 2007), because it focuses on participants' perceptions, views and interpretations of multiple realities so as to arrive at the meanings of the phenomenon under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Walliman, 2005). It may involve one or more specific case studies, enabling the researcher to conduct analysis of qualitative data in greater depth in order to resolve a research problem (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, this method involves interaction between the researcher and the participants in unique locations (Newman, 2006 and Opie, 2004a). It is system-bound in terms of space and time situations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006

and Stake, 2005), since it investigates the specific experiences of individuals. A case study could involve events, groups of people, academic programmes, schools or communities. In this study, it involved real people in form of distance learners and the learner support providers who were interacting in real situations.

I selected the case study approach because I could secure explanations and understanding of the effectiveness of learner support services on the DPE programme. By involving different participants, I was able to gather information for the same case study from different sources, making verification of data possible through the triangulation of data sources and the research method. In the interpretivist approach, the main strength of a case study is its ability to replicate quantity with quality by separating the significant few instances from the insignificant many. The significance of the data generated, rather than its frequency and statistical inferences, is the hallmark of such a study (Cohen et al., 2007:258; Patton 2002; Trochim, 2006; Voeten, 2006). In this regard, the issue of numbers is not relevant since a case study aims to assemble a picture of a certain behaviour or activity in a particular situation in a unique setting, rather than dealing with numbers of participants to show the representativeness of the sample in the population (Opie, 2004a). The case study approach was found appropriate for my study because it investigated the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme in order to gain an understanding of their views, not their statistical frequencies.

3.2.2. Role of the researcher

The first thing I did as the researcher was to embrace the interpretive approach in the naturalist enquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also became aware that before entering the field to collect data, I had to read around the topic under investigation so as to be mentally, physically and intellectually prepared to interact with the participants and assess their experiences and the context within which they were operating (Hall & Hall, 2004; Patton, 2002). During data collection, I assumed the role of a facilitator to moderate the interview processes, using an objective rather than a subjective lens so as not to contaminate the data collected. My decision

to adopt this approach was informed by Cohen et al. (2000:125), when they argue that a researcher:

- requires good knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation so as to guide and moderate the interview sessions effectively;
- requires a clear structure of the interviewing instruments to facilitate a clear focus on ideas through probing, clarifying and confirming; and
- must be a good listener so as to avoid frightening or intimidating participants during the interview process.

I started by reviewing the literature on the meanings of ODL so as to have a firm grasp of the phenomenon I was investigating as discussed in Chapter 2 (§2.2). I then reviewed the literature on qualitative research methodology. This enabled me to design the data collection instruments. I then purposively selected the research sites and participants whom I considered to have the information I needed to answer the research questions. In selecting the DPE programme as a case study, I considered the possibility of gaining access to the research site in the limited time available so as to collect appropriate data reasonably, readily and quickly, in the research context and at the convenience of participants.

3.2.3 The research context

Easterby-Smith et al., (2008) argue that research participants are grounded in their environment in terms of locality and time. As such, the researcher must be sensitive to the contexts, the settings, and the situations in which the participants live or work, since these factors affect their behaviour. In the interpretivist research approach, the context forms the framework and the reference points of participants. From these, 'thick' descriptions and interpretations of their actions and gestures emerge (Patton, 2002). To answer the research questions, I had to anticipate the type of evidence I sought and decide on the research method which would yield the anticipated results. Before collecting data, I reviewed the documents relevant to the problems surrounding the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme.

The study was carried out in Botswana and involved respondents from the Ministry of Education and the University of Botswana. The two colleges of education selected for this study, at both of which distance learners attended tutorial sessions, were 75 kilometres apart. In terms of geographical location, the Molepolole College of Education is situated in the rural areas, while the Tlokweng College of Education is about 15 kilometres from the Gaborone urban area in Botswana. The Kanye Education Centre, where the ODL office is located, is 90 kilometres from Gaborone. As primary school teachers, the distance learners were scattered all over Botswana. Some taught in geographically remote locations such as Khalagadi desert, which is far from the colleges of education, making attendance at residential sessions and access to resources such as libraries a big challenge, as explained in the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.3). Given this context, the learner support services were offered in the centralised colleges of education at specified times, so that distance learners could access them during the school holidays when the facilities and other resources were not in use by the full-time students.

3.3 The research design

A research design is determined by its fitness of purpose for the study which is being undertaken (Patton, 2002). It should specify the research problem, the theoretical framework, and the research questions. Through the review of relevant literature, the researcher should specify data collection methods, sampling strategies and the study sample, data analysis, interpretation, the expected product and presentation strategies, including budgets (Hall & Hall, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It should anticipate the information to be obtained, and estimate the timescale for conducting the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hall & Hall, 2004; Silverman, 2000). For this study, this entailed spelling out what I wanted to know and how I could access the relevant information. During the planning stage, I went through various phases of defining the objectives and purpose of the study. This was followed by a convergent phase, in which I sifted through various ideas to select the most plausible concept as the topic of investigation (Cohen et al., 2000). I then devised a plan to guide me on the following issues:

- aligning the focus of the enquiry to the research questions;

- defining boundaries of the investigation within the theoretical framework;
- selecting the research sample and context, including sampling strategies;
- developing data collection instruments and strategies for recording and analysing data;
- deciding measures to be taken to ensure the trustworthiness and dependability of the research findings.

The next step was to link the research questions and the purpose of the study to the identified data sources and data collection methods, as shown in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: Rationale for the research design

Research question	Purpose	Data sources	Data collection methods
What are the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme?	To find distance learners' perceptions about the effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses of learner support services	Distance learners Tutors Managers and decision makers	Group interviews. Group interviews. Individual interviews with managers and decision makers.
How do distance learners perceive the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme?	To understand distance learners' perceptions about the effectiveness of learner support services in their studies.	Distance learners Programme and learner support coordinators Managers and decision makers	Group interviews. Group interviews Individual interviews.
What are tutors and stakeholders' perceptions about their roles and responsibilities in the DPE programme?	To gather views of stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. To gather views from institutional managers about supervision and monitoring of learner' support services in the DPE programme.	Tutors. Programme and learner support coordinators. College management.	Group interviews. Group interviews. Individual interviews.
What barriers and opportunities exist for the implementation of effective learner support services in the DPE programme?	To gather the views of distance learners, tutors and decision makers about the implementation mechanisms and how these affect distance learners' progress and completion.	Distance learners. Tutors. Managers and decision makers.	Group interviews. Group Interviews. Individual interviews.

3.4 Sampling

I used purposive sampling to hand-pick the participants. In this study, the respondents did not have an equal probability of being picked. As noted by Creswell (1998) and Scaife (2004), in the purposive sampling technique, the researcher subjectively applies her or his own judgment to select the respondents whom he/she considers most appropriate for the study. The choice of the sample depends on what the researcher wants to learn from it, within the available time and resources, and not the sample size (Patton, 2002). For this study, I picked the participants on the basis of their knowledge of learner support services in the DPE programme. They were all actively involved in the implementation of learner support services, either as distance learners themselves or as intermediaries, such as part-time tutors, programme coordinators, or policy makers. In using the purposive sampling technique, I kept in mind that the credibility, dependability, meaningfulness and insights generated from the qualitative case study approach had more to do with the information richness of the case, the methodological skills and analytical capabilities of the researcher, than with the sample size (Patton, 2002).

3.4.1 Number of participants

The significance of a case study lies not in the frequencies commonly used in the positivist approach but in the in-depth data that can be generated through a small but information-rich group of participants (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, my intention was to gain insights into the phenomenon under investigation by recording participants' perceptions, views and opinions about the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners, through an in-depth qualitative case study approach based on my judgment of the typicality and appropriateness of the participants in terms of their knowledge about the DPE programme. Thus, I purposively selected 12 final-year distance learners from the 2002/2003 cohort of the DPE programme, who received support from Tlokwen College of Primary Education and Molepolole College of Secondary Education. The criteria used were that the DPE syllabus was being implemented on a conventional basis in the primary colleges, while the secondary colleges were used as study centres for distance learners, to enable them to have access to

academic support and other learning resources. I needed to understand the similarities and/or differences in the provision of learner support services in these institutions.

To help me assemble the research sample, I requested the DPE college coordinators to identify 12 distance learners (6 from each college) and eight tutors (4 from each college). Two college principals, one from Molepolole College of Education and the other from Tlokweng College of Education, were handpicked to give their insights about their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of learner support services. As policy makers, they were responsible for monitoring the provision of learner support services in those institutions. Participants from UB included the programme coordinator, two learner support coordinators and one quality assurance member of staff, all of whom were involved in the monitoring of learner support. I also included three officers from the Kanye ODL office in the Kanye Education Centre who supported distance learners in the regions in between the residential sessions. A breakdown of the participants is shown in Table 3.2 below:

Table 3.2: Number of participants

Category of participants	Site	Total number
Distance learners (5 who have completed and 7 still on the programme).	2 colleges of education.	12
Tutors.	2 colleges of education.	8
Programme coordinators (managers).	2 colleges of education.	2
College management (decision makers).	2 colleges of education.	2
One programme coordinator and one learner support coordinator.	UB.	2
Regional learners' support coordinators.	Kanye ODL office at the Kanye Education Centre (Ministry of Education).	3
Assessment and quality assurance.	UB.	1
Total.		30

To gain a holistic view of the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners, I included both completers and non-completers among the distance learners because they were actively involved in the DPE programme activities. The other selection criterion was that distance learners and tutors were chosen according to subject specialisations (Maths/Science, Social Studies/Religious Studies, English/Setswana) and practical subjects (Art, Craft and Design, Agriculture, Home Economics, Music and Physical Education), since these subjects

posed different resource demands during the provision of learner support services. The criteria for selecting participants are explained in Table 3.3 below.

Table 3.3: Sample selection criteria

Participants	Selection criteria
Distance learners	To give their perceptions about the effectiveness and contribution of learner support services to their progress and programme completion.
Tutors	To give their views on the effectiveness of academic, counselling and administrative support provided to distance learners, feedback mechanisms, assistance with study skills, and how these forms of support contributed to distance learners' progress and programme completion.
Decision makers or policy makers	To provide answers on monitoring and supervision mechanisms of academic, counselling and administrative support, assessment, and access to learning resources such as libraries, computer and science laboratories for practical work, and their contribution to distance learners' progress and programme completion.
Regional learner support coordinators	To provide information on their roles and responsibilities in supporting distance learners in between the residential sessions.

3.4.2 Learner profiles at enrolment stage

The age range given at the data collection stage, and confirmed from existing records (University of Botswana, 2005b), was between 35 and 60 years, as indicated in Table 3.4 below. The sample comprised of 10 females and 2 males. At the time of enrolment, distance learners' work experiences ranged between 10 and 30 years, as shown in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4: Age range and work experience

Learner profiles		
Age range	Number of learners	Work experience in years at enrolment stage
35-40	1	10
41-45	2	15
46-50	4	20
51- 55	3	25
56-60	2	30
Total	12	

The subject combinations and the educational backgrounds of distance learners ranged from Primary Lower (PL) and Primary Upper (PU) to Primary Teacher Certificate holders (PTC), as shown in Table 3.5 below, indicating that many of the learners had over twenty years' teaching experience from the time they graduated from the pre-service teacher training colleges.

Table 3.5 Previous academic backgrounds and subject combinations

Previous academic background		Subject combination on the DPE programme		Completed	Incomplete
Std 7+ PL	1	Maths/Science	3	5	7
JC + PU	1	English/Setswana	1		
JC + PTC	10	Religious Education/Social Studies	2		
		Home Economics/Agriculture	3		
		Music/Physical Education	1		
		Agriculture/Physical Education	1		
		Agriculture/Art, Craft and Design	1		
		Education	All		
		Communication and Study Skills	All		
		Research Project	All		
		Teaching Assignment Portfolio	All		
Total	12		12	5	7

As explained in Chapter 1 (§1.2), primary school teachers with the qualifications shown in Table 3.5 above, plus five years of teaching experience, were eligible for upgrading through the DPE programme by ODL (University of Botswana, 1999, 2005b). In order to gain a balanced view from the participants, purposive sampling was used to select six completers and six non-completers from the distance learners. At the data collection stage however, one of the completers was unable to participate in the interview and was replaced with a non-completer, leading to 5 completers and 7 non-completers, as shown in Table 3.5 above. Considering the high incidence of non-completers and of data saturation during the data collection stage, this change was not deemed to contribute negatively to the results of this study. In selecting the distance learners and tutors, I took into consideration the different subject combinations, as shown in Table 3.5 above, in order to get participants' views about distance learners' access to learning resources and how this influenced their progress and programme completion.

3.4.3 Preparation for field work

To enhance the trustworthiness, credibility and dependability of the findings in a qualitative case study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Scaife (2004) advise researchers to explain their data-gathering procedures, including the constraints they encounter during the data collection process. The field work for this study was carried out between September 2009 and January 2010. In preparation for the interviews, I sent out letters to the institutional managers, asking for permission to conduct field work in their institutions (see appendices 5, 6 & 7).

3.5 Data collection methods

In their discussion of data collection methods, Cohen et al. (2000), Easterby-Smith et al. (2008), and Patton (2002) assert that interviews, review of relevant documents and observations are the main tools of qualitative research, because the researcher is interested in discovering peoples' perceptions, interpretations and meanings about multiple realities. In this study, the interview method was used to collect primary data from the participants and discussed in section 3.5.1 below.

3.5.1 The interview method

The interview method allows the researcher to probe for meanings, clarify concepts, and obtain rich and in-depth information, which is unlikely to be obtained through other methods (Creswell, 1998; Hall & Hall, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this regard, interviews are not simply tools for collecting data; rather, they allow respondents to describe and interpret the external realities of the world in which they live, in the form of facts, events and internal experiences such as feelings and meanings, and by so doing express how they regard a given situation from their own points of view (Silverman, 2000). I was able to collect data by holding conversations with participants to find their views, perceptions, feelings, motivations, claims and concerns about the effectiveness of support services for distance learners in the DPE programme. In the process, I was able to develop the interview questions, comparing insights from participants' responses and seeking further clarification during the interview process. To do this, I adopted the guidelines suggested by Cohen et al. (2000: 268):

- **Thematising:** This involved clarifying the purpose of the interview by relating the research questions to the theoretical framework and the practical need for the study.
- **Designing:** Involved translating the research questions into interview questions so that the content and format of the questions reflected the information I wanted to get from participants.
- **Interviewing:** I audio-taped the interviews to reduce bias and ensure trustworthiness, dependability and credibility during the transcription, analysis and interpretation of data. I also listened to the audio tapes as I transcribed the data, and conducted a literature review of relevant documents.
- **Transcribing:** Data were transcribed from audio tapes to the written word. To avoid data loss or distortion, I listened to the audio tapes many times.

- **Analysing:** This process entailed analysing and interpreting the data to generate natural units of meaning; these units were then classified, coded, categorised and clustered thematically and orderly, as discussed in the findings in Chapter 4.
- **Verifying:** This was done by triangulating the data sources and data collection methods. Participants were also asked to confirm the accuracy of the information collected by reviewing the transcripts.
- **Reporting:** During data analysis and interpretation, quotations from the interviews were used verbatim to ensure that the findings reflected the participants' views.

Using this approach, I developed semi-structured interview questions which enabled me to collect data and probe deeper to clarify ideas as the interviews unfolded. The interviews were conducted at times convenient to the participants in their own natural environments. To arrange for the interviews, I contacted distance learners, tutors, institutional managers and policy makers by telephone or by e-mail. Individual interviews lasted between one and one and half hours, while the group interviews lasted between one and two hours.

Group interviews with twelve of the distance learners (Interviews 7, 11 and 13, see Table 3.7), were conducted on different dates at the Molepolole and Tlokweng Colleges of Education, depending on the convenience and availability of participants. My initial plan was to conduct two group interviews with these learners. However, during the interviewing process, it became clear that because of their teaching schedules, it would be difficult to get all of them together at the same time. Instead, I conducted three separate group interviews at times which were convenient to most of them. The group interviews with tutors and part-time programme coordinators (Interviews 2, 8, 12 and 14), and the individual interviews with decision/policy makers (college principals, Interviews 4 and 5), were conducted at the Tlokweng and Molepolole Colleges of Education on separate occasions. Interviews with learner support regional officers (Interviews 1 and 10) took place at the Kanye Education Centre on two separate occasions, as the participants were not available at the same time. To avoid conflict of interest and contamination of data, the other interviews (3, 6, and 9) were conducted by my

research assistant with respondents at the University of Botswana. Before she ventured into the field, I explained the purpose of the study, its ethical issues, and discussed the research instruments with her. I also asked her to emphasize to the participants' their right to privacy before the start of the interviews so they could make informed decisions about whether to participate. For purposes of identification, the interview sessions were given numbers (1-14) and the participants were identified by pseudonyms; these were later used during data analysis and interpretation, as shown in Chapter 4.

A major challenge during data collection was the failure by participants, particularly distance learners, to adhere to interview schedules, due to their busy work schedules. I had to schedule and reschedule interview sessions so as to secure a time slot in which the majority of them would be available to come to the interview venue, but my patience paid off. At other times, I would visit a research site only to find that, although the interview had been confirmed, the participant's diary was full. I had similar experiences with decision makers and learner support coordinators. At other times, respondents did not turn up and my efforts to reschedule did not bear fruit. This experience made me aware of the challenges faced by the participants, and also made me appreciate their multiple responsibilities.

3.5.1.1 Individual interviews

I selected the individual interview method so as to give busy participants, such as decision makers, a voice in this research, allowing them to give their views on the nature and relevance of support services in meeting distance learners' demands. The detailed information I gathered from this category of people would have been difficult to capture using other data collection strategies, such as group interviews or questionnaires as used in the quantitative research approach. The in-depth information I obtained through the use of semi-structured interview questions is presented in the findings in Chapter 4. In addition, such interviews gave respondents the freedom to comment on sensitive issues such as the commitment of tutors to their duties, which they might have found difficult to raise in a group interview.

3.5.1.2 Group interviews

In qualitative research, group interviews are an essential tool for collecting data, particularly where the participants have been working together for some time or for a common purpose (Cohen et al., 2000). In the case of the DPE programme, where the participants were aware of what everyone in the group was doing. In using group interviews, my assumption was that distance learners, tutors, part-time programme coordinators and other stakeholders knew what everyone in their group was doing in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. I found such interviews appropriate in this study because, as stated by Morgan (1997), Cohen et al., (2000) and Patton (2002), group interviews:

- give group members the opportunity to interact and comment on each others' ideas during discussion, thus allowing for triangulation of ideas at the data collection stage;
- enable participants to express their attitudes and opinions about the topic by sharing and comparing ideas;
- are self-contained research instruments, and allow the results obtained to stand on their own;
- are time-saving and cost-effective compared to other methods, such as individual interviews;
- allow for group interaction among participants which enhances data quality through checks and balances of each others' responses.

Group interviews were used to gather information from distance learners, tutors, learner support and part-time programme coordinators. Given the limited time I had to conduct my study, I found group interviews quicker, more economical, and capable of generating a wider range of ideas than individual interviews. During data collection, I bore in mind the advice of Patton (2002) that the researcher should guard against certain shortcomings, such as individuals bringing out negative personal opinions during an interview, with the risk of

reprisals from other members of the group. To avoid this, I used probes to encourage participation by all group members. This approach was convenient for the participants since they were all responding to the same interview questions. Pseudonyms were used to notate participants' responses and to protect their right to confidentiality and anonymity.

In this study, group interviews facilitated interaction among participants with the information being triangulated through immediate crosschecking of facts and opinions during the discussions. I also gained in-depth information by probing for clarification of ideas during the sessions. I used two tape recorders in case the electronic one ran out of power, in which case I had the back-up of the manual tape. After an interview, I immediately checked the tape recordings to ensure that I had captured all the material on both the electronic and the manual tapes. This strategy paid off because whenever the manual and/or the electronic recorder occasionally failed, I resorted to the other recorder and the field notes to reconcile the collected data. This happened sometimes when the capacity of the electronic recorder was full and needed to be cleared before the next interview.

3.5.2 Review of relevant documents

In the qualitative research approach, the review of documents and records, such as minutes of meetings and policy documents, can illuminate events or a programme by exposing its historical and contextual perspectives (Creswell, 1998; Hall & Hall, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Pittman, 2003). Documentary evidence may yield important information illuminating initial decisions and policy recommendations that were made before the implementation of a programme (Glesen, 2006; Robson, 2002). Such documents also help the researcher to avoid anecdotal narratives by challenging, expanding and enriching the research approaches. Consulting organisational records enables the researcher to verify facts from field data and give him/her the chance to corroborate information by triangulating multiple data sources and different data collection methods.

For this study, I reviewed both published and unpublished in-house materials, such as organisational schedules, class lists and record-keeping reports. Pittman (2003:29) refers to

these as `fugitive literature`, since they are not published but contain valuable evidence, not only about the history of a programme but also about other leads which were used in its implementation. Review of documents also allowed me to crosscheck respondents' views against available documents and by so doing triangulate data from the participants with records kept by the programme coordinators, gaining deeper insights from the interviewees about their interpretations and meanings of the data that was obtained. To find background information about the implementation of learner support services in the DPE programme, I reviewed relevant documents, such as the 1994 National Policy on Education RNPE (Republic of Botswana, 1994), the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a), the DPE Special Academic Regulations (University of Botswana, 2005b), and the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD. This document analysis enabled me to crosscheck findings with the information given by the participants, as shown in Table 3.6 below:

Table 3.6: Document review

Document	Purpose	Anticipated benefit
Revised National Policy on Education (1994).	Assess recommendations for upgrading primary teacher certificate holders (PTCs).	To provide insights about the policy position for launching the in-service upgrading diploma for PTC holders.
Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy of the University of Botswana (2005a).	Understand the policy position in the implementation of learner support services in the DPE programme. Provide guidelines for the implementation of learner support services by the University of Botswana.	To guide stakeholder involvement in the integration of ODL activities in the institutional core activities.
Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the University of Botswana and the Ministry of Education (2007).	To inform collaboration and cooperation between the UB and the MoESD, who were the main stakeholders in the provision of learner support services.	Guide and direct stakeholder partnership and involvement in the implementation of learner support services and delivery of the DPE programme.
Diploma in Primary Education Special Academic Regulations of (2005b).	To inform academic content and methodology, assessment and quality assurance in the development, delivery and award of the diploma.	Facilitate smooth provision of the distance-taught diploma programme by ensuring the integrity of the diploma certificate as per curriculum requirements.

3.6 Research ethics

One of the most challenging responsibilities for a researcher involves safeguarding participants' ethical requirements, avoiding putting them at risk or disempowering them through deception, misinformation or betrayal (Creswell, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Merriam 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002). It is unethical for researchers to expose participants to pain, stress or embarrassment by concealing the true purpose or conditions of the research (Graziano & Raulin, 2004; Walliman, 2005). To obtain ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria (see Appendix 8), I first of all asked permission from the MoESD through the Office of Research and Development (ORD) at UB to conduct research in Botswana (see Appendix 5). A further consideration was ensuring the protection of the respondents' right to privacy, as explained below.

3.6.1 Voluntary participation and informed consent

In order to protect participants' rights to freedom and self-determination, Cohen et al. (2000:51) and Patton (2002:407) emphasise the need for researchers to secure their cooperation and consent by explaining to them the importance of the information being solicited, including the benefits and risks involved so that they can make competent and informed decisions about participation. In this study, I ensured the anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of the respondents by disclosing to them the purpose of the research and explaining that their participation would be voluntary. They could give their informed consent (see Appendices 6 & 7), but were also free to withdraw if they chose to do so. I also asked their permission to record their responses on tape to facilitate correct transcription (Silverman, 2000), since it would have been difficult for me to recollect conversations or note down all the words correctly during the interview sessions.

3.6.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

I avoided the risk of false information by transcribing the interviews verbatim, thus enhancing the dependability and the credibility of the findings. I used pseudonyms to protect participants' identities and confidentiality, assuring them that the information they gave during interviews

would not be revealed or traced back to them. Their anonymity in the data analysis and presentation was protected using group designations, such as `distance learners`, `tutors`, `managers` and `decision makers`, and `learner support coordinators`, and through the use of verbatim quotations, as demonstrated in the presentation of data in Chapter 4.

In qualitative research, data analysis is an interpretive and progressive process which commences at the data collection stage and continues through to data analysis and drawing conclusions from the main findings (Cohen et al., 2000; Creswell, 2003; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Glesen, 2006; Patton, 2002; Saldana, 2009). It is also a result of reflexive and reactive interactions between the researcher and the interpretations of social encounters which emerge from the interviews. In order to draw meaning and understanding from participants' views and perceptions, I developed codes which enabled me to group the data into patterns and clusters of related concepts as shown in Chapter 4. From these patterns and clusters of the data, I was able to generate the themes which emerged from the coding process.

3.7 Data analysis

As discussed in Chapter 4, data were analysed to answer the main research question which sought to understand *the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in the DPE programme*. In qualitative research, data analysis is a cyclic process which involves data collection, analysis and interpretation (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Saldana, 2009). It entails coding and recoding of data, then classifying, prioritising and integrating the data corpus in order to develop categories from emerging themes. The themes guide data analysis by exposing the social reality underlying the findings (Glesen, 2006; Opie, 2004b). Coding is also an interactive process which requires the identification of a word, phrase or sentence to represent a concept or area of interest in the data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Hall & Hall, 2004; Saldana, 2009). Since I was analysing large chunks of written data, the content analysis method was the most appropriate, because it gave me an opportunity to compare and contrast data from different sources and identify links or interconnectedness between the categories and emergent themes. In this study, coding was done *in vivo*, as explained in the next section.

3.7.1 Coding procedures

According to reviewed literature (Cohen, et al., 2007), my study fell in the category of language-based interview transcripts. After reading and re-reading the transcripts, data patterns began to emerge around words and short phrases (such as *assignments, assessment, academic support, incomplete, loss of scripts, record keeping, tutorial support, barriers, feedback, library, laboratories* and *policy*) which were mentioned frequently in relation to some of the factors that contributed to the provision of both effective and ineffective learner support services in the DPE programme. Because I was investigating the perceptions, views and opinions of the participants, I found the *in vivo* coding method (also called verbatim coding), (Saldana, 2009:74) to be the most appropriate. It gave me the chance to explore the findings in the light of participants' interpretation of learner support services in the DPE programme. The *in vivo* method enhanced the findings both by giving participants a voice and by keeping track of what was participant-inspired and not researcher-generated. During the coding process, I selected words and short phrases from the interview transcripts which appeared to interconnect participants' responses across the 14 interviews. The codes produced patterns and overlaps of related content clusters which enabled me to compare and contrast similarities and differences of data and determine a structure for organising the findings into a written report as presented in Chapter 4. This method also enabled me to triangulate my data by comparing and corroborating information from different sources so as to gain a better perspective and enrich the findings of the case study.

Data were analysed through the computer-assisted qualitative data programme (CAQDAS) using the Atlas.ti platform. Each primary document was given an Interview Number (1-14). Through the Atlas.ti software, all 14 tape-recorded interviews were transcribed into MS Word documents, saved as rich text format (rtf) documents, and then imported into the Atlas.ti software where they were converted into hermeneutic units of 14 Primary Documents. During data analysis, I replaced some codes which appeared too general with new ones. Despite this limitation, the Atlas.ti software was beneficial in that data for each interview were grouped separately, which made it easy to go back and forth to the participants' views. There were 14 primary documents, 53 codes and 1537 quotations in all the primary documents, as shown in Table 3.7 below:

Table 3.7: Codes - Primary document table

CODES-PRIMARY-DOCUMENTS-TABLE (CELL=Q-FREQ)

Report created by Super - 09/01/11 10:12:26 PM

"HU: [C:\Users\user\Documents\Scientific Software\ATLAsTi\TextBank\Learner support analysisPDs3.hpr5]"

Code-Filter: All [53]

PD-Filter: All [14]

Quotation-Filter: All [1537]

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		PRIMARY DOCS							
CODES		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	Totals			

absenteeism		0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
0	2	1	0	0	0	8			
academic support		1	0	3	1	2	0	0	8
1	1	0	0	0	0	17			
accountability		1	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
0	1	2	0	1	0	9			
administrative support		1	2	0	0	0	0	0	8
0	0	0	0	1	0	12			
assessment		4	10	21	8	4	8	3	20
6	2	0	6	1	4	97			

assignments					1	1	2	2	2	3	4	4
1	2	4	3		2	3	34					
assignments					13	11	13	3	7	1	20	48
14	12	30	10		51	27	260					
attendance					1	2	5	2	3	0	0	4
6	4	1	0		0	0	28					
barriers					1	1	2	2	2	2	0	0
0	0	0	0		0	0	10					
child					3	3	2	0	6	0	8	4
4	6	12	0		7	3	58					
communication					1	0	0	1	2	1	0	2
1	4	1	0		1	1	15					
completion					2	2	3	2	8	3	2	8
3	1	1	0		1	0	36					
counselling					10	5	13	0	4	0	0	22
10	6	1	0		0	0	71					
counselling support					4	3	1	0	2	0	0	6
2	1	0	0		0	0	19					
difficult concepts					0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0		2	1	3					
diploma holder					0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
0	0	3	0		1	0	6					
expectations					0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0
3	1	0	0		0	0	7					
family					1	0	0	3	0	3	8	2

2	4	10	1	15	0	49						
feedback				5	6	3	2	8	2	1	14	
7	3	4	2	17	9	83						
friend				0	0	0	0	0	1	5	0	
0	0	6	0	7	1	20						
husband				2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	
2	4	1	0	0	1	12						
incomplete				4	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	
0	2	4	0	4	0	18						
laboratory				1	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	
0	0	2	1	1	1	9						
labs				4	8	0	0	8	4	8	0	
6	0	1	0	3	1	43						
learner support				4	5	19	2	1	0	2	22	
5	8	6	10	2	10	96						
library				6	9	15	0	10	6	10	12	
3	6	5	7	2	4	95						
loss of scripts				1	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	
0	1	2	0	1	0	9						
motivation				2	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	
1	2	0	0	0	0	8						
neighbours				0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
0	0	2	0	0	0	2						
network				1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	
0	10	0	1	1	0	14						

noise				0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	2	0	0	1	3					
payment				1	1	1	5	5	0	0	0
0	0	0	3	0	2	18					
policy				13	0	0	3	2	0	0	2
4	3	2	0	1	0	30					
programme ownership				0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
3	0	0	0	0	0	7					
promotion				0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	6	0	0	0	9					
qualifications				2	0	2	2	0	0	1	2
1	0	6	0	2	2	20					
recognition				0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	2	0	0	0	3					
record keeping				0	0	0	0	0	4	5	10
0	1	1	0	4	1	26					
remote areas				2	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
0	1	1	0	2	1	11					
research projects				2	4	0	0	0	5	2	0
4	0	3	5	4	6	35					
resources				20	7	4	1	15	6	1	12
6	3	4	5	5	7	96					
salary				1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
1	0	8	2	0	0	14					
study centres				1	1	2	2	2	3	4	4

1	2	4	3	2	3	34						
study group				9	0	2	0	0	0	0	5	0
0	3	5	0	6	3	33						
study leave				2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	1	0	0	0	0	4						
supervision				1	3	0	1	0	6	0	2	
2	1	0	2	3	1	22						
supervisor				1	6	0	0	0	4	0	2	
4	1	2	3	3	7	33						
telephone				6	3	0	1	0	1	0	2	
4	2	0	1	4	0	24						
training				14	0	15	0	9	1	1	2	
12	10	2	3	7	0	76						
transfer				11	7	8	1	1	1	2	0	
1	2	2	0	3	2	41						
tutorial method				0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	
0	0	0	0	2	0	6						
tutorials				8	15	7	5	14	0	7	28	
10	9	2	6	8	12	131						
workload				1	0	0	2	8	0	1	0	
1	0	6	4	1	0	24						

Totals				169	117	147	53	135	71	106	266	
135	122	157	78	178	114	1537						

The primary documents were analysed line-by-line by reading and re-reading the coded data, developing meaning units, categories and sub-categories, and grouping data under emerging themes. The sample of codes below shows the hierarchy of the code list in alphabetical order.

Code hierarchies

The code hierarchies enabled me to establish relationships of related concepts. For example, the code 'accountability and supervisor' led me to the data clusters that dealt with management, monitoring and supervision of DPE programme activities and of research projects. An example of a code hierarchy is shown below:

Code-Filter: All

HU: Learner support analysisPDs3

File: [C:\Users\user\Documents\Scientific Software\ATLAS\TextBank\Learner support analysisPDs3.hpr5]

Edited by: Super

Date/Time: 09/01/11 09:56:16 PM

absenteeism <is> Root

academic support <is> Root

accountability <is> Root

supervisor <is part of> accountability

administrative support <is> Root

assessment <is> Root

assignment <is> Root

The illustration below is a selection from the list of quotations which were generated on the Atlas.ti

platform after the data had been coded.

All current quotations (1537). Quotation-Filter: All (extended version)

HU: Learner support analysisPDs3

File: [C:\Users\user\Documents\Scientific Software\ATLAsTi\TextBank\Learner support analysisPDs3.hpr5]

Edited by: Super

Date/Time: 09/02/11 08:48:55 PM

P 1: INT1.rtf - 1:51 [when you talk to the learners they say t..] (205:205) (Super)

Codes: [resources]

P 6: INT6.rtf - 6:3 [You know access to technology is not the..] (88:88) (Super)

Codes: [assignment] [resources] [study centres] [supervisor]

P 7: INT7.rtf - 7:108 [They would just come in some days and at..] (136:136) (Super)

Codes: [absenteeism]

P11: INT11.doc - 11:155 [I joined because of the salary scale.] (42:42) (Super)

Codes: [salary]

P12: INT12.rtf - 12:59 [Even our payments are delayed and someti..] (383:383) (Super)

Codes: [payment]

An explanation of one of the quotations is given below.

(P 1: INT1.rtf - 1:51 [when you talk to the learners they say t..] (205:205) (Super)

Codes: [resources]

In the above example, P stands for Primary document 1, which refers to Interview 1, quotation 51, interview number 1, lines (205:205), where one of the codes is 'resources'. This continues for all the other interviews. In this case, the code 'resources' indicates different views and different experiences of participants in their perceptions about the effectiveness of learner support services in the DPE programme. Other views regarding resources could be: *Gorata:...I have never used the practical part of the computer but just theory. P13:11 (65:65).* (Primary document 13, quotation 11, lines (65:65)).

From the data patterns and clusters of the coded primary documents, I generated categories and sub-categories which formed the code families CF), as shown below:

Code family: Facilitating two-way communication

HU: Learner support analysisPDs3

File: [C:\Users\user\Documents\Scientific Software\ATLASi\TextBank\Learner support analysisPDs3.hpr5]

Edited by: Super

Date/Time: 09/05/11 05:25:26 PM

Created: 08/01/11 11:39:53 AM (Super)

Codes (7): [assessment] [assignments] [completion] [feedback] [incomplete] [loss of scripts] [record keeping]

The example below shows the list of quotations that were generated from the Atlas.ti computer software for each interview.

List of current quotations (1537). Quotation-Filter: All (extended version)

HU: Learner support analysisPDs3

File: [C:\Users\user\Documents\Scientific Software\ATLASi\TextBank\Learner support analysisPDs3.hpr5]

Edited by: Super

Date/Time: 09/05/11 08:03:14 PM

1:19 Take the case of a project, if the teach.. (149:149)

3:17 I just wish we had at least 1 counsellor.. (34:34)

4:19 They are coming from their own employing.. (92:92)

5:17 The staff provide counselling to convent.. (35:35)

6:30 They need teachers to supervise them, ev.. (88:88)

7:25 The family was really supportive. (273:273)

8:20 It's the counselling support to me which.. (52:52)

9:60 Some of them do not attend tutorials bec.. (116:116)

7:25 The family was really supportive. (273:273) This means it is quotation 25 in Primary document 7, which is interview number7 and lines 273:273.

In order to answer each research question, I looked for concepts, ideas and issues which could explain the questions, such as distance learners' access to learning resources, and the major barriers that may have prevented access to the learning resources.

3.8. Trustworthiness, credibility and dependability

In the qualitative research approach, researchers are required to demonstrate the worthiness and genuineness of their research findings through critical investigations, in order to avoid

arriving at quick conclusions through anecdotes (Denzin &, Lincoln, 2000, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2000). Unlike in quantitative research, where truth is refined through careful sampling, instrumentation and statistical treatment of data, trustworthiness in qualitative research is enhanced to include the honesty, richness, scope and in-depth knowledge of the participants, as well as through the data collection methods (Patton, 2002).

To enhance credibility and dependability, which are important factors in improving trustworthiness, I collected data from a wide spectrum of participants which included distance learners, who were the recipients of the learner support services, intermediaries such as part-time tutors and programme coordinators, as well as policy makers. I used different data collection methods which as articulated by Lincoln & Guba (1985), allowed for triangulation of methods and gave participants the opportunity to interact and comment on each other's views, thus allowing for contextual triangulation and validation of data at the data collection stage. I avoided influencing and manipulating participants' perceptions by transcribing data and using quotations verbatim during data analysis and interpretation, as presented in Chapter 4. To improve credibility and dependability, the transcribed scripts and analysed texts were given to the participants so they could check and confirm that the texts and findings reflected their views and inputs.

3.9 Limitations of the study

This qualitative case study focused on the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners' progress in the DPE programme in Botswana. It recorded the perceptions of distance learners and the different stakeholders who were involved in the provision of such services. Since the results from a case study are case specific, I lay no claim that my findings could be generalized beyond the DPE programme. A further limitation was that, due to the short time that was available, I found myself collecting and transcribing data simultaneously in order to keep within the time frame.

3.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the research design, and explained why I chose a case study approach. I also explained the criteria used for sample selection, my data collection methods, and the data analysis and interpretation techniques that I used. I showed examples generated from the Atlas.ti software to demonstrate how the data were analysed and interpreted to facilitate reporting of the findings. I also explained the ethical considerations that ensured the participants' right to privacy.

In the next chapter, I will discuss data analysis and interpretation of the findings.

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

Theme: Distance learners’ motivation for enrolling in the DPE programme			
Meaning unit	Codes	Sub-category	Category
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:

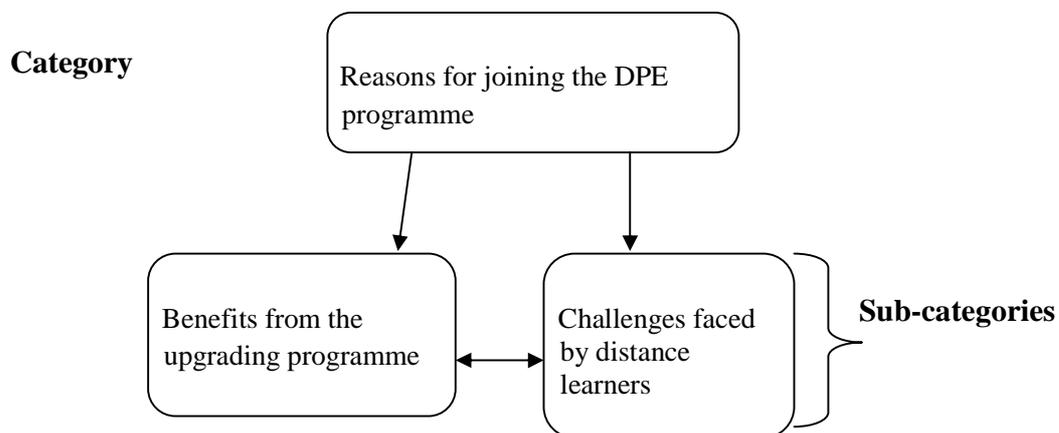
Mary: *I really wanted to take this one (referring to the ODL programme. P11:138 (100:100). ...because of my old age. P11:140 (102:102).*

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).

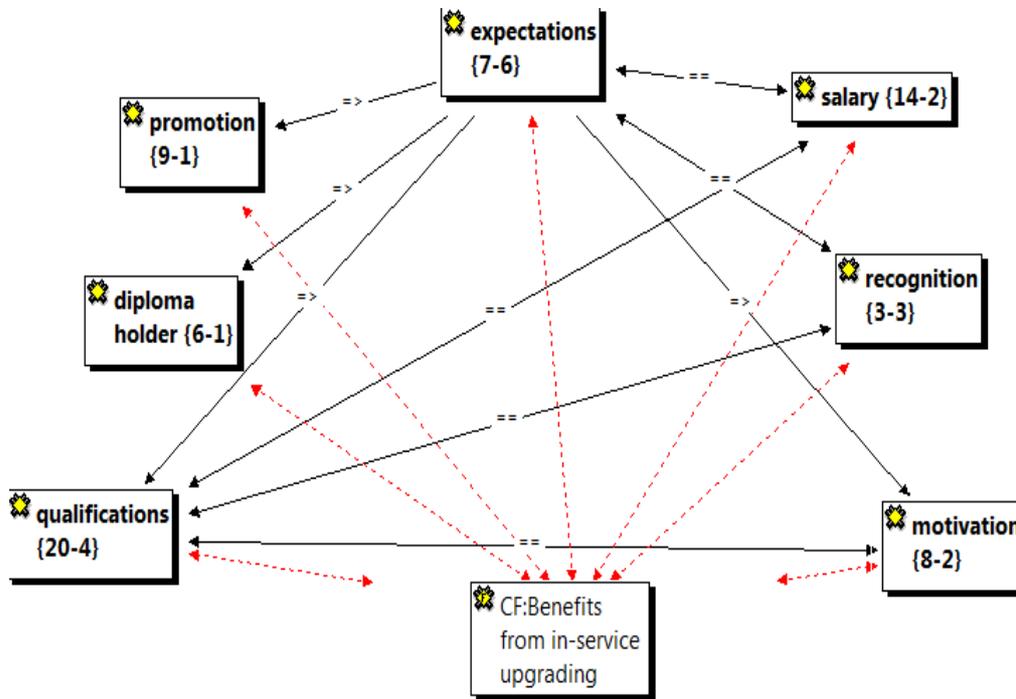
These findings reveal distance learners' fears about ODL delivery mode, which were not explained to them before enrolment. During the period of study, their fears appear to have been made more complicated by the fact they did not receive any information about the programme prior to enrolment. Their motivating 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:

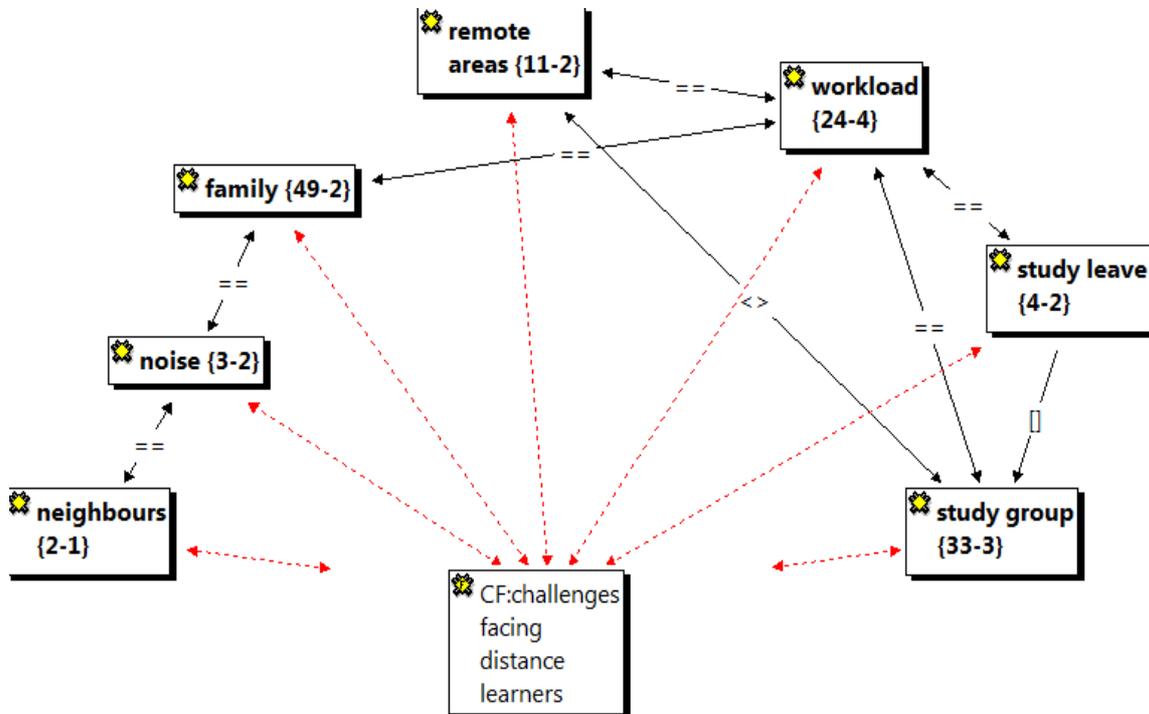
Tebogo: *If they had a choice they would not enrol with distance education because they say... it takes a long time...it's coupled with a lot of things that they are doing at school and they don't have time to pay much attention to it because they are full-time teachers at school. So if they had a choice,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

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



<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>

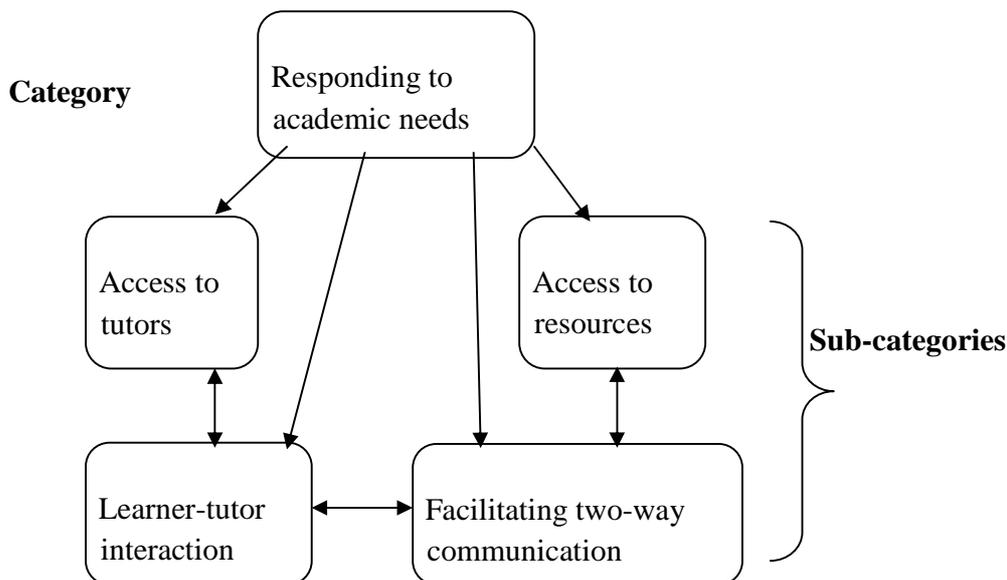


<p>Increased workload due to multiple commitments, caring for family members and their studies</p> <p>Learners received support from family, children, friends, spouses and employers</p> <p>Limited public transport and poor telephone network inhibited peer interaction for learners living and working in 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.

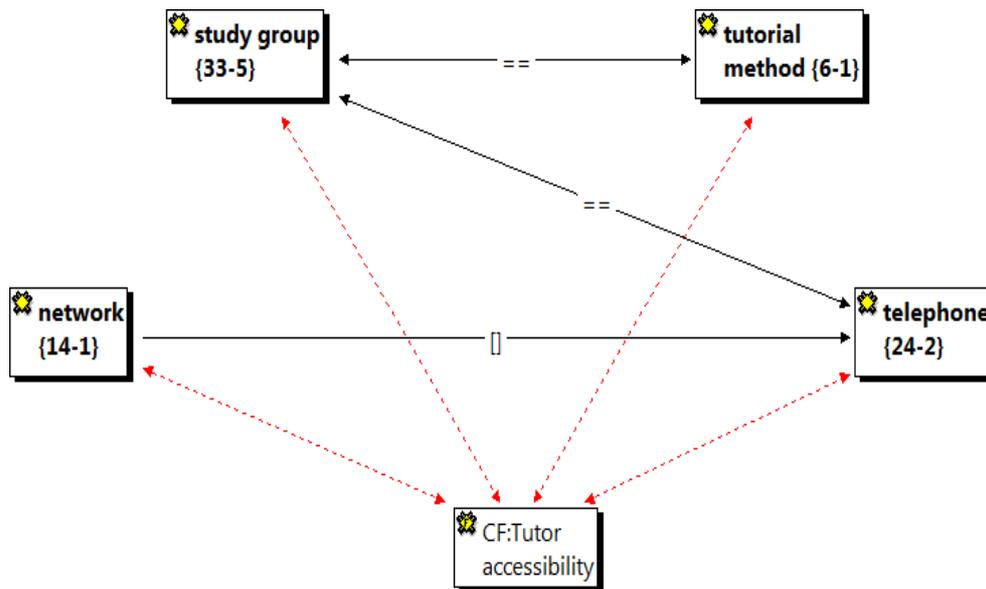
Figure 4.4 Responding to academic needs



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.

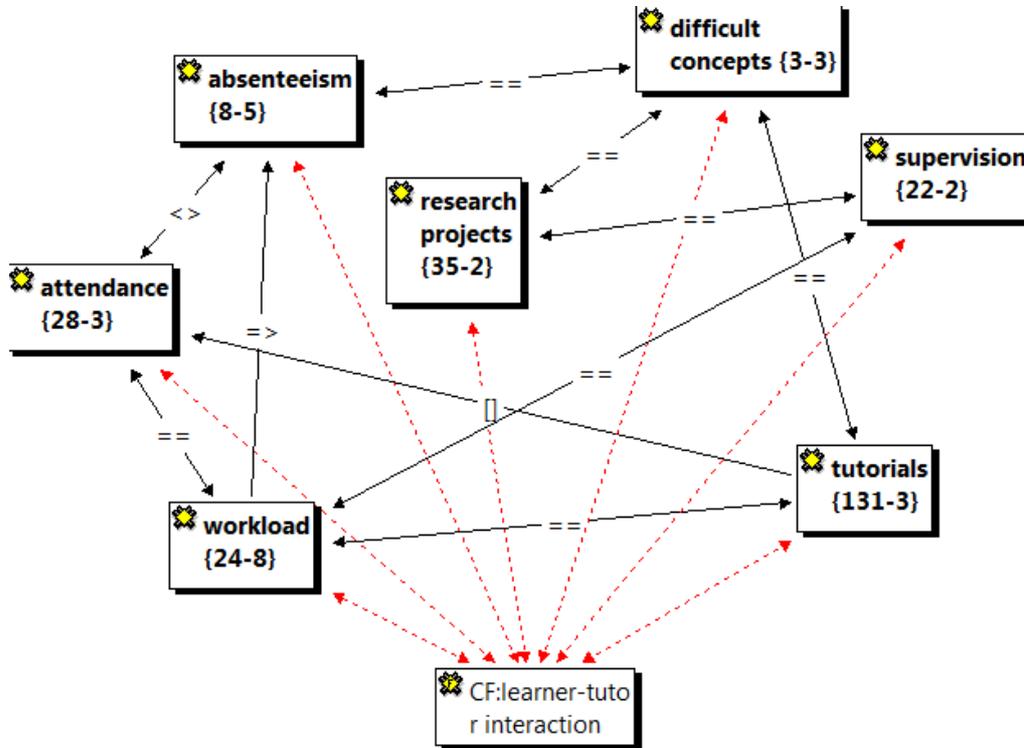
Thato: Students kept in touch with tutors through the telephone numbers in the supervision of research and portfolios. P13:60(205:205).

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.

Figure 4.6: Facilitating learner-tutor interaction



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

Data in this section were analysed to determine whether interaction between learners and tutors creates an opportunity for tutors to clarify content and explain difficult concepts in the learning materials. Commenting on the effectiveness of learner-tutor interaction, one learner remarked:

Thato: Our tutors explained content we did not understand...teachers who taught us would come with their own knowledge of the subject and elaborate difficult concepts... They did not use only the knowledge in the module. P13:89 (193:193).

While the findings suggest that learners benefit from explanation of content by tutors, failure by tutors to attend scheduled tutorials disrupted learner-tutor interaction and prevented two-way communication between learners and the tutors, as reported by one of the learners:

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).*

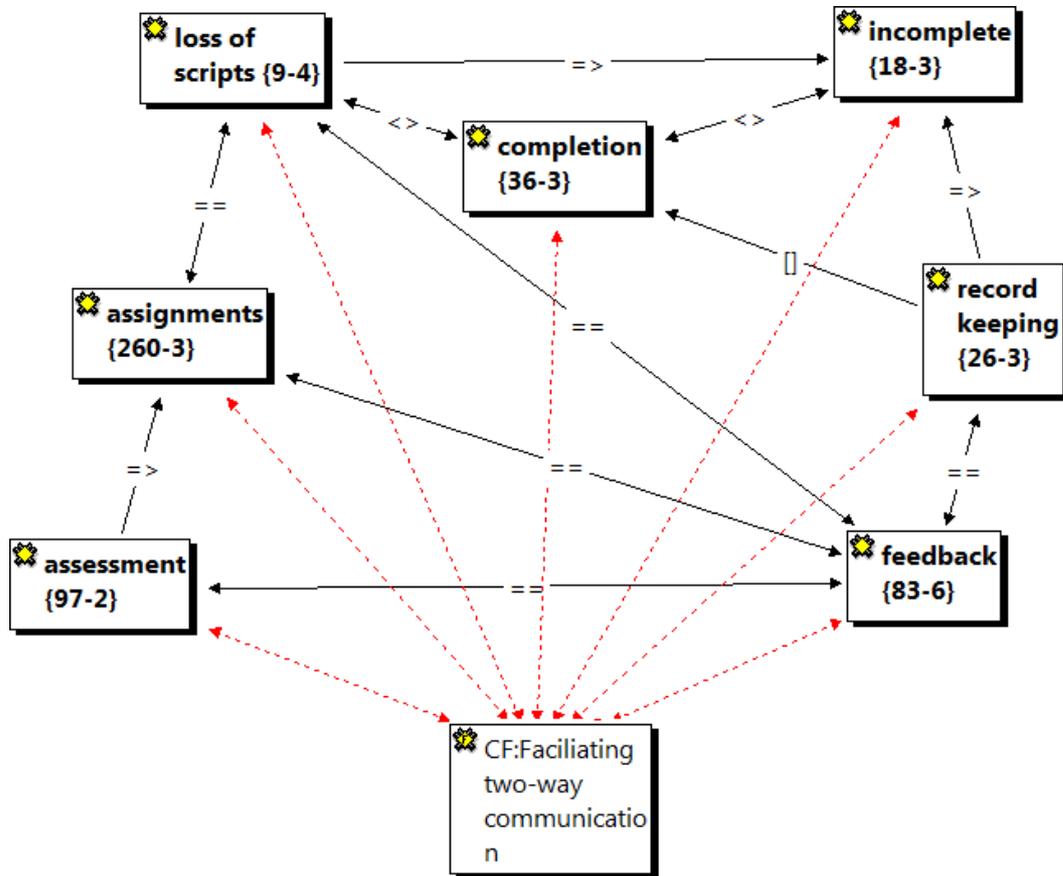
In summary, the findings established that it was necessary to build learner-tutor interaction into the provision of academic support. Tutors could then help learners to interpret content through using the appropriate study skills as explained in Chapter 2 (§2.7.2). Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, 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:

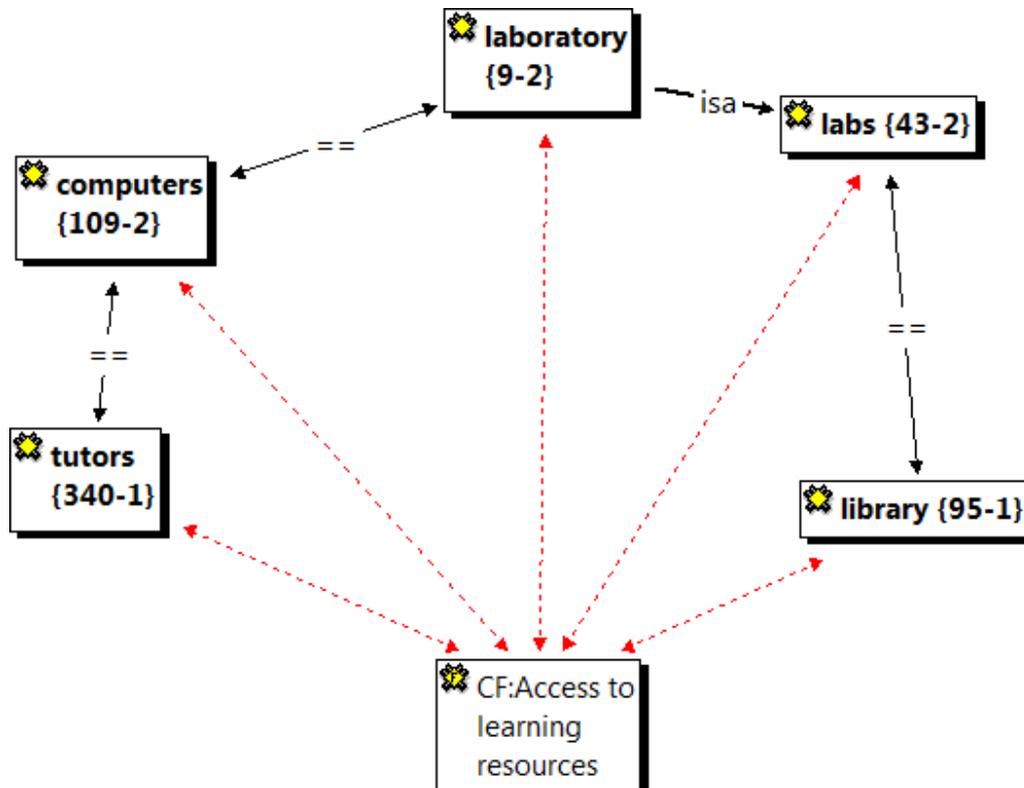
***Tiro:** The orientation was...OK. I even use some of the skills when teaching my conventional students.. how to write instructional materials.... And the way I mark the scripts for distance learners is different from the way I mark for conventional students. P12:37 (123:123).*

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...*

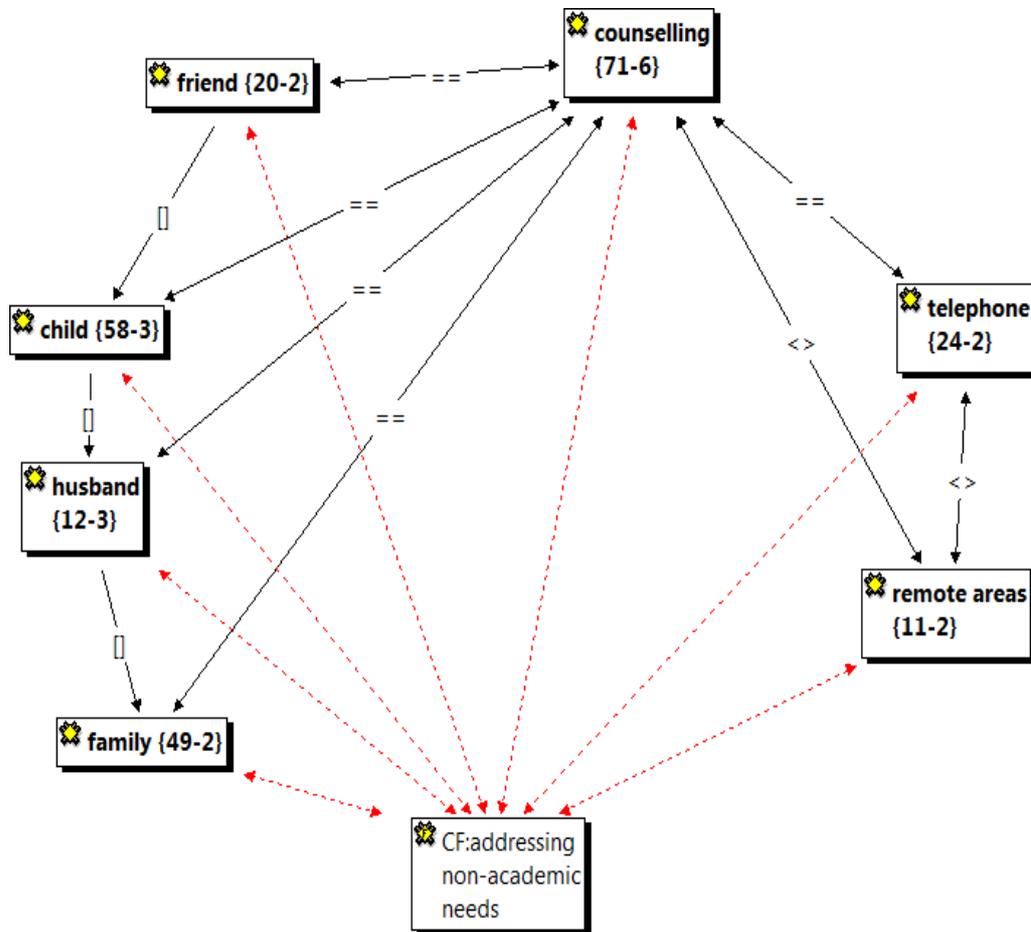
tutor them at a fee... that's how they... help themselves ... Those in...remote areas... don't have access. P3:52 (85:85).

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).

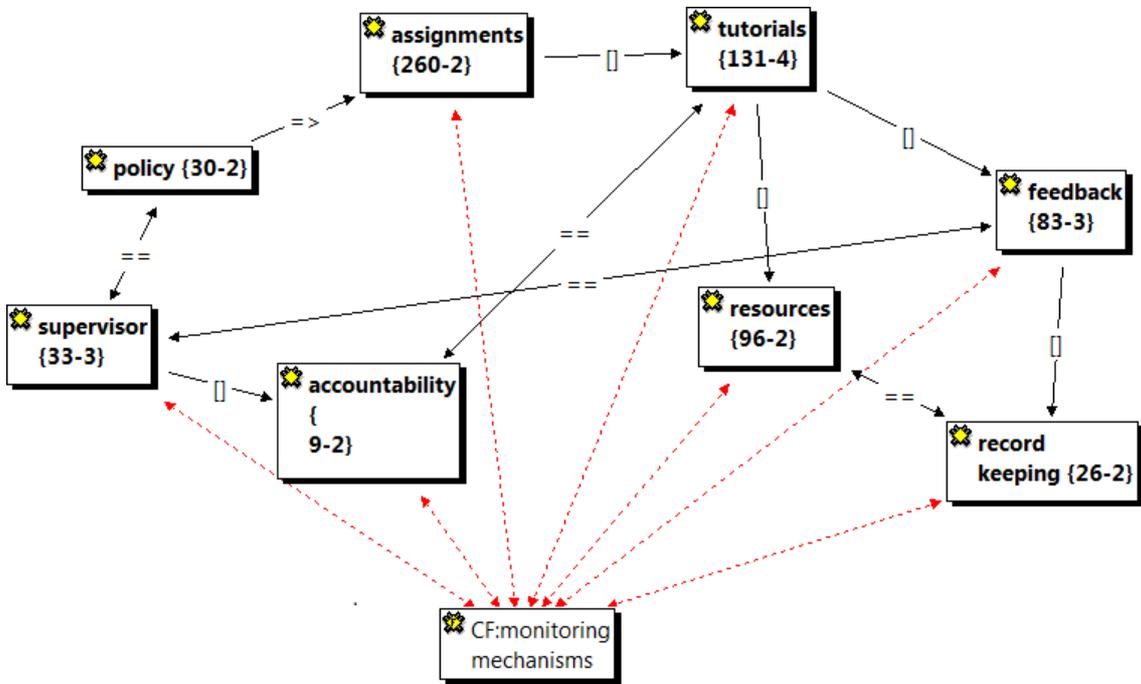
In summary, the findings analysed in the sub-category of non-academic support show that distance learners received emotional support from their families, children and friends, but only limited counselling from the ODL institutions. From this I drew the conclusion that such

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

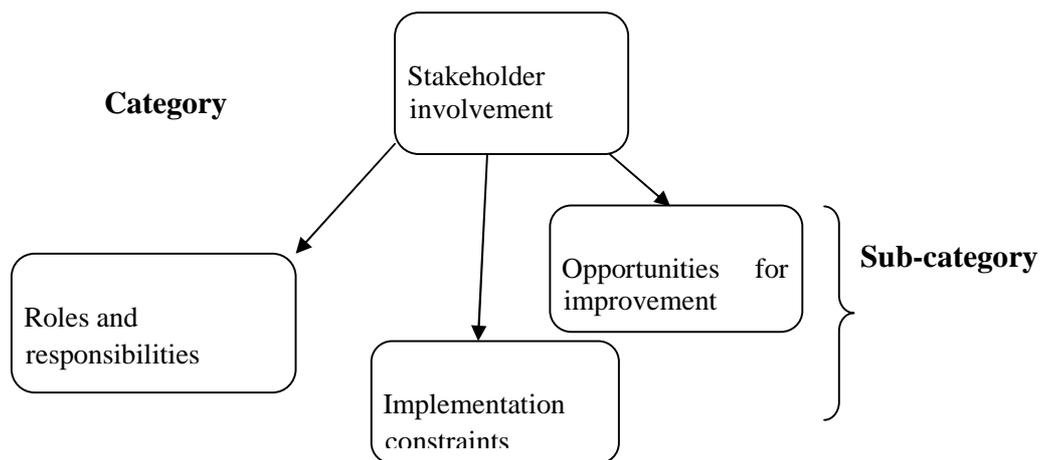
Theme: Stakeholders' participation in the provision of learner support services			
Meaning units	Codes	Sub-categories	Category
<p>Ensuring supervision and monitoring of learner support services in stakeholder institutions.</p> <p>Supervision of learner-tutor and learner-learner contact during tutorial 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

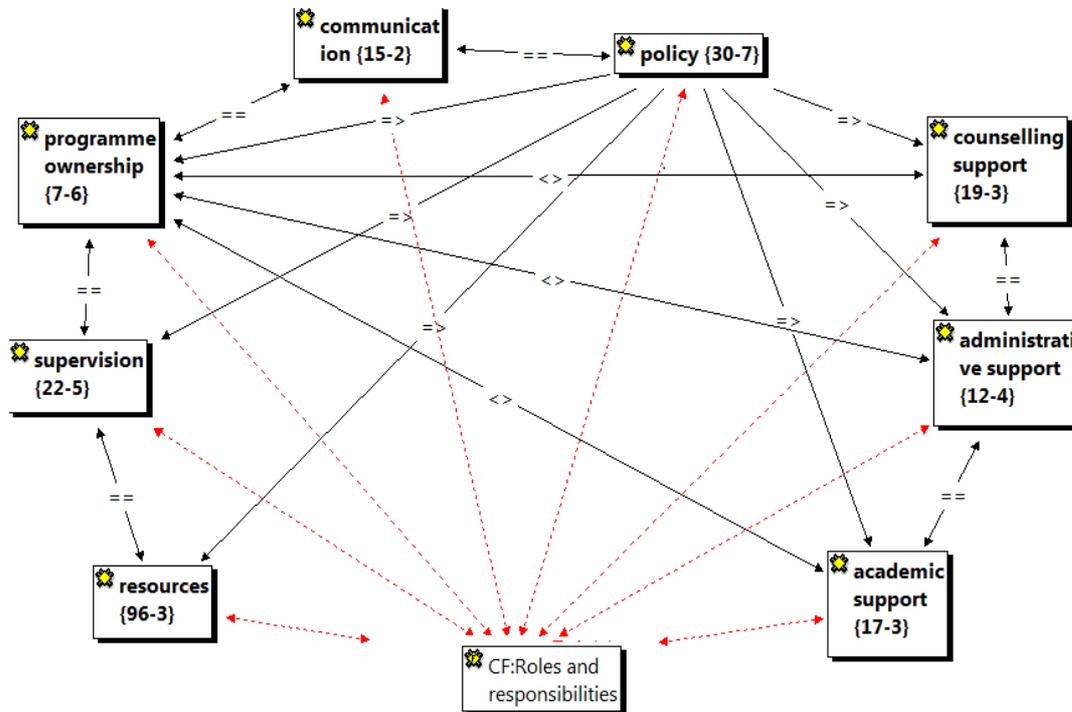
In Chapter 1 (§2.3), it was noted that one of the functions of administrative support is to ensure that there is adequate interaction between learners, tutors and other learners. In this section, data were analysed under the category of stakeholder involvement in the implementation of learner support 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 babysittersthe 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:

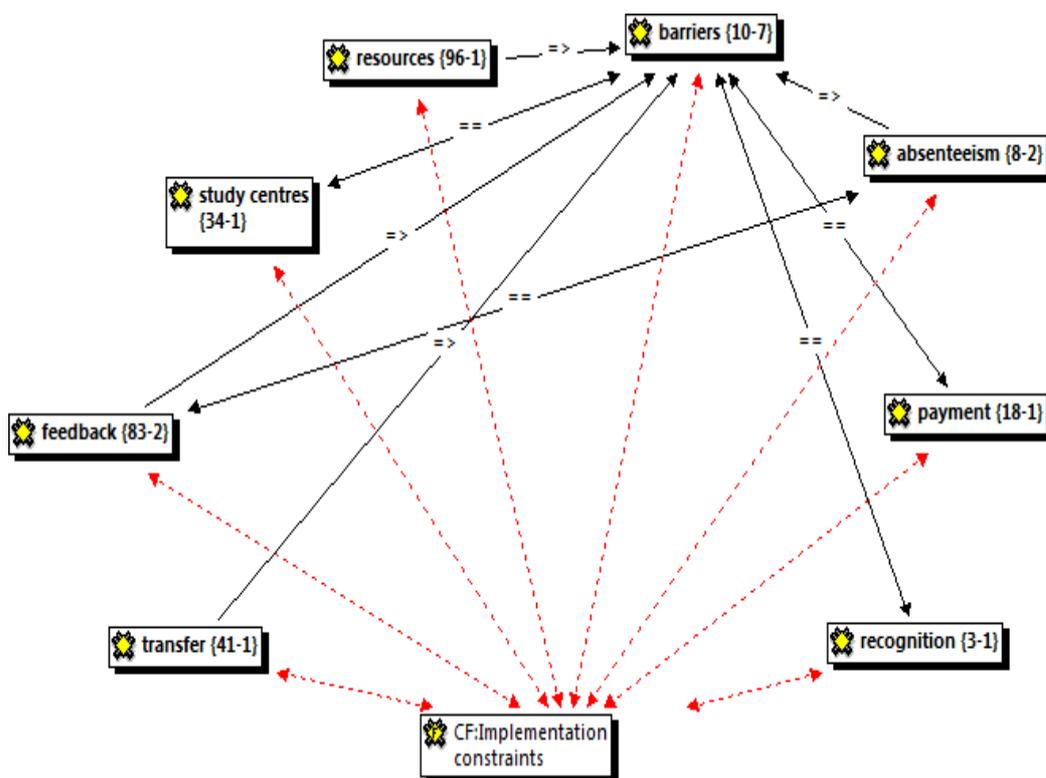
***Faith:** The regulations need to be revised...to allow them not to progress if they have not completed a module...because it helps even in record keeping... you find me opening Module 1, Module 2, Module 3, Module 4, at times in the process you get confused...and...you could enter marks for Module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

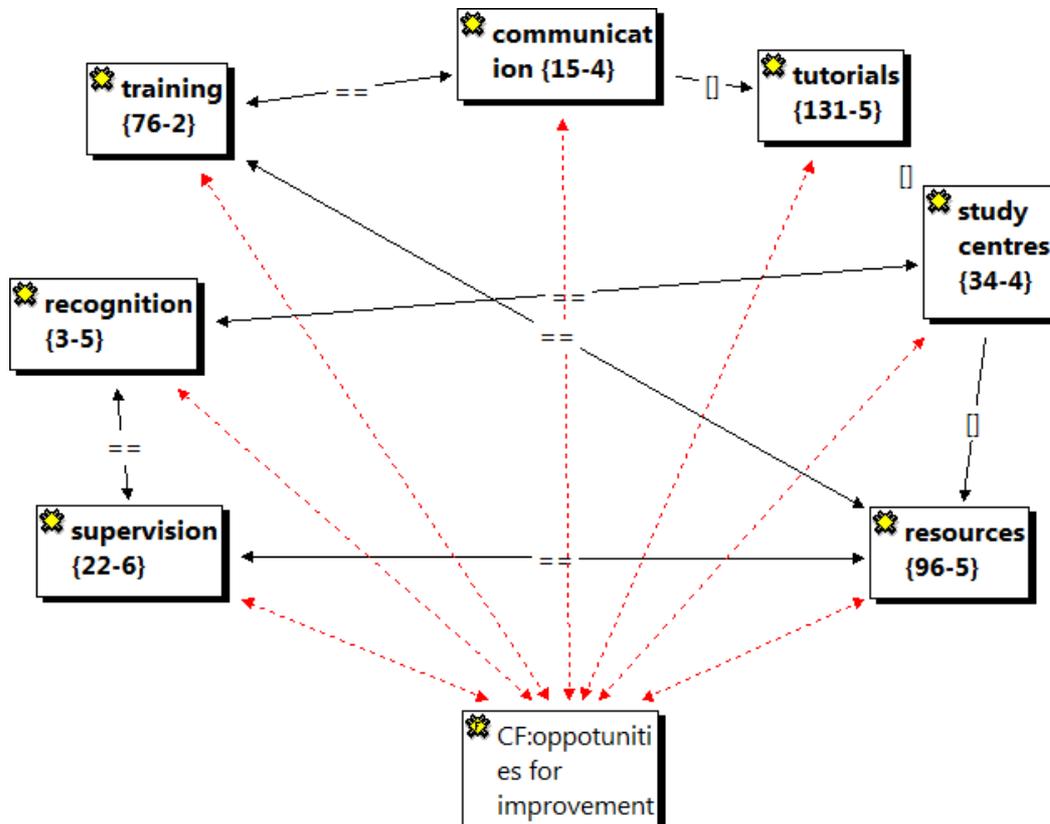
In this sub-category, while payments for part-time activities were viewed as an incentive for institutional staff to participate in the DPE programmes, the payment structures and delays in payments discouraged some of the staff from offering their services. The management and coordination of payments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

Figure 4.14: Opportunities for improvement



Symbol: == is associated with; [] is part of

As indicated in Chapter 1 (§1.2), the main issue that intrigued me and inspired me to carry out this study was to discover why there were low pass-rates and a high incidence of incomplete results, despite the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. This puzzle motivated me to explore the contribution of support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion. In this chapter, one issue appeared repeatedly in the findings, namely the need for sustained interaction between learners and tutors, their peers, and the ODL institution, together with access to learning resources so as to reduce the physical and psychological distance between learners and support providers. In the sub-category about opportunities for improvement, participants suggested helping distance learners to complete their studies by decentralising support services, so as to reach learners near where they lived and worked, as confirmed by one of the tutors:

***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.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This study was motivated by my desire to understand why, despite the provision of learner support services, low pass rates and high rates of incomplete results occurred in the DPE programme. To resolve this academic puzzle, I needed to find out participants' perceptions about the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion. In carrying out this investigation, I dealt with four main concerns which were reflected in the research questions:

1. Although distance learners in the DPE programme received learner support services, the strengths and weaknesses of these services had not been evaluated in order to establish their effectiveness.
2. There appeared to be a knowledge gap regarding the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and completion in the DPE programme.
3. There was a need to understand how the learner support intermediaries (tutors, coordinators, policy makers) perceived and performed their roles and responsibilities in the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme.
4. There appeared to be a lack of information regarding any hurdles or barriers encountered and their effects on the implementation of suggestions for the improvement of learner support services in the DPE programme.

I was intrigued by the issues raised above and convinced that there was a need to investigate their contribution to distance learners' progress and programme completion. In this study, a number of conclusions were drawn from the participants' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme. These views are reflected in the overview of the study and in the discussion of the recommendations in this chapter.

5.2 Overview of the study

The reviewed literature in (Sedisa & Bogopa, 2008; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009 and Wright, 2008) raised pertinent issues about low pass rates and high rates of incompleteness in the 2002/2003 cohort in the DPE programme (see Chapter 1, § 1.2, Table 1.1). These results, as discussed in the background to the study in Chapter 1, occurred in a context where support services were provided to distance learners to help them complete their studies successfully. To understand the problem under investigation, I studied the literature to find out what it said about the definitions and effectiveness of learner support services and their contribution to distance learners' progress and programme completion in the ODL delivery mode. From the literature review (Holmberg, 1995; Simpson, 2002, Robinson 1995; Thorpe, 1994, 2002a, 2002b), it was clear that the main purpose of learner support services in ODL was to assist distance learners to complete their studies successfully.

In this study, the respondents' views and opinions showed that distance learners experienced many learning challenges in the form of academic difficulties due to their previous educational backgrounds, demands of employment, and taking care of their dependants, all of which competed with their time to study. These conclusions, which are supported by the reviewed literature (Dearnley, 2003; Tresman, 2002), indicate that challenges such as heavy workloads made it difficult for distance learners to juggle their part-time studies with their other responsibilities. The findings further showed that the role of learner support services in ODL was to facilitate learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction by bringing learners and tutors together. In this scenario, tutors could help learners to understand difficult course content by defining, explaining, clarifying and exploring the learning materials, both individually and in group tutorials, as well as by giving timely and constructive feedback on assessment work (Melton, 2002; Simpson, 2002). The literature further noted the need for distance learners to meet in organised self-help study groups to reduce loneliness and their isolation from each other. The findings showed that tutor-learner interaction in the form of tutorial support, the provision of relevant study skills and counselling were essential components of distance learners' progress and programme completion. The reviewed literature indicated that this form of assistance had been found to contribute to improvement in the completion of ODL

programmes (Hodgson, 1993; Tresman, 2002; Usun, 2004). There were higher completion rates in institutions where learners received learner support services, compared to the ODL programme, which gave minimal or no learning support (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Dearnley, 2003; Tau, 2006). These views from the literature motivated me to investigate participants' perceptions about the effect of support services on distance learners' progress because, despite the provision of such services, the incompleteness rates appeared to be higher than the completion rates.

My drive to assess stakeholder involvement in support services in the DPE programme was further motivated by Hope (2006), Tait (2003a) and Thorpe (2002a), who assert that the provision of learner support services is institution-based. Academic staff help learners to interpret the course content and seek solutions to personal problems (Holmberg, 1995, 2003; Robinson, 1995; Tait, 2003a). This information was not available in the DPE programme. I sought to understand how academic support and study skills could empower distance learners to study on their own. The assertions from the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.2), that learner support services entail interaction of tutors with a known individual or group of learners (Thorpe, 1994) and that such services are a way of giving distance learners access to institutional resources (Sewart 1993) needed to be understood in the context of the DPE programme.

Some of the challenges discussed in the reviewed literature also emerged from the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.3). These included heavy workloads, lack of appropriate study skills, difficult content, and lack of time management skills in a learning context where distance learners received inadequate support services, all of which were factors contributing to incomplete results in the DPE programme. In this study, I compared participants' perceptions of learner support services in the DPE programme with descriptions of the role of learner support services in the reviewed literature (Botha, 2010; Kurasha, 2003; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009; Risenga, 2010; Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko & Torto, 2009; Siaciweana, 2000), which posit that distance learners benefit from learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction and access to learning resources.

The policy documents reviewed in Chapter 2 (§2.8), such as the 2007 MoU between UB and the MoESD, and the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a) demonstrated that there was no relevant ODL policy to facilitate the implementation of effective learner support services in the DPE programme. The findings suggested a need to formulate specific policies to facilitate the implementation of learner support services in ODL programmes. In this respect, I took cognisance of the seven policy areas given in the literature review by Simonson & Bauck (2003), (see § 2.8) who argue that ODL institutions should formulate and implement ODL policies to facilitate academic, counselling and administrative support in areas such as the maintenance of correct records of distance learners' activities, contracts for part-time staff; policies to regulate workloads for tutors and access to resources, equipment and software. These policies need to be integrated with the vision and mission statements and other management structures at stakeholder institutions.

The participants indicated that there was a policy gap in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme as discussed in Chapter 4 (§4.7.2). The findings suggested that, although academic, counselling and administrative support were provided in the DPE programme, their implementation was poorly managed in the stakeholder institutions. The conclusion that there was poor management and lack of monitoring and supervision structures was confirmed by participants' views on tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, frequent changes of tutors and the loss of scripts submitted for marking. These constraints delayed feedback in assessing distance learners' activities and subsequently, contributed to incomplete results and delays in programme completion as explained in Chapter 4 (§4.2).

These findings suggest apathy from distance learners which is a result of poor learner support management, and a lack of empathy on the part of stakeholders, contrary to the theory of distance education based on empathy by Holmberg (2003) which urges support providers to empathise with distance learners by maintaining contact and interaction through regular communication, and timely and constructive feedback within short turnaround times. Tutor attendance at scheduled tutorials was irregular, poorly supervised and monitored as discussed in Chapter 4 (§4.1). The findings further hint at negligence in record keeping, with the loss of assignments that distance learners had submitted for marking, coupled with poor conversion of

marks. These were some of the factors leading to delays and incomplete results in the DPE programme.

To address the research questions adequately and to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of the support services in the DPE programme, I focused on the views of distance learners and the providers of the support services. As articulated in Chapter 2 (§2.2) by Sewart (1993), Thorpe (1994), and Tait (2003a), stakeholders are the intermediaries between distance learners and the support services. As such, their views would offer useful insights about the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion. The criteria for effective learner support services proposed by Robinson (1995) and Welch & Reed (n.d), (see Chapter 1 (§2.3) were adopted as a guide to the investigation and the analysis and interpretation of the findings, which are presented in Chapter 4. The literature review also enabled me to formulate the research questions which I translated into semi-structured and open-ended questions as a basis for data collection, analysis and presentation of the findings.

In Chapter 3, I presented the research design and methodology used in this study. The research design was guided by discussions with my supervisors and through the seminars I attended at the University of Pretoria between 2007 and 2008. Conducting an investigation on participants in their natural environments is a characteristic of qualitative research as explained in Chapter 3 (§2.3). The participants were purposively selected from stakeholder institutions in the MoESD and UB. They comprised distance learners, tutors, coordinators/managers and policy makers. The assumption was that they were involved in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme and their insights would illuminate the effectiveness of such services.

As argued in Chapter 3 (§3.4), though small, the number of 30 participants was considered adequate for a qualitative/interpretive case study approach, since it was assumed they could offer rich information about the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. The variety of data sources and different data collection methods, such as individual and group interviews, and the review of relevant documents, gave me a basis on which to triangulate data sources and research methods, thus enhancing the trustworthiness, credibility and

dependability of the findings. Data analysis was carried out using content analysis. Data were coded *in vivo* using the Atlas.ti software so as to improve dependability of the findings, as explained in Chapter 3 (3.7). The *in vivo* coding technique was chosen because I wanted to give the sources a voice, by selecting words and short phrases from actual interviews, as advised by Saldana (2009). This coding technique enabled me to extract actual quotations which were used verbatim during data analysis and interpretation, as presented in Chapter 4.

Data analysis in Chapter 4 focused on the research questions about the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme. The distance learners' views and opinions were triangulated with the findings from tutors and other stakeholders. I also analysed the data to assess the stakeholders' perceptions about their roles and responsibilities in the provision of support services, and compared these to the relevant policy documents, such as the 2007 MoU, which outlines the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. The other research question related to the opportunities for and barriers to the implementation of effective support services. From this, I could draw similarities, differences and conclusions about participants' views on the effectiveness of such services in the DPE programme. Although the findings indicated that learner support services were an essential component of distance learners' progress and programme completion, there was evidence from the participants that poor supervision and monitoring of the academic, counselling and administrative support, together with a lack of access to learning resources, were among the barriers which inhibited the provision of effective support services in the DPE programme as presented in Chapter 4 (§4.8).

5.3 Data collection methods and analysis

Since I was dealing with human elements in this case study, I selected interviews and document review as the most appropriate methods of investigating. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they normally combine structured questions with open-ended questions, which gave me the opportunity to probe issues for deeper understanding and clarification during the interview sessions. As explained in Chapter 3 (§3.8), the combination of different data sources (distance learners, tutors, learner support coordinators and policy makers) and

data collection methods allowed me to cross-check and validate data through the triangulation of sources and data collection methods (Patton, 2002). These measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

5.4 Main findings and their implications for distance learners' progress

In this section, I present the main findings for each of the research questions and discuss their implications for effective learner support in the DPE programme. One major theme which emerged was participants' perceptions, views and opinions on the factors contributing to the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services. They highlighted the need to strengthen learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction and make learning resources accessible to distance learners. They offered insights about barriers inhibiting effective provision of learning support and opportunities for improvement. These insights were discussed in detail in Chapter 4 (§4.11) under the themes of *satisfaction, accessibility and responsiveness* and *ODL policy gaps* in the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme. The findings are summarised in the next section.

5.4.1 Contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress

In Chapter 4 (§11.1) the findings confirmed that the main purpose of learner support services was to help distance learners to complete their studies successfully. The participants' answers to the research questions were summarised in terms of their perceptions and opinions on the contribution of learner support services to distance learners' progress and programme completion.

Distance learners said that they were motivated to join the DPE programme to elevate their academic and professional qualifications to the diploma level so that they could teach their subjects with confidence. To succeed in their part-time studies, they expected assistance from their tutors throughout the learning process in the form of feedback on mastery of content. Their views were supported in the reviewed literature (Botha, 2010; Holmberg, 1995; Keegan, 1996; Melton, 2002; Risenga, 2010; Robinson, 1995; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 1988), which emphasise the need for tutors to explain and clarify content so as to enable

learners to cope with their part-time studies. Although there was evidence that those distance learners who interacted with their tutors benefited from learner support services, those whose tutors were absent expressed dissatisfaction because they were denied the opportunity for feedback. Lack of timely and constructive comments on assignments, failure of communication, particularly in relation to the supervision of research projects, and lack of access to learning resources all had a negative impact on distance learners' progress and programme completion as discussed in Chapter 4 (§4.4).

The other research question sought to understand participants' views about the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme. There was consensus among them that one of the strengths of such services was their responsiveness to distance learners' known needs. As explained in section 5.4.2 below, the major weakness of learner support services in the DPE programme was that they were not based on a scientifically established needs assessment of a known individual or group of learners. This contradicts views from the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.2), where Melton (2002), Simpson (2002) and (Thorpe, (1994), assert that learner support services should address the known challenges of distance learners. My findings revealed that distance learners' profiles in terms of their academic strengths and deficiencies and study habits were not known and could therefore not be adequately addressed, which presented a major shortcoming in the provision of learner support services in this programme.

The next research question looked at how the stakeholders perceived their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of learner support services in the DPE programme. Data analysed in Chapter 4 (§4.7& 4.8) showed that the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders were not clear, despite the existence of the 2007 MoU between UB and the MoESD. This claim is supported by what appears from the findings to be a prevailing lack of commitment and accountability by tutors in giving tutorial support, demonstrated through frequent tutor absenteeism, lack of feedback and loss of assignments. The claim by institutional policy makers that they had no mechanism to persuade staff to participate in or even discipline those who absconded from conducting scheduled tutorials highlighted weaknesses in the management structures of the stakeholder institutions. Stakeholder

involvement was further weakened by the lack of relevant ODL policies, institutional guidelines or structures which could facilitate the implementation of efficient learner support services and ensure students' access to the required resources, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 (§11.3).

To strengthen the monitoring and supervision of support services, policy makers could take advice from the reviewed literature (Haughey, 2003; Simonson & Bauck, 2003; Snowball & Sayish, 2007; Wolcott, 2003) which stresses the need to re-engineer institutional operations, changing the mindsets of staff and entering into contractual agreements with tutors so as to determine their commitment to the learner support services. Deficiencies in such provision were further demonstrated by the claims that stakeholders initiated learner support services with no induction or training in ODL skills to prepare them for their new roles, which weakened their ability as managers and supervisors.

The fourth and last research question sought participants' views on both the barriers to the implementation of effective learner support services and opportunities for improvement in the DPE programme. My findings showed that the major barrier was lack of ownership and recognition of the DPE programme as part of the core business of stakeholder institutions. This could explain why participation in the programme was treated as voluntary and therefore optional. This view was further reinforced by the fact that tutors could abscond from scheduled tutorials, misplace assignments and make wrong conversions of marks but no action could be taken against them. A further barrier was the lack of any organised interaction in between the residential sessions, which delayed the supervision of research projects and set back completion dates for the affected learners. The findings recommended the implementation of decentralised learner support services close to where learners live and work.

In conclusion, the findings show a need to implement flexible learner support services that are accessible to distance learners, irrespective of their geographical location. Such services should address known learner needs; which was not the case in the DPE programme.

5.4.2 Perceptions about meeting learner needs

The study established that distance learners' characteristics, such as their educational backgrounds, learning styles and skills, and geographical locations, were not addressed. This explains why the participants regarded the learner support services as ineffective. These views were supported in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.6) where Robinson (1995) and Melton (2002) urge ODL institutions to identify distance learners' characteristics, as a prerequisite for the development and implementation of appropriate and relevant learner support services which are responsive to the needs of distance learners. In this regard Simonson et al. (2006) stress the need for ODL providers to be informed about learners' demographic factors, their motivations to enrol on a programme of study, and their plans as to how learning resources could be accessed.

The findings showed that knowing distance learners' characteristics would have enabled support providers to assess their learning styles and their study skills, exposing any learning deficiencies and suggesting how these could be addressed through effective support services (Munger, 1995). My findings indicated that the lack of information on learner needs disguised PTC holders' readiness for the DPE programme, which, as noted in the literature review (Republic of Botswana, 1993), was designed for candidates with a minimum of O-Level qualifications, while the majority of PTC holders had JC-level education and two-year PTC training (Republic of Botswana, 1993). My evidence, supported by the review of literature (Mayor & Swann, 2002), indicated that distance learners' difficulties with content in subjects such as maths and science, including problems with the language used in the learning materials, could be attributed to their previous educational backgrounds, a problem which appears not to have been identified at the time the DPE programme was launched. This in itself was a major weakness in the learner support services in the DPE programme. Lezberg (2003), advises ODL institutions to ascertain that distance learners are qualified for the academic programmes in which they are enrolled so that they can cope with the course content. Participants indicated a further reason why distance learners found the content of subjects such as maths, science, music and home economics difficult in the inappropriateness of the language used in the learning materials (Mayor & Swann, 2002), since for most of the

time they teach in Setswana or other mother tongues. Lack of information about distance learners' geographical distribution resulted in lack of decentralised learner support services in the DPE programme. Robinson (1995) and Simpson (2002) emphasise that to be of benefit to distance learners, support services should be located as close as possible to where distance learners live and work.

Although the main purpose of the DPE programme was to upgrade PTC holders' qualifications, raising their standard of education from the primary to the tertiary level (Republic of Botswana, 1994), my findings showed that learners' reasons for enrolling in the DPE programme were both intrinsic and extrinsic. Apart from helping them to secure further qualifications, with the chance of gaining promotion or a raise in salary, they valued the new knowledge and skills they acquired from the DPE programme, which made them more confident when teaching, organising school meetings or providing leadership at their places of work. These reasons, which were discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 (§4.2) under the sub-category of benefits from the upgrading programme, emerged as some of the factors which motivated distance learners to persist in the DPE programme. These views were supported in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 by Kember (1989), Bird & Morgan (2003), and Granger & Benke (1998) who stress the need for learner support providers to consider distance learners' learning goals and expectations because these are some of the factors that contribute to the creation of relevant and effective learner support services.

The findings also indicated that, although distance learners appreciated the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications without leaving their jobs and their families, they did not have adequate information about the DPE programme before enrolment, contrary to views discussed in reviewed literature where Carrey (2003) indicates that information about the ODL programmes plays an important role in distance learners' progress. This was a major weakness in the provision of support services in the DPE programme because it created anxiety and fears about whether they could succeed through the distance mode. For these reasons, it was clear that potential distance learners needed information about the ODL delivery mode at the pre-enrolment stage, so that they were aware of what they could expect when they enrolled in an ODL programme.

Despite the stated benefits of the DPE programme, distance learners encountered challenges, such as the lack of a quiet place to study at home and shortage of time because of workload constraints. The findings showed that learners who lived in remote rural areas were more isolated from their tutors and other learners because of a lack of public transport and poor telephone networks. The dearth of library facilities and lack of electricity were other factors that contributed to incomplete results. Learners living in remote rural areas found it difficult to secure reference materials for their assignments and often could not read at night due to lack of electricity, as discussed in Chapter 4 (§4.3). These findings have a correlation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 (Kurasha, 2003; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009; Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko & Torto, 2009) when they state that family responsibilities, lack of access to resources such as libraries, and living in remote areas with no public transport and no electricity were found to hinder distance learners' progress and delayed completion dates. Thus both the findings and the reviewed literature concurred on the need to devolve learner support services to study centres close to where distance learners live and work.

5.4.3 Perceptions about the effectiveness of academic support

The findings showed that learners benefited from having access to and interacting with tutors, especially during tutorial sessions. In these, tutors could explain content through group discussions, which was one of the strengths of academic support in the DPE programme. Participants revealed that distance learners applied the study skills that they acquired during tutorial sessions to organising and discussing content, both in self-help study groups and individually, when doing assignments. These views are supported in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.7), where Simpson (2002) and Robinson & Latchem (2003) contend that academic support in the form of tutorials promotes two-way communication through feedback on assignments so that learners can take responsibility for their own studies and develop towards independence and autonomy (Holmberg, 1995, 2003 Moore, 1994).

Although tutorial support emerged as beneficial to distance learners, tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, loss of assignments, lack of feedback on assignments, and frequent changes of tutors tended to disrupt the sequence and logical flow of discussion of content.

Tutor absenteeism suggests poor supervision and monitoring of tutorial support, creating apathy and demonstrating a lack of empathy for distance learners. To ensure tutor commitment and accountability, contractual agreements between tutors and stakeholder institutions were called for, as advised in the reviewed literature (Wolcott, 2003) in Chapter 2 (§2.8).

The findings further indicated that distance learners perceived tutorial sessions in which tutors read modules in class as not being effective. Such techniques were regarded as a waste of time because they did not engage students in discussion of content. Instead, they were discouraged from attending such tutorial sessions, forcing many of them to read on their own. Robinson (1995) maintains that one of the major roles of a tutor is to facilitate group discussions. The need for such participatory tutorial techniques is echoed in the UNISA Tutor Handbook (UNISA, 2007c), which encourages tutors to use interactive methods such as group discussions, demonstrations and case studies, encouraging learners to participate actively in the learning experience. These observations suggest a need to orientate tutors in ODL skills and in the monitoring and supervision of tutorial sessions to ensure that they apply appropriate tutorial techniques.

The findings further revealed participants' dissatisfaction with the lack of organised contact with tutors in between the residential sessions, lack of appropriate research skills and lack of time, all of which emerged as factors that contributed to incomplete results. The reviewed literature (Sedisa & Bogopa, 2008; Sikwibele & Mungoo, 2009; Wright, 2008) indicated that lack of assistance to help distance learners acquire research skills so that they could complete their research projects was one of the factors contributing to incomplete results in the DPE programme. The respondents said that some of the supervisors of research projects did not offer adequate support because of what the participants saw as the tutors' own lack of adequate research skills. Moreover, the claim that some of the tutors did not appear to be especially knowledgeable in computer skills, further suggests that the screening of their qualifications to ascertain their competency might not have been thoroughly carried out.

This evidence suggests a failure by learner support providers to scrutinise carefully the qualifications of tutors in order to align tutorial support with tutor qualifications, which emerged as one of the weaknesses in the provision of effective learner support services. The reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (Lessing & Schulze, 2003) posits that poor knowledge and guidance skills on the part of lecturers, inefficient systems for allocating students to supervisors, and poor quality of feedback are some of the factors that contribute to distance learners' failures in ODL programmes. The findings of this study clearly indicated a need for learner support providers to intensify the supervision of research projects by identifying qualified staff to help distance learners with such projects in between residential sessions. Participants thought that such supervision might be improved by employing retired but qualified officers who lived near distance learners. A further suggestion was to arrange for tutors to be released occasionally to meet with learners at specified study centres, such as the education centres, where again they could help learners with their research projects.

The next factor that was discussed was facilitation of two-way communication by providing feedback in assessment work. The findings indicated that distance learners found timely feedback and constructive comments on assignments useful because they helped them to avoid making similar mistakes in the next set of assignments. In the reviewed literature, Robinson (1995), Melton (2002) and Simpson (2002) stressed the need for distance learners to receive timely and constructive feedback to enable them to measure their own progress. In the DPE programme, there appeared to be a lack of coordination in the provision of feedback on assignments, with some distance learners receiving feedback while others did not.

The difference in service delivery seems to point to a lack of the monitoring processes and procedures needed to ensure that all learners received their marked assignments and feedback from their tutors. Moreover, even when the scripts were marked, there were no comments to explain the marking process. There were also cases of misplaced or lost scripts, resulting in the affected learners having to rewrite assignments they had already submitted for marking. This clearly suggests negligence, lack of supervision and poor record-keeping in the administration of assignments. Again, a lack of empathy by the stakeholders in the provision

of learner support services was revealed. The next factor to be discussed dealt with participants' perceptions about access to counselling support.

5.4.4 Perceptions about the effectiveness of counselling support

The findings analysed in the category of responding to non-academic needs (see Chapter 4, § 4.7), dealt with participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of non-academic support in responding to the personal needs of distance learners in the DPE programme. In this study, the evidence showed that distance learners encountered various challenges while trying to cope with their studies and attributed incomplete results to social problems such as taking care of elderly parents and working and living in remote areas. They also complained of lack of time-management skills, lack of contact with tutors and other learners, and lack of access to resources, such as libraries, all of which required the attention of learner support providers. Counselling support could also have helped with the lack of a quiet place to study, workload constraints due to demands from family and employers, and personal social problems. These views are echoed in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2 (§2.7) (Ashby, 2004; Lephoto & Mohasi, 2009; Simpson, 2002; Tresman, 2002) who assert that distance learners study alone most of the time in isolated environments and need counselling support to help them to solve both academic and personal problems which they encounter during their studies.

The findings however, showed that distance learners were given only limited access to counselling support services in the stakeholder institutions, suggesting that the stakeholders had not developed guidelines for the provision of such support. This was a further weakness in the learner support services in the DPE programme. The literature (Wolcott, 2003) stresses the need for institutional commitment, positive and supportive leadership to encourage staff to participate in ODL activities, and clear rewards for those who do participate. Such commitment by institutional staff to give counselling support to distance learners was found to be lacking.

Despite this weakness, the data showed that distance learners received emotional and academic support from family members, their spouses, their children, friends, employers and peers. This support tended to motivate them to continue with their studies (Bird & Morgan,

2003; Dearnley, 2003; Simpson, 2002). There was, however, a difference between the views of distance learners and those of the stakeholders. The latter claimed that distance learners complained of lack of support from their supervisors, particularly when it came to getting the ten days' study leave to read for their tests and examinations. This difference in opinion among the participants could be a topic for future research to establish the nature of support that distance learners receive from their employers in the course of their studies. To improve counselling support throughout the duration of study, stakeholders need to integrate such services as a core business of their institutions. This could be done by devolving their provision to study centres, such as the education centres, for ease of access by distance learners.

5.4.5 Perceptions about access to learning resources

My findings showed that in general distance learners did not have access to learning resources since such access depended on individual tutors, although the policy makers appeared to believe that learning resources were available and accessible to distance learners. These differences of opinion suggest that there were no guidelines to ensure that distance learners had access to learning resources; a further weakness in the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme. The reviewed literature (Sewart, 1993) asserts that learner support services are a means by which distance learners are enabled to make use of institutional resources, and that such services should include access to libraries, laboratories and the equipment necessary for practical work (Robinson, 1995).

It also emerged that access to library facilities differed between the two institutions in this study. While the Tlokweng College of Education allowed distance learners to use the library during weekdays and weekends from 8.00 am to 10.00 p.m in the evening, distance learners at the MCE had only limited access to the library since it was open only during office hours, which in Botswana are from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m from Monday to Friday. This lack of flexibility in the library opening hours at the MCE denied distance learners access to a vital learning resource. The conclusion is that guidelines are needed to facilitate access to resources for use by distance learners in stakeholder institutions. Moreover, such learners also had only

limited access to computer laboratories and science laboratories, further reducing their chances of acquiring practical skills, including computer literacy skills.

In some of the stakeholder institutions, such as the Tlokweng College of Education, lack of access to computers was mainly due to the limited number of computers available. Similarly, the lack of computers in the schools where many distance learners taught meant that their access to computers was limited to residential sessions only. Reviewed literature (Bates, 1992; Perraton & Lentell, 2004; Simonson, 2003) advise ODL institutions to ensure the availability and accessibility of learning resources, while Boitshwarelo (2009; Edwards et al. (2002), Nleya, (2009) and Richardson (2009) assert that ODL institutions should ensure that personnel who provide training in computer literacy are themselves trained in the use of ICTs and have the appropriate knowledge and skills to deliver such a course. These data suggest that no plans were put in place to ensure availability and access to learning resources at the time when the learner support services were conceptualised.

5.4.6 Perceptions about monitoring and supervision

To understand participants' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of learner support services in the DPE programme, it was necessary to include the views and opinions of the stakeholders on their involvement in managing, monitoring and supervising learner support activities. As intermediaries, they were responsible for implementing such services and therefore in a position to offer useful insights into their effectiveness. The role of the stakeholders was to monitor and supervise learner support implementation to ensure that they were accessible to distance learners. The need to monitor and supervise these services was outlined in the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD, and also stressed in the reviewed literature (Bernath et al., 2003; Curry, 2003; Simonson et al., 2006; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 1988), all which assert that stakeholders should develop and implement management structures to facilitate effective tutorial support, timely and constructive feedback, and the availability and accessibility to learning resources.

Participants' views about the supervision of academic support revealed differences of opinion over the execution of stakeholder roles and responsibilities as discussed in Chapter 4 (§4.7).

For example, managers at Tlokweng College of Primary Education appeared to be more involved in managing and monitoring learner support, as compared to management at MCE. To the participants, there was more recognition and ownership of the DPE programme at Tlokweng College of Primary Education than appeared to be the case at MCE. Tutors at the Tlokweng College appeared to be more supported by college management than was the case at MCE. Furthermore, Tlokweng College appeared to track distance learners' progress, whereas there was no such follow-up at MCE. The management at MCE did not appear to participate in the administration of tutorial and assessment functions in the DPE programme, suggesting a lack of recognition and ownership of this programme at MCE, compared to Tlokweng College. Respondents claimed that MCE perceived its role as that of babysitting a programme which belonged to the primary colleges of education. From these comments, one can conclude that there was lack of management structures or coordinated effort to ensure that the DPE learner support activities were executed in the same manner across all the stakeholder institutions.

Although review of documents such as the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD indicated that stakeholders were supposed to manage and supervise learner support activities in their institutions, the findings showed a lack of management and monitoring structures, particularly for ensuring that part-time staff, such as tutors, attended scheduled tutorials and gave timely and constructive feedback. Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, the seemingly poorly coordinated supervision of research projects, the loss of assignment scripts and the apparent poor record-keeping, which delayed feedback to distance learners and contributed to incomplete results and delays in programme completion, suggested a failure to monitor and supervise support activities in the stakeholder institutions. Further, distance learners were denied access to vital services such as counselling support in these institutions because participation in the DPE activities by institutional staff was considered to be optional.

Voluntary participation in the provision of learner support services suggests a policy gap where there should have been a regulated participation of institutional staff in the DPE programme activities. My findings also showed that the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a) did not facilitate the provision of learner support services in

the DPE programme, although Item 9.8 of that policy expressed the university's intention to give efficient administrative, academic and infrastructural support for ODL programmes such as the DPE programme.

The reviewed literature (Haughey, 2003; Wolcott, 2003) advises institutional managers to ensure that ODL activities are integrated into the core business of stakeholder institutions, but this was not the case with learner support in the DPE programme. This confirms participants' perceptions that these services were viewed by the stakeholders as peripheral and not part of their core business. To integrate ODL activities with those of the supporting institution, Moore & Kearsley (1996) urges institutional managers to develop guidelines which could facilitate the inclusion of learner support services as part of the system, from admission, registration and orientation, tutorial delivery and assessment, through to the graduation stage.

The findings also indicated that in some of the institutions, access to learning resources such as computers to facilitate practical work was not well coordinated despite the existence of the 2007 MoU between UB and the MoESD. In the literature, Perraton & Lentell (2004) advise stakeholders to understand, own and execute their roles and responsibilities effectively by committing their resources to ODL activities for the benefit of distance learners. This advice did not appear to be applied in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. Another relevant factor was the contribution of incentives or monetary payments to part-time staff for providing support services in the DPE programme. Although payments were intended to reward part-time staff for their services, I found that the payment criteria (University of Botswana, 2002) inhibited members of staff in some of the departments, such as the counselling department, from offering counselling support because such services were not covered in the payment criteria. While payment was seen as an incentive, those who were not sure if they would be paid declined to volunteer their services. Such ambiguity would not have arisen in an holistic system, in which those involved in support services would all be either rewarded in monetary terms or not paid at all.

Several conclusions could be drawn from these findings. Although academic, counselling and administrative support were offered on the DPE programme, they failed to adequately address

the needs of distance learners which appear not to have been known, showing that learner support services in the DPE programme were not pegged to identified learner profiles and needs. Participants suggested decentralising these services to specified study centres to resolve the lack of access to learning resources and complaints about difficult content.

Another conclusion from the findings is related to institutional commitment to providing learner support services in the DPE programme. It appeared that policy makers in stakeholder institutions were not adequately informed about their new roles and responsibilities in the support services, which would have helped them to make the necessary adjustments to the change of institutional culture and practices. This was reflected in the respondents' claim that participation in the DPE programme by institutional staff was voluntary, which indicated a lack of recognition and ownership of the programme in stakeholder institutions. Although the 2007 MoU was in existence, it appeared to bind no one in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. To ensure participation by staff, the reviewed literature (Perraton & Lentell, 2004) indicates that learner support providers need to ensure that the stakeholders understand, own and effectively execute their roles and responsibilities for the benefit of distance learners, which did not appear to be the case in the DPE programme.

5.5 Implementation barriers

The other area investigated in this study, which is also reflected in the research questions, was the barriers or hurdles encountered in the implementation of learner support services. Although distance learners received academic support in the form of tutorials, participants said that the learners still found content difficult. This could have been a legacy of their previous academic backgrounds, a factor which, judging from the reviewed literature (Munger, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Thorpe, 1994) appears not to have been considered before the DPE programme was launched. Lack of knowledge of distance learners was one of the barriers to the provision of effective support services, since these services were not aligned with the learners' established and known needs. They had difficulties expressing themselves in their assignments and problems in carrying out their research projects, suggesting that the shortcomings in their academic backgrounds were not known at the enrolment stage.

The participants held that support providers should establish learner profiles to identify their strengths and learning deficiencies, and implement support services which address known learner needs. They could remedy the situation with bridging courses, bringing learners to the level of the anticipated new knowledge and skills through the development and implementation of prerequisite courses. The absence of a needs analysis before enrolment meant that there was a lack of information which could have facilitated credit transfers (Robinson, 1995, Welch & Reed, n.d) for content areas that were covered in the PTC curriculum and as result, reduced repetition, overlap and content overload. By considering learner profiles and needs, this strategy could have reduced the programme duration. This was not done in the case of the DPE programme.

The other barrier which hindered the provision of efficient academic support was the apparent lack of supervision and monitoring mechanisms. The findings showed that the failure of supervision contributed to tutor absenteeism, resulting in frequent changes of tutors. The effect this lack of a logical sequence of tutorial support could have had on distance learners' progress was not considered. In the reviewed literature, (Edwards et al., 2002; Robinson 1995; Welch & Reed, n.d) stress the need for proper planning to ensure a sufficient number of tutors to facilitate learner-tutor contact. As reflected in the findings, lack of contractual agreements between the tutors and the stakeholder institutions inhibited commitment and accountability of tutors to executing their roles and responsibilities effectively, since they considered the DPE programme as extra work for which staff could volunteer or not as the case may be. This barrier was attributed to lack of clear guidelines regulating participation by institutional staff. The respondents felt that the stakeholders were not given adequate orientation and training in the ODL skills which would have helped them to empathise with distance learners and to prepare them for their new roles in providing learner support services in the DPE programme. These views are backed up in the literature by Wolcott (2002) and Simonson (2002), when they argue that ODL institutions require policy guidelines to regulate participation of staff in ODL activities.

A further barrier was lack of policy guidelines for decentralising support at designated study centres. Other studies (Komba, 2004; Kurasha, 2003; Mmari, 1998; Tau, 2006) maintain that

decentralised support services increase enrolment and improve retention and completion rates in ODL programmes. My findings showed that policy documents such as the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD, and the Distance Education Mainstreaming Policy (University of Botswana, 2005a) were not considered to be relevant, since they did not commit anyone to the introduction of learner support services in the DPE programme. The absence of clear institutional policy frameworks to implement decentralised support services meant that distance learners' contact with tutors and access to learning resources were limited.

Furthermore, the payment criteria (University of Botswana, 2002), which were expected to be an incentive for part-time staff to render their services in the DPE programme, instead discouraged some members from participating. Delayed payments for part-time services also deterred some staff from volunteering their services. The respondents agreed on the need for policy makers to review payment strategies so that part-time staff would all be paid or otherwise compensated for their services. It is clear that there is a need for institutional policies and guidelines to coordinate learner support services at stakeholder institutions.

In conclusion, the data from this study showed that one of the major barriers to the provision of effective learner support services was the lack of ownership and recognition of the DPE programme as part of the core business of the stakeholder institutions. This in turn was related to the lack of a relevant management structure. Some of the participants claimed that a number of the institutions, such as the secondary colleges of education, saw their role as babysitters of someone else's baby, while others pointed out that policies such as the 2007 MoU, which were expected to clarify the roles and responsibilities of stakeholder institutions in fact did not commit anyone to the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme.

5.6 Significance of the study

This study has significant implications for the provision of effective learner support services in the DPE programme. Participants confirmed that learner support services were a vital component of the DPE programme and not an add-on. Since distance learners study on their own most of the time, they need contact and interaction with tutors and the ODL institution, for

explanation and clarification of content, to receive feedback on their assignments, and to acquire study skills enabling them to measure their own progress and to study on their own.

The study further demonstrated distance learners' desire to interact with each other, both individually and in organised self-help study groups for encouragement and socialisation, to reduce the feeling of isolation which is one of the inherent characteristics of the ODL delivery mode. With effective support services, learners could realise their aim of gaining further qualifications. Various documents in the literature review revealed the need for collaboration between stakeholders to ensure access to learning resources which might not be available in ODL-providing institutions, such as the colleges of education and University of Botswana.

This research also revealed a number of constraints in the provision of learner support services. The geographical distribution of distance learners needed to be addressed so that they could interact regularly with their tutors and other learners. This could be done by devolving support services to study centres which would be within reach of the learners and equipped with the necessary learning resources. Commitment and accountability of learner support providers, such as part-time tutors needed to be ensured through contractual agreements. This would reduce absenteeism and poor provision of feedback on assignments, both of which emerged in this study as major constraints to programme completion.

5.6.1 Contribution to the existing body of knowledge

This study also contributed to knowledge by building on existing research into the need for learner support services, both in Botswana and in the region as a whole. Although the findings are not generalisable, they could serve as lessons for institutions which want to incorporate learner support services in their ODL programmes. One of the main lessons that emerged was that learner support services should be a component part of an ODL programme and not an add-on. These conclusions were supported by the participants' views that living and working in areas with poor public transport and poor telephone connectivity made it difficult for the affected learners to access support services. Such learners were not catered for in the design, development and implementation of support services in the DPE programme.

The study demonstrated that conducting a needs assessment to identify the needs of learners was a pre-requisite for the design and implementation of efficient support services. This required learner support providers to assemble learner profiles and develop appropriate services that would be responsive to known learner needs, study habits and geographical locations (Sewart, 1993; Simpson 2002; Thorpe, 1994;). Lack of information about learner characteristics meant that the support services were not responsive to their needs in the DPE programme. This conclusion was reinforced by distance learners' claims that they found some of the content in the diploma syllabus difficult, attributing this to the level of their previous educational backgrounds.

Results from a needs assessment survey could have identified the strengths and weaknesses of distance learners and identified areas where they could have earned credits and reduced the content load and programme duration, bearing in mind that all of them had a previous teacher training course and wide teaching experience prior to enrolment on the DPE programme. Information about their geographical distribution could have been used in designing and developing decentralised learner support services, ensuring frequent contact between learners and their tutors and other learners, and bringing learning resources closer to where distance learners lived and worked. This study showed that having knowledge about distance learners' needs and expectations was a stepping stone towards the design and development of effective learner support services.

Isolation of learners from tutors and other learners, poor reading cultures, multiple responsibilities and lack of access to learning resources, were among the factors that slowed distance learners' progress and delayed programme completion. The study has shown that learner support services are expected to help distance learners overcome these learning challenges, assist them in coping with difficult content and with personal problems, and give them access to learning resources through the provision of effective academic, counselling and administrative support. These claims were supported by participants' views that learners who completed their studies appeared to receive regular feedback on assignments from their tutors, while those with incomplete results blamed lack of feedback on tutor absenteeism, loss of assignments and wrong conversion of marks. These conclusions indicate the need to develop

criteria for the recruitment of tutors and to regulate the provision of academic and counselling support to ensure that learners interact with their tutors. Proper planning was required to guarantee fitness to purpose of learner support services through the involvement of the different stakeholders, and by so doing, ensure their recognition and ownership (Wolcott, 2003). Policy documents alone, such as the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD, may not have been adequate. Implementation guidelines in the form of monitoring and supervision mechanisms should have been developed. While resources were known to exist in stakeholder institutions, there was no guarantee that they would be available to support distance learners.

These observations are supported in the findings which showed that in stakeholder institutions such as MCE, access to resources such as computers and science laboratories depended on whether or not staff from the relevant departments were participating in the DPE programme. Guidelines indicating how such resources would be accessed needed to be negotiated and developed. Payment, though meant to be an incentive, could also be a barrier and needed to be aligned with the tasks to be carried out by part-time staff.

The study stressed the need for training of staff in ODL skills. The fact that tutors, institutional managers and policy makers have expertise in their own areas of specialisation does not mean they understand the ODL operations. Capacity building for service providers was essential to prepare and empower them to give effective learner support and empathise with the circumstances of distance learners. Another call was for the diversification of media in learner support in order to improve the frequency of learner-tutor and learner-learner contact. Although Bates (1992) warns service providers to consider factors such as the cost of technology, the findings indicated that the use of e-mail and mobile phone technology could have improved communication between learners and their tutors, particularly in the supervision of research projects in between the residential sessions.

5.7 Limitations of the study

The scope of this study was limited to the DPE programme by distance mode in Botswana. Data were collected from a limited but information-rich number of participants who were

directly involved in the provision of learner support services on this programme. In this regard, I lay no claim that the findings of this study can be generalised beyond the DPE programme in Botswana. Furthermore, as a qualitative case study, my research was designed to seek in-depth information about the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners in a specific distance-taught DPE programme in Botswana. As such, involving a large number of participants would have been beyond its scope and purpose.

5.8 Recommendations

The study focused on the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learners enrolled on the DPE programme in Botswana. It investigated participants' perceptions about the contribution of such services to distance learners' progress and programme completion. Specifically, it set out to discover why, despite the provision of learner support services, the DPE programme continued to register low pass rates and high incompleteness rates. To this end, it established a number of strengths and weaknesses that were discussed in detail in Chapter 4. In this section, the issues which emerged as recommendations are discussed briefly.

The findings presented in Chapter 4 indicated that learner support providers should base learner support services on identified and known learner characteristics, needs and expectations, in order to address real and anticipated learning challenges. These views were reinforced in the reviewed literature (Robinson, 1995; Welch & Reed, n.d) where it was observed that learner support services should fit the purpose for which they are intended. The need for learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction and socialisation in self-help study groups to reduce isolation and loneliness for distance learners cannot be overemphasised. All the participants agreed that academic support could be improved by frequent contact between learners and their tutors and two-way communication through timely and constructive feedback, thus enabling learners to measure their progress regularly, rather than having to wait for four months between residential sessions.

The findings suggested that staggering learner support services after four months was not effective since it left distance learners separated both from their tutors and from other learners for too long before the next residential session. All the participants agreed that to facilitate

more regular interaction, support services should be devolved to designated study centres such as the existing education centres and secondary schools. Retired but qualified people could be employed, particularly for the supervision of research projects which seemed to be a major factor contributing to incomplete results. Participants believed that this form of support could reduce delays in programme completion.

Tutor absenteeism from scheduled tutorials, lack of timely and constructive feedback, poor record-keeping and lack of access to learning resources all suggested a failure by the stakeholder institutions to provide adequate guidelines, planning and preparation which are discussed in Chapter 4 (§4.7). The fact that college lecturers were employed in colleges of education did not necessarily mean they would be available to give tutorials in the DPE programme. In this regard, one of the recommendations from the findings was for the integration of the DPE learner support activities into the institutional core business. This would ensure acceptance, recognition and ownership of the DPE programme, offering distance learners access to learning resources and other vital services, including counselling support.

A further recommendation was to intensify learner-tutor interaction through the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), in addition to face-to-face tutorial sessions and occasional school visits made by regional learner support officers from the Kanye ODL office. E-mail technology could be used to link learners and their tutors, and to intensify the supervision of research projects. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 (§2.9), (Aluko, 2009; Beukes, 2009; Fresen & Hendrikz, 2009; Kanjumbula, 2006) found mobile phones useful for supporting distance learners in other institutions. Policy makers should therefore explore the possibilities of ensuring that distance learners have access to and use such technology to improve communication between them and their tutors as indicated in the findings in Chapter 4 (§4.3).

A difference also emerged between statements in the policy documents and the reality on the ground. In practice, the policy documents, such as the 2007 MoU of UB and the MoESD, did not bind anyone in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. This MoU was not enough to guarantee the implementation of such services. Strategies were needed to

translate the policy documents into learner support services at the institutional level. The commitment of part-time tutors should have been ensured through contractual agreements signed between the tutors and stakeholder institutions. The participants were in agreement that such policy guidelines could have spelt out payment structures which could be aligned with the completion of specific work, such as tutorials, marking assignments and entering marks into the relevant mark sheets before the payments could be made. A further recommendation was for the training of all service providers in instructional and leadership skills in the field of ODL. Indeed, the stakeholders admitted that they lacked knowledge in ODL and appeared to be groping in the dark as they went about implementing support services in the DPE programme. In the next section, a structure for the provision of learner support services is recommended.

5.8.1. Recommended structure for effective learner support services

The findings from this research indicated that the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme was not based on any specific criterion of effectiveness. Review of the literature established that distance learners faced similar learning challenges worldwide. There was a clear necessity to understand their characteristics and learning difficulties so as to design and develop relevant support services that would be responsive to their needs. In the literature review in Chapter 2, Robinson (1995) and Welch & Reed (n.d.) stressed the need for learner support providers to develop criteria for the introduction of such services. In this regard, my findings suggest the need for a theoretical contribution to knowledge in the form of a structure for effective learner support services, an example of which is provided in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Structure for the provision of effective learner support services

Factors to be considered by policy makers and ODL providers	Implications for the provision of effective learner support services
<p>Learner characteristics and needs:</p> <p>Demographic factors such as age are determined.</p> <p>Base learner support services on known needs of distance learners such as previous educational background and learning styles.</p> <p>Establish motivation for learning.</p> <p>Identify resource requirements and develop mechanisms for their accessibility.</p> <p>Determine geographical location of distance learners.</p>	<p>Background information about distance learners is available and used to design flexible and learner-centred support services that are accessible to all distance learners, irrespective of their geographical location.</p> <p>Prior learning is determined and new knowledge aligned with distance learners' previous educational backgrounds by giving credits for content/courses already covered, and prerequisite courses developed and implemented to bridge identified knowledge gaps. Learners are provided with appropriate learning skills.</p> <p>Distance learners' needs are determined and arrangements made as to how they will be supported in order to realise their expectations.</p> <p>Learning resources are identified and guidelines developed and implemented to ensure access by distance learners and learner support providers.</p> <p>Learner support services are devolved to study centres close to where distance learners live and work by clustering the learners into groups based on their physical or geographical locations.</p>
<p>Academic support:</p> <p>Identify tutors, their workloads</p>	<p>Distance learners have access to tutors and</p>



<p>and availability.</p> <p>Learner-tutor interaction is scheduled.</p> <p>There are management structures to maintain two-way communication between learners and tutors.</p> <p>Learner-learner interaction in self-help study groups is encouraged and monitored.</p> <p>Orientation of learners and training of tutors in ODL skills.</p>	<p>tutorial support is regularly monitored and supervised to ensure that tutors attend scheduled tutorials.</p> <p>Regular learner-tutor interaction is scheduled, and organised at specified venues and closely monitored to ensure that tutors help learners to interpret content by explaining and clarifying difficult concepts.</p> <p>Processes and procedures are in place to ensure that tutors mark and return assignments to distance learners with constructive comments within short turnaround times that are specified and regularly monitored, such as 14-21 days, as suggested in the literature review (Holmberg, 1995; Welch & Reed, n.d).</p> <p>Distance learners are encouraged to form and participate actively in self-help study groups which are supervised and monitored by the ODL institution, in order to help learners to reduce feelings of isolation by interacting with each other and discussing content in the learning materials.</p> <p>Distance learners, part-time tutors/markers and other people involved in the provision of learner support services are given orientation and training in ODL skills in order to prepare them for their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme.</p>
<p>Counselling support:</p> <p>Academic and personal problems are identified.</p>	<p>Distance learners have access to counselling support throughout the programme duration, enabling them to seek solutions for both academic and non-academic difficulties that they may encounter as they study on their own.</p>
<p>Administrative support:</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders are clarified.</p>	<p>Measures are taken to ensure that learner support providers understand and recognise their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme.</p>



Monitoring and supervision of tutorial and assessment activities.	There are procedures to ensure that learners have access to tutors during scheduled tutorial sessions and that learner-tutor interaction is facilitated during tutorials and in the supervision of practical work, such as conducting research projects and teaching assignment portfolios.
Ensuring tutors' commitment and accountability to deliver tutorial support.	Learner support providers ensure that tutors sign contractual agreements in order to ensure their commitment and accountability in the delivery of academic and counselling support.
Ensuring provision of timely and constructive feedback.	Learner support providers introduce clear assessment procedures to ensure that tutors provide timely and constructive feedback, enabling distance learners to measure their learning progress.
Ensuring correct and up-to-date record keeping.	There are processes and procedures for monitoring the submission of assessment work such as assignments and research projects in order to ensure correct and up-to-date record keeping of the receiving, recording and dispatch of assignments for marking and their return to distance learners.
Determine tutor-learner ratio.	Measures are taken to ensure that there is a sufficient number of tutors to provide tutorial support.
Distance learners have access to learning resources.	There are guidelines to ensure that distance learners have access to learning resources, such as libraries, laboratories, computers and equipment for practical work throughout the learning process.
Learner support services exist at designated study centres.	Learner support providers ensure that learner support activities are accessible at study centres that are convenient to distance learners.
Monitoring and evaluation of effectiveness.	In order to monitor the effectiveness of learner support services, the providers ensure that feedback from learners and part-time staff is

<p>Develop and implement learner support policy guidelines at the institutional level.</p> <p>Stakeholder involvement and collaboration mechanisms are clearly defined.</p> <p>Distance learners' representation in decision making structures.</p>	<p>collected regularly and applied for the improvement of the implementation of learner support services.</p> <p>There are policy guidelines to ensure acceptance, recognition and ownership of DPE activities at the institutional level.</p> <p>It is necessary to interpret the MoU by defining performance expectations for each stakeholder and how this performance is to be monitored in order to ensure the provision of effective learner support services.</p> <p>Distance learners are encouraged to form a representative council which could give management feedback on the effectiveness of the learner support services being provided.</p>
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5.8.2 Implications for tutors, policy makers and ODL institutions

From the above structure, a number of recommendations emerged, for tutors, policy makers and ODL institutions. The findings showed that some learners benefit from interaction with their tutors during tutorials and feedback on assignments, while others do not, either because of tutor absenteeism or as a result of misplacement and/or loss of assignment scripts. These deficiencies suggest the need for stringent supervision and monitoring structures to ensure commitment and accountability of tutors to the welfare of distance learners. The literature (Robinson, 1995; Holmberg, 2003) posits that tutors have an obligation to attend scheduled tutorials, help learners with the explanation of content, and give them immediate feedback on assessment work. The role of learner support providers is to enforce these strategies.

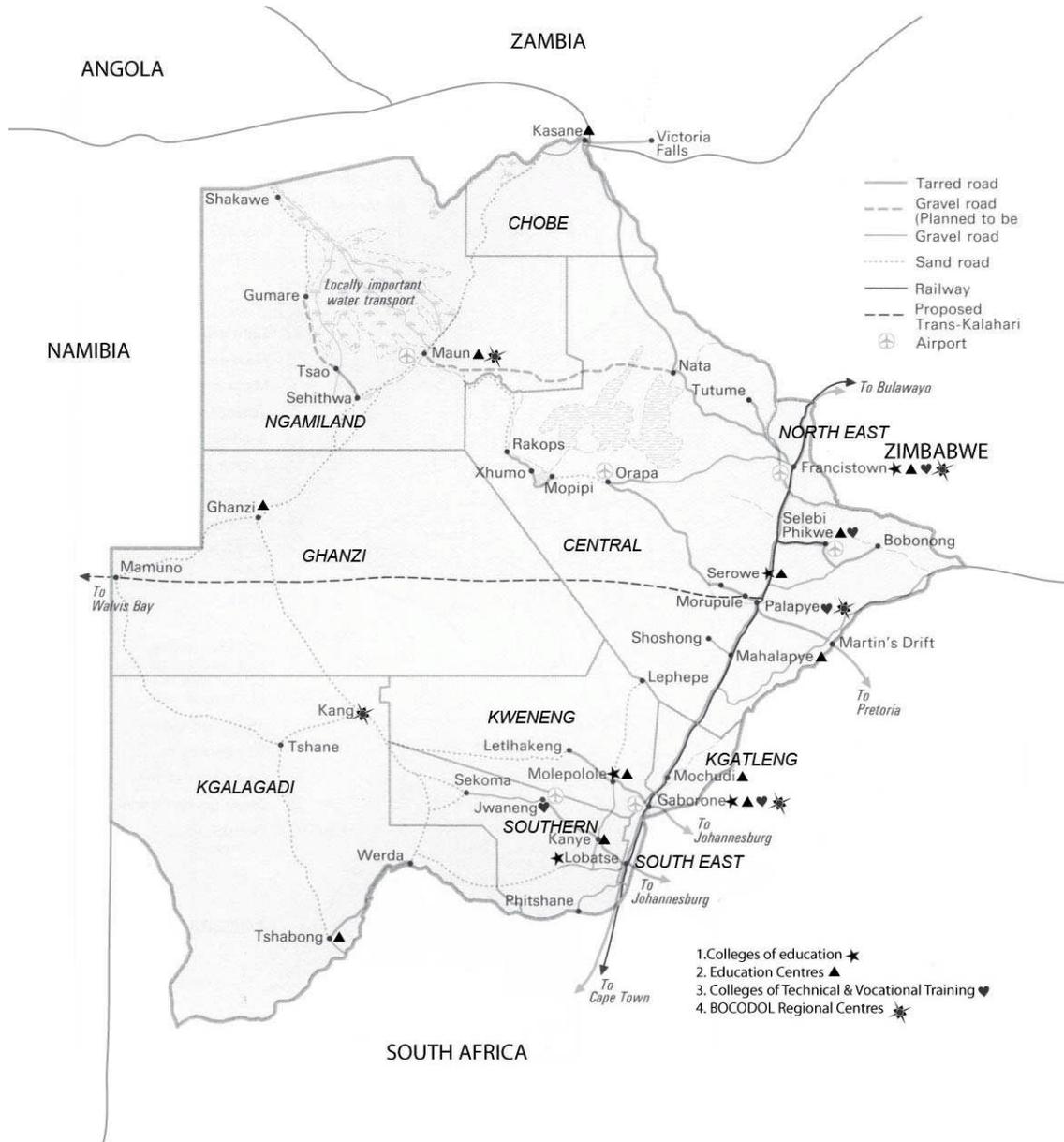
For ODL institutions and policy makers, the recommendations expose a number of constraints that call for planning and the development of guidelines for the implementation of effective learner support services that are responsive to the needs of distance learners. To guarantee the availability and accountability of tutors, policy makers and institutional managers should introduce contractual agreements between part-time staff and the stakeholders. Another

imperative for policy makers is to ensure access to learning resources so as to enable distance learners to do practical work. The fact that stakeholder institutions have human, infrastructural and material resources does not necessarily mean these will be available to distance learners. Implementation guidelines are needed to ensure access to resources by distance learners. These conclusions were confirmed by participants' views that the DPE programme is not recognised as a core activity in stakeholder institutions, hence the limited access to learning resources. A needs assessment survey should be carried out by policy makers and stakeholder institutions to establish the availability of resources and the conditions for their use before an ODL programme is launched. Institutional leaders and part-time staff should be trained in ODL skills to improve capacity and prepare them for their new roles.

5.8.3 Recommendations for decentralised learner support services

To improve learner-tutor and learner-learner interaction, learner support services should be devolved to designated study centres so that they are flexible and more easily accessed. This would ensure regular contact between learners and their tutors, as well as among the learners themselves, in between the residential sessions. Respondents suggested using existing institutions which have resources, such as qualified education officers, libraries and computer facilities, which could be negotiated for use by distance learners. A proposal was made for possible study centres, as shown in Figure 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1: Proposed distribution of study centres of learner support services for the DPE programme.



Adapted from Collins-Longman Atlases (1988). Atlas for Botswana. Gaborone: Longman Group. p18.

5.9 Emerging issues for future research

This study has raised issues which suggest further research into how learner support services could be improved in the future. A few of the issues that call for such investigation are discussed in this section.

1. One of the areas for future research could be the relationship between distance learners' profiles, expectations and learning difficulties in ODL programmes and the formulation of effective learner support services. There is a need to determine how demographic factors such as age, previous educational backgrounds, learning styles and geographical location affect distance learners' progress and completion of ODL programmes.
2. Another area of future research could be the factors that affect retention and throughputs in an ODL programme. Participants in this study mentioned time constraints and heavy workloads as two of the factors that contributed to incomplete results. The literature review in Chapter 2 stressed that one of the advantages of ODL was its flexibility in enabling people to earn qualifications as they continued with employment and taking care of their families (Farrell, 2003). There is thus a need to explore further how distance learners manage to combine their multiple responsibilities with their part-time studies.
3. A further possible area for future research could be collaboration strategies to facilitate sharing of resources in stakeholder institutions. As established in the reviewed literature, ODL programmes depend to a large extent on available resources, such as tutors and physical facilities in form of classrooms and laboratories for practical work. Such an investigation could come up with strategies to inform stakeholder collaboration for the benefit of distance learners.
4. The effectiveness in the classroom of graduates from ODL programmes emerged as another area for future research. This could consider issues such as gaining respect and recognition after graduation, which was seen as one of the factors which motivated distance learners to enrol in the DPE programme.

5. There is a need to carry out research to explore the relationship between difficult content in the learning materials and the language of instruction as these affected distance learners' programme completion.

These are the major areas that emerged from this study and that warrant future research, in addition to the other factors that influence access to learning resources, which were discussed in the analysis of the findings.

5.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the conclusions and recommendations of the study. The reasons that motivated me to carry out this investigation were summarised. I also provided a brief discussion of the main findings and highlighted the constraints that were encountered in the provision of learner support services in the DPE programme. The significance of the study, in terms of the lessons learnt and constraints encountered, as well as its contribution to the existing knowledge on the provision of learner support services, were highlighted. The recommendations that emerged from the analysis of the findings and their implications for tutors, learner support coordinators, policy makers and ODL institutions were also briefly discussed. Drawing on the findings and the reviewed literature, a structure was proposed for the provision of decentralised learner support services, as shown in Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1 above.

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Appendices and Definitions

Appendix 1: Definition of Key Terms

In Appendix 1, I have presented the key terms used in this study in alphabetical order and explained their contextual use in order to provide a common understanding.

Academic advisement (support): Encouraging distance learners to participate in communities of learning such as formal and informal discussion groups. This support may be in form of tutorial support during contact sessions, marking and providing feedback and constructive commenting on assignments and promoting participation in peer support sessions (Holmberg, 1995).

Administrative Support: Refers to the clarification of the obligations and responsibilities of learners and the education provider during the admission, registration and orientation stage and throughout the learning process including advice on assessment structures (Holmberg, 1995). It also entails making arrangements and providing learners with information about access to physical facilities and other learning resources such as libraries and necessary equipment for learning such as computers and science laboratories.

Collaboration: Refers to the partnership between the stakeholders in the provision of learner support services on the DPE programme.

Completers: This term refers to distance learners who had completed the four year duration and passed in all the subjects at all levels, the research project and the teaching assignment portfolio (TAP).

Computer literacy: Refers to the knowledge and skills that distance learners are supposed to acquire from the prescribed computer course.

Constructivism: Refers to the theory of learning that stresses the importance of experiences, experimentation, problem solving, and construction of Knowledge by the learner, (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 56).

Correspondence course: Refers to distance education delivery mode where the learning materials and assignments are mailed to the learner. The learner completes the assignment and returns it to the instructor (tutor) for marking. Feedback is provided through mail and the next assignment is mailed to the learner. The cycle is repeated until the course is completed (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 57).

Counselling Support: Learners are given counselling support to enable them to solve personal difficulties and advice related to their study before and during their course or programme, (Simpson, 2002).

Delivery system: Refers principally to the physical delivery in terms of originating, distributing, and receiving and using study materials (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 61).

ODL: An educational process in which the significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone removed in time and/or space from the learner (UNESCO, 2002). The student and the instructor are physically separated by distance. All communications are mediated by some form of media in real or in delayed time. Technology i.e. voice, video data or print is used to bridge the instructional gap (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 66).

Flexible Learning: Refers to the removal of barriers to accessing higher education and the use of various media for the delivery of the curriculum and teaching and learning (Edwards et al., 2002).

Formative evaluation: Evaluation conducted during the development or improvement of a programme or product (or a person, etc.) (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 78).

Learner support: entails providing learners with opportunities for two-way communication through participatory and interactive learning materials, tutorial contact mentoring, counselling and organisation of peer support structures (Melton, 2002, Robinson, 1995 and Simpson, 2002). Also distance learners have access to physical facilities and other learning resources.

Learner Support Coordinator: Refers to the person responsible for the coordination of learner support services at the providing institution, colleges of education and other study centres.

Learner autonomy and independence: Refers to the level where the learners feel well equipped in terms of study skills and access to learning resources to be able to learn on their own as self-directed learners. In this study, the theory of autonomy and independence of the learner is discussed in Chapter 2 under the section on theories of distance education.

Learning Experience: Refers to how distance learners felt or perceived the learning events. In this case it was important for me to know if learners were satisfied or dissatisfied with the academic, counselling and administrative support during the learning process.

Learning Activity: This refers to ways in which learners are involved in their own learning either alone or with small groups (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 97). In this study it was necessary to find out the type of learning activities the learners engaged in such as group discussions or self-help groups and their experiences with those activities.

Self-help Study Groups: Interactive learning activities either in formal or informal, as in peer groups where participants play both the role of the learner and the teacher for purposes of exchange of information (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 97).

Learning Contract: An agreement between the learner and the instructor (tutor) of what and how to master the learning performance objectives (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 97).

Monitoring: Refers to monitoring learner performance and providing timely remedial assistance to improve throughputs and reduce dropout rates.

Non-Completers: This term refers to the category of distance learners who had completed the four year duration but still had incomplete results having failed one or more subjects in levels 1 to 4 or had not completed the research projects and/or the teaching assignment portfolio.

Open Learning: Refers to organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which barriers to studying in terms of either access, or of time and place, pace, methods or study or any combination of these are minimised (UNESCO, 2002).

Open and Distance Learning (ODL): This term is used as an umbrella term to cover open and distance learning activities where learners can learn without attending learning institutions or where new opportunities are opened up to enable learners to learn no matter where or when they want to study. Often, ODL makes use of various media such as print, audio tapes, broadcasts, and the internet and through occasional face-to-face meetings with tutors and with other learners (UNESCO, 2002).

Programme Coordinator: The person responsible for the coordination and the management of the DPE activities in the providing institution and at colleges of education.

Scaffolding: Refers to building on prior knowledge so as to provide the foundation for new knowledge (Simonson & Schlosser, 2006: 128). On the DPE programme, the PTC qualification was assumed to provide adequate scaffolding or requisite knowledge for the diploma curriculum.

Tutor: Refers to a lecturer or a teacher who is engaged on a part time basis to provide tutorial support, mark and provide feedback to distance learners.

Tutorial Support: Refers to a learning environment in which tutors carry out tutorial responsibilities of conducting scheduled tutorials, marking and providing timely feedback and constructive comments on assessment work.

Turnaround time: Refers to the speed the tutor marked assignments are returned to distance learners from the time they were submitted for marking.

Workload: Refers to distance learners, tutors and programme coordinator's ability to combine their normal teaching loads with learning, tutoring and assessment and coordinating the DPE programme on a part time basis.

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule I: Distance learners

1. How did you know about the DPE programme by distance mode before enrolment?
2. What motivated you to enrol in the DPE programme?
3. What assistance are you given to prepare you for distance learning at the following stages of your studies?
 - a) admission
 - b) registration and orientation
 - c) during the course of your studies.
4. How effective are the study skills provided in meeting your learning needs? If not, why?
5. What challenges do you face when learning on your own? Briefly describe some of the advantages and disadvantages.
6. How has studying part-time and your teaching responsibilities affected your personal life? What changes has studying part-time brought to your personal life?
7. What assistance do you get from your family, employer and friends in the course of your studies?
8. What subjects, if any, do you find most challenging on the DPE programme? Why? What remedies would you suggest?
9. How do the following factors affect your learning progress?
 - a) time allocation to your studies and pacing your work
 - b) availability and accessibility to tutors outside residential sessions
 - c) finding a quiet place to study.
10. How accessible are the following resources and facilities to you to enhance your studies?
 - a) computers

- b) laboratories
- c) libraries

11. How helpful are your tutors in the following aspects of your studies?

- a) clarifying difficult content by providing additional explanation over and above what is in the study materials
- b) facilitating discussions during tutorials
- c) correcting errors on assignments and giving clear explanations on how a higher grade could have been obtained
- d) giving timely and constructive feedback on (i) research projects and (ii) the teaching assignment portfolio.

12. In what ways have you benefited from being a member of a self help study group?
(Briefly explain)

13. What in your view are the major barriers that you experience in accessing learner support services?

14. What changes would you suggest to improve the provision of more effective learner support services on the DPE programme?

Appendix 3: Interview Schedule II: Tutors/Part time Coordinators

1. What is your understanding of learner support services? (Briefly)
2. What do you think learner support services are addressing on the DPE programme?
3. How effective is the orientation you get in distance education skills in preparing you for tutoring and marking assessment work for distance learners?
4. What are the most common learning challenges that distance learners present during the learning process? How do you assist them to find solutions to these challenges?
5. What preparations do you make for tutorials before meeting distance learners?
6. What subject areas do learners have most difficulties in? Why? How do you assist them?
7. How do you ensure that distance learners get timely feedback in the following aspects of their assessment work?
 - a. marked assignments
 - b. research projects
 - c. teaching assignment.
8. What arrangements are in place to ensure that distance learners have access to the following resources?
 - a. computers,
 - b. laboratories and
 - c. libraries
9. What form of support do you get from college management in the following aspects of your work?

- a. integration of tutorials, setting and marking distance learners' assessment work with other college activities
 - b. timely processing of results through college assessment structures
 - c. accessing human, physical, and material resources for distance learning activities.
10. What in your view are the major barriers in the implementation of learner support services on this programme?
11. What changes would you suggest to improve the provision of a more effective learner support system on the DPE programme?

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule III: Decision makers

1. How do distance learners know about the DPE programme? Briefly explain how this programme is advertised before enrolment?
2. How is distance learners' readiness determined to ensure that they meet the admission requirements for enrolment on the programme?
3. What information do distance learners get at the following stages of their studies?
 - a) admission
 - b) registration and orientation
 - c) in the course of their studies
4. What processes and procedures are in place to ensure that distance learners get their study materials on time?
5. What is the purpose of (i) academic support such as tutorials and assessment (ii) administrative and (iii) counselling support on this programme? How do you ensure that learner support services achieve the purpose for which they were set up?
6. What monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure that distance learners attend scheduled tutorials? What steps are taken to assist those who fail to attend tutorials?
7. What orientation/training is given to part-time tutors and programme coordinators to enable them to carry out their duties effectively?
8. What processes and procedures are in place to ensure that the following roles and responsibilities are carried out effectively on the DPE programme?
 - a. tutor attendance to tutorials
 - b. timely marking of assessment work
 - c. timely provision of feedback in form of constructive comments on assessment work?
 - d. correct conversion and entry of marks into the mark sheets
 - e. processing of results through various regulatory academic boards.

9. How does the learning support contribute to distance learners' retention and timely completion of the DPE programme?
10. What arrangements/policies are in place to ensure that the following resources are accessed by distance learners?
 - a) computers,
 - b) laboratories and consumables for practical subjects
 - c) libraries
 - d) photocopying facilities and stationery
 - e) office space and equipment
 - f) meals and hostel facilities.
11. What do you see as the major barriers in the provision of learner support on the DPE programme?
12. What changes would you suggest to improve the provision of a more effective learner support system on the DPE programme?



Appendix 5: Letter of Permission from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development in Botswana

TELEPHONE: 3655408
TELEX: 2944 THUTO BD
FAX: 3655408
REFERENCE E 1/20/ 2 II (7)



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
PRIVATE BAG 005
GABORONE
BOTSWANA

REPUBLIC OF BOTSWANA

24th Feb. 2009

To **Ms. Judith Kamau**
University of Botswana
Private Bag 00707
Gaborone

**RE: REQUEST FOR A PERMIT TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH STUDY ON:
DISTANCE LEARNERS PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF
LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES ON THE DIPLOMA IN PRIMARY EDUCATION
BY DISTANCE MODE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA: A CASE STUDY**

We acknowledge receipt of your application to conduct a research on the topic mentioned above.

This serves to grant you permission to conduct your study at Tlokweng College of Education, Molepolole College of Education and Kanye Education Centre to address the following research objectives/questions:

1. *What are the strengths and weakness of learner support services at the University of Botswana?*
2. *How do distance learners perceive the effects of learner support services on their studies?*
3. *What barriers and opportunities exist for effective implementation of learner support services?*
4. *How do stakeholders perceive their roles and responsibilities in the provision of learner support services?*

It is of paramount importance to seek Consent from the Principals, Lectures and Students that you are going to interview before conducting the study. We hope and trust that you will conduct the study as stated in your Proposal and to strictly adhere to the Research Ethics.

Please note that this permit is valid for a period of one year effective from 24th February 2009 to 24th February 2010.

You are furthermore requested to submit a copy of your final report of the study to the Division of Planning, Statistics and Research, Ministry of Education, Botswana.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

Fernando T. Siamisang
For / Permanent Secretary

Appendix 6: Letter of Informed consent for Distance Learners



University of Pretoria

Pretoria 0002 Republic of South
Africa

Tel (012) 420-5721 Fax (012) 420-
4215

<http://www.up.ac.za>

Faculty of Education

Date:

30 June 2009

Letter of Informed Consent (Students)

**Topic: Distance Learners' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Learner Support Services
on a Diploma in Primary Education Programme.**

Dear -----

I wish to request you to participate in a research project aimed at investigating the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learning and teaching on the Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) by distance mode. While the success of this research will contribute to the completion of my doctoral qualification at the University of Pretoria, it is also meant to explore your perceptions about the effectiveness and timeliness of the academic, administrative and counselling support in enhancing distance learners' progress to complete their studies.

Your participation in this study (focus group discussion) is voluntary and your identity will remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality throughout the interview session which will last about 45-60 minutes. The interviews will be audio-taped with your consent to facilitate accurate transcription of data. The transcripts and tapes will be destroyed once the study has been completed. For this purpose, interview responses will be treated as confidential, and anonymity will be guaranteed throughout.

Hopefully, the results of this study will provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of learner support services in distance teaching and learning and contribute towards the development of policies and strategies to improve students' progress and completion rates on the DPE programme.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign this letter as a declaration of your consent, i. e. you participate in this research project willingly and that you understand that you may withdraw any time.

Kind regards,

Judith W Kamau

(Applicants signature)

CC: Prof Nkomo (Supervisor)

Signature _____

Student _____

Signature _____

Appendix 7: Letter of Informed Consent for Learner Support providers (Tutors, programme Coordinators and Decision makers



University of Pretoria

Pretoria 0002 Republic of South Africa

Tel (012) 420-5721 Fax (012) 420-4215

<http://www.up.ac.za>

Faculty of Education

Date: 30 June 2009

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT (Tutors/ Programme coordinators and managers)

Topic: Distance Learners' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Learner Support Services on a Diploma in Primary Education Programme

Dear -----

I wish to request you to participate in a research project aimed at investigating the effectiveness of learner support services to distance learning and teaching on the Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) by distance mode programme. While the success of this research will contribute to the completion of my doctoral qualification at the University of Pretoria, it is also meant to explore your perceptions about the effectiveness, fitness of purpose and timeliness of the academic, administrative and counselling support in enhancing distance learners' progress to complete their studies.

Your participation in this study (one-to-one interviews and group discussions) is voluntary and your identity will remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality throughout the interview session which will last about 45-60 minutes. The interviews will be audio-taped with your consent to facilitate accurate transcription of data. The transcripts and tapes will be destroyed once the study has been completed. For this purpose, interview responses will be treated as confidential, and anonymity will be guaranteed throughout.

Hopefully, the results of this study will provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of learner support services in distance teaching and learning and contribute towards the development of policies and strategies to improve the implementation of learning support on the DPE programme.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign this letter as a declaration of your consent, i. e. you participate in this research project willingly and that you understand that you may withdraw any time.

Kind regards

Judith W Kamau

(Applicants signature)

CC: Prof Nkomo (Supervisor)

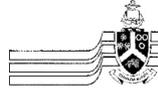
Signature_____

Participant _____

Signature _____



Appendix 8: Clearance Certificate from the University of Pretoria



UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

DEGREE AND PROJECT

INVESTIGATOR(S)

DEPARTMENT

DATE CONSIDERED

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE NUMBER :

EM09/03/03

PhD: Educational Policy Studies

Distance Learners Perceptions about the effectiveness of learners support Services at the University of Botswana: A Case Study

J Kamau

Education Management

4 May 2010

APPROVED

Please note:

For Masters applications, ethical clearance is valid for 2 years

For PhD applications, ethical clearance is valid for 3 years.

CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS COMMITTEE Prof L Ebersohn

DATE

4 May 2010

CC

Prof. M. Nkomo
Ms Jeannie Beukes

This ethical clearance certificate is issued subject to the following conditions:

1. A signed personal declaration of responsibility
2. If the research question changes significantly so as to alter the nature of the study, a new application for ethical clearance must be submitted
3. It remains the students' responsibility to ensure that all the necessary forms for informed consent are kept for future queries.

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.