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 incompletion 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 incompletion 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.

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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 incompletion 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
Learner characteristics and needs: Demographic factors such as age are determined.	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.
Base learner support services on known needs of distance learners such as previous educational background and learning styles.	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.
Establish motivation for learning.	Distance learners' needs are determined and arrangements made as to how they will be supported in order to realise their expectations.
Identify resource requirements and develop mechanisms for their accessibility.	Learning resources are identified and guidelines developed and implemented to ensure access by distance learners and learner support providers.
Determine geographical location of distance learners.	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.
Academic support: Identify tutors, their workloads	Distance learners have access to tutors and

and availability.	tutorial support is regularly monitored and supervised to ensure that tutors attend scheduled tutorials.
Learner-tutor interaction is scheduled.	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.
There are management structures to maintain two-way communication between learners and tutors.	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).
Learner-learner interaction in self-help study groups is encouraged and monitored.	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.
Orientation of learners and training of tutors in ODL skills.	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.
Counselling support: Academic and personal problems are identified.	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.
Administrative support: Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders are clarified.	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.

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

	collected regularly and applied for the improvement of the implementation of learner support services.
Develop and implement learner support policy guidelines at the institutional level.	There are policy guidelines to ensure acceptance, recognition and ownership of DPE activities at the institutional level.
Stakeholder involvement and collaboration mechanisms are clearly defined.	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.
Distance learners' representation in decision making structures.	Distance learners are encouraged to form a representative council which could give management feedback on the effectiveness of the learner support services being provided.

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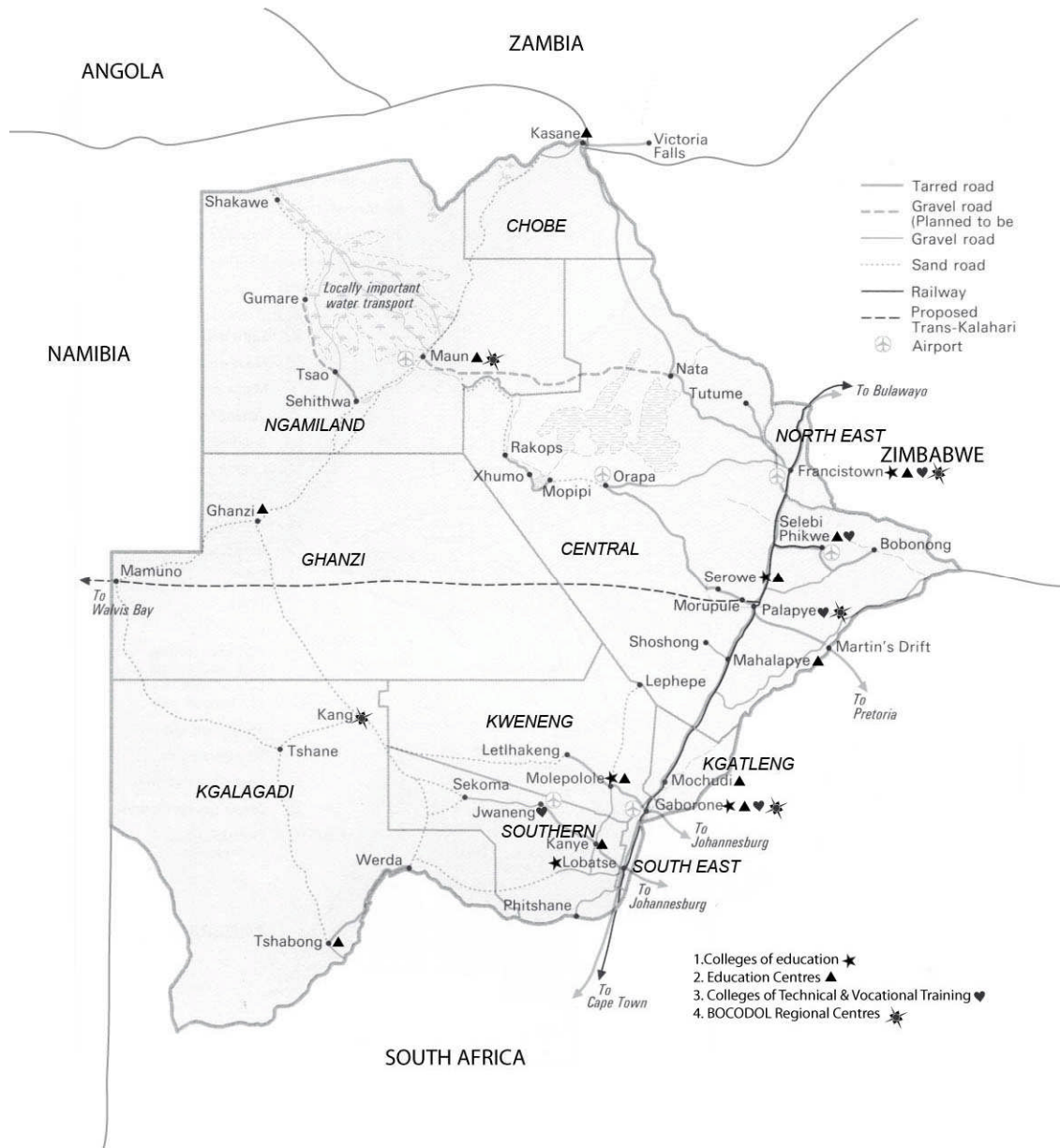
Adapted from Collins-Longman Atlases (1988). Atlas for Botswana. Gaborone: Longman Group. p18.

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.