ANDRAGOGY: The Philosophy underpinning Learner Support (LS) provision in Open and Distance Education (ODE). The case for the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

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Abstract
The context of ODE is such that the students and institution are separated in time or space or both (Bates, 1995; COL, 2000) hence, the provision of learner support services (LSS) is required in order to help students meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge requisite to academic and career success (Tait, 2000; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2003). However, despite efforts made by the ODE institutions, ZOU included, to provide LSS to distance learners, the institutions have experienced problems related to low student motivation, low retention, and decreasing enrolments (Ali and Leeds, 2009; Burholder, 2012; Berger and Lyons, 2005), which are symptoms indicating negative growth and downward development of the institutions. According to Malcom Knowles (1980), these symptoms persist because adult education practitioners are failing to understand and to effectively apply the philosophy and principles of ‘andragogy’ which means “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980:43). To this end, the study employed a qualitative research paradigm to generate data from a purposive sample of students and staff at Masvingo Regional Campus about how best the ZOU can use the knowledge of andragogy to enhance the design of appropriate learner support strategies for its students. A triangulation of qualitative methods were used to generate data that were coded, analysed and categorised into themes from which conclusions were drawn. Results revealed that the current provision of LSS at ZOU is deficient due to adult education practitioners not sufficiently considering students’ needs and characteristics as vital in influencing the design and provision of appropriate learner support strategies. The study concluded that it is only after education practitioners understand the philosophy of andragogy that they are in a position to design and provide effective LSS for adult students in ODL.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning; learner support services, students, andragogy, education practitioners; philosophy.

Introduction
In the past decade or two, the quest for access to university education by adult learners has necessitated the emergence of distance learning institutions across the globe (Henschke, 2009). Our knowledge of adult learners depict a group of learners who have been disadvantaged in one way or another resulting in them finding it difficult to access university education. In developed and industrialised nations, the need for work and occupation during the day by the adult population means that there should be an education system that is accessible and flexible to allow adults to learn at times other than the traditional working hours. In developing countries such as Zimbabwe, the
majority of the adult population is still smarting from the colonial past that employed bottle-necked strategies that restricted and discriminated people from accessing university education (Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006). Amongst the education discriminatory tendencies were those based on age, gender, race, ability, or religion. This meant that only a few people were accommodated in the few conventional universities that were existing. Thus, to redress these historical negatives, Open Distance Education institutions emerged, among the beginners being that of the Open University United Kingdom (OUUK), followed by others such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), and several years down the line, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

Several plausible attempts have been made to define open distance education, the earliest ones notably being those of Keegan (1980), Moore (1977), Peters (1973), and Rumble (1983). Their contributions led to the conceptualisation of distance education as a form of education of which the learner does not receive continuous, immediate supervision from the tutor because the two are separated from each other by time or space or by both time and space (COL, 2000). This synchronous and asynchronous nature of distance education increase complexity of the adult learner characteristics which are shrouded in feelings of isolation, separation and loneliness, devoid of interactive experiences and with the individual having no one to look up to for support (Tait, 2000). These challenges, coupled with other problems engendered by family demands, ageing, and social and economic hardships, make the adult student find it difficult to cope with university education, resulting in distance education institutions experiencing declining enrolments due to low motivation, low retention and high attrition (Ali and Leeds, 2009; Burholder, 2012; Berger and Lyons, 2005). Such is the situation with the ZOU. All these concerns about declining enrolments, low retention and high attrition, have sparked debates and spurred efforts to find ways of promoting accountability and academic credibility in ODE mainly through the development of effective learner support systems (LSS) (Brindley, 1995; Chadamoyo and Dumba, 2012). What this means is that distance education learners need support (Tait, 2000)). To this effect, this study intended to carry forward those debates and efforts, especially using evidence based on adult learner perceptions about their experiences with learner support provision at the ZOU.

Given the above background, the efforts to develop effective learner support systems have taken centre stage during the past two decades and learner support provision has been found critical and central in all ODE institutions (McLoughlin, 2002; Usun, 2004). Several authors in literature have attempted to define the concept ‘learner support’. Among prominent definitions are those given by Tait (2000), Simpson (2002), Thorpe (2003) and Robinson (1995). All these definitions seem to revolve on the central idea of viewing learner support as all those elements or a full range of activities developed to help students meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge requisite to academic and career success (Brindley and Paul, 2003). However, in order to design and provide effective learner support systems that achieve academic and career success for learners, it is argued in literature research and indeed by this study that practitioners in ODE need to consider the knowledge of adults’ learner characteristics, that is, their needs, preferences, feelings, attitudes, cognitive levels, among other attributes as a starting point (Chikoko, 2012). This means, practitioners and researchers in ODE need a body of knowledge or philosophy that guides and informs them about the adult learner characteristics. This body of knowledge or philosophy is called andragogy.

Andragogy is a term coined and
popularised by Malcolm Knowles since 1967 and 1968 to mean the ‘art and science of helping adults learn’ (Knowles, 1980). Knowles (1980) argued that adults learn differently from children and hence they should be treated differently. By his concept of andragogy, Knowles (1980) intended to shift the conceptualisation of education of adults from the traditional pedagogical or didactical approaches which are teacher-directed to a learner-centred methodology in which the needs of the learner are considered and the learner is afforded the opportunity to collaborate with the tutor in making decisions about their education. This is in keeping with the constructivist orientation that encourages learner self-directedness, enhances self-esteem, promotes lifelong learning and fosters critical and creative thinking (Hein, 1991).

Such are the values enshrined in the current ZOU vision and ideology. To clarify and strengthen his view about the importance of adult learner characteristics, Knowles (1980, 1984) based his theory on what he termed the six assumptions or principles of andragogy that are related to adult needs and motivation to learning. These principles explain adults as characterised by: the need to know the reason for their learning and how that learning should be self-directed, the need for a learning activity and use of vast experience as a learning resource, their readiness to learn and orientation about life situations and how they are motivated to learn in various teaching and learning contexts. Details of these characteristics are explained in the section under literature review.

Whilst these assumptions were meant to inform adult education practitioners about how adults learn, the theory was met with controversy and criticism for failing to provide empirical evidence to support its validity (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007; Donnan, 2008; Devermport, 1997; Brookfield, 1995).

Despite these criticisms, Knowles andragogical theory and philosophy has gained wide acceptance with many authors in literature, among them are Donnan (2008), and Henschke (2009). These authors argue that the andragogical philosophy advanced by Knowles would contribute to knowledge regarding the teaching and learning of adults and one specific aspect being the effective design and development of learner support provision in ODE settings. To this effect, as Donnan (2008) observes, whether termed a theory or a set of assumptions, Knowles work has found relevance in many adult educational practices and indeed in my study in so far as it depicts a philosophy that guides the knowledge of adult learner characteristics as a critical component in the equation that leads to the practice and provision of learner support services to adult education in ODE.

Meanwhile, those adult education practitioners that strongly supported Knowles’ andragogical philosophy proposed a number of learner support models or frameworks. Henschke (2009) gives a summary of some of them as outlined below.

Sweet (1993) focused on a learner support system that took account of the interactive forms of learning as well as acknowledging the importance of learning contexts. Brindley (1995) believed that a learner support model should be more responsive to learner needs, contributing to learner persistence and success. Tait (2000) proposed a learner support model comprising three functions namely: cognitive, affective and systemic, all of which are crucial to student success. Simpson (2002) moved away from a systems approach, instead providing a typology of leaner support categorised by activity rather than by specific personnel or department. Thorpe (2003) viewed learner support as all the elements capable of responding to a lone learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process.

Gleaning through all these models, it is apparent that there is no one model that can be considered as embracing all key elements
of an integrated and holistic learner support model. In other words, each of the models has focused on some aspects of learner support and downplaying the other. Furthermore, if we are to consider that many of these models have been source to theory and practices in current literature from which implications to learner support provision in ODE can be drawn, then much still needs to be done because not much has been achieved to mitigate the ills of low student motivation leading to low retention and high attrition in open and distance institutions in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Perhaps this makes us believe that most of the researches on learner support models have been carried in Western countries (Ozoglu, 2009) and very little on the ground shows evidence of such researches having been carried out in distance education institutions situated in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Furthermore, as pointed out by Potter (1998) and Reid (1995), there is still dearth of research that reviews the andragogical implications of learner support provision in ODE institutions from the point of view of the learners’ themselves.

The study therefore focused to establish the importance of andragogy as the philosophical foundation to learner support provision in ODE. The case is the Zimbabwe Open University, the only open and distance Education institution in Zimbabwe. Since its inception in 1999, ZOU established ten Regional Campuses, one in each of the ten provinces of the country. Using the constructivist approach, ZOU set out on a mission to produce a person who would take charge of his/her responsibilities during the time when one is studying with the university and when one has joined the workforce. At one stage, during the period 2003 to 2006, the university attracted an enrolment averaging 20000 students (ZOU,2010) but this figure has since gone down to levels between 8000 and 10000 during the years 2012 to 2013. Among the factors attributed to low student motivation leading to this decline in enrolment, for example, stiff competition from conventional institutions and Zimbabwean economic meltdown that caused students find it difficult to raise their fees (Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006), provision of learner support was found critical. Hence, it was found appropriate that this study was carried out to interrogate both students and staff of Masvingo Regional Campus (one of the ten ZOU regional campuses) about their experiences with learner support at the ZOU. It was hoped that the investigation would unearth the andragogical needs and characteristics that would be used as guidelines in the planning and provision of LSS at the ZOU.

Review of Related Literature

The issue of how students learn in the context of distance education has been the subject of discussion in the past three decades. Among the many models or philosophies that have been developed to explain adult education, andragogy has emerged as one of the outstanding philosophical foundations that attempted to explain how adults learn (Henschke, 2009). The term andragogy, as we know it today, was found with the German High School teacher called Alexander Knapp in 1833. During that time, Knapp developed the term while trying to describe the practice Plato exerted when instructing his students who were young adults (MPAEA, 2009). Since then, the concept went fallow until adult education scholars such as Edward Linderman and Dusan Savicevic in Europe and Malcolm Knowles in America resuscitated its conceptualisation and use, though not as a unified theory. In 1967, Savicevic introduced the term ‘andragogy’ to Malcolm Knowles who then adopted and popularised the term to mean the ‘art and science of helping adults learn’,
as different from pedagogy which means the ‘teaching and learning of children’ (Knowles, 1980).

Knowles and his successors distinguished andragogy from pedagogy as adult learning versus the way children learn (Knowles, 1970). To this end, adults should be taught differently from children because the learning processes are drastically different (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005) in that adults have different learning needs and preferences from those of children. Given this premise, Knowles consolidated the concept of andragogy into six key assumptions or principles about adult learner needs and characteristics (briefly mentioned earlier on) which then became the foundation of understanding adult learning. These assumptions are expanded as follows (Knowles, 1980; Heinschke, 2009; MPAEA, 2009):

- **The need to know**: Adults need to know the reason for learning something, thus the task of the teacher is to help the learner become aware of the need to know.
- **Self-concept**: As a person matures, his/her self concept moves from one of being a dependant personality towards one of being self-directed.
- **Experience**: As a person matures, he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes a resource for learning. Adults tend to come into adult education with a vast amount of prior experiences compared to that of children.
- **Readiness to learn**: As a person matures, his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented to the development task of his/her social roles. Readiness to learn is dependent on an appreciation of the relevancy of the topic to the student.
- **Orientation to learn**: As a person matures, his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, his/her orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem centeredness.
- **Motivation to learn**: Internal motivation is key as a person matures. Although adults feel the pressure of external events, they are mostly driven by internal motivation and the desire for self-esteem and goal attainment.

In trying to illuminate and consolidate the above listed andragogical principles about adult learning, Zmeyov (1998) cited in Henschke (2009) aptly defines andragogy as the theory of adult learning that sets out the fundamentals of the activities of learners and teachers in planning, realising, evaluating and correcting adult learning.

In view of the above principles, Knowles’ version of andragogy was not easily accepted by some adult educators of the time, who tended to dismiss it as inadequate, unscientific, not well researched and misleading to adult educators (Heinschke, 2009). For example, Hartree (1984) asserted that if viewed from the psychological standpoint, Knowles’ theory of andragogy fails to make good its claims to stand as a unified theory because it lacks coherent discussion of the different dimensions of learning. Equally, if viewed as a philosophy, it falls short because it does not incorporate an epistemology. Deverport (1987) argued that the theory lacks clarity and solid empirical support. Jarvis (1984) posited that the theory is not grounded in sufficient empirical research, while Pratt (1987) said the theory spawns further debate to clarify certain unclear terms.

Indeed this study adopted Pratt’s view and intended to investigate further the issues surrounding andragogy as a philosophical underpinning in understanding how adults learn. This study also accepted Knowles andragogical theory in the same manner other adult educators of the time accepted it (Heinschke, 2009) and hence, it...
acknowledged that the theory has stimulated a great deal of interest to the extent that it has provided a framework for understanding adult learner needs and characteristics and the extent to which these influence the way adult learners should be helped to learn.

Given the above understanding of andragogy as a philosophical foundation to understanding adult learning, the context of ZOU is such that it is a distance learning institution that deals with adult students who learn whilst separated from the institution in time or space or both (COL, 2000). Because of this condition, the adult student is often isolated and feels immense pressure exerted by other adult social responsibilities of being a parent, a worker, and community member. Coupled with the pressures of being a student, this is when learner support becomes critical (Tait, 2000) and how learner support should be provided, becomes the essence of many adult educators and adult learners. Indeed in the context of this study, learner support provision becomes the concern of the university staff and students of the ZOU.

With the view that ZOU operates in an open and distance learning context, it means that it employs certain theoretical frameworks that makes it possible for the synchronous and asynchronous nature of distance education to work. In literature, prominent theoretical frameworks that explain how adult learning takes place in distance education include the following: Holmberg’s (1983) theory of learning conversation, Moore’s (1990) theory of transactional distance and Gorsky, Caspi and Trumper’s (2004) theory of dialogue. The main central idea that these theories are projecting is that of how ODE institutions can enable the adult learner access teaching and learning resources through mediation by various media and ICT. To this end, Holmberg’s (1983) theory emphasises interactive activities in the form of two-way communication between the learner and the tutor. These activities can be provided in the form of tele-conferencing, video-conferencing, face-to-face tutoring and discussions. Moore’s (1990) theory of transactional distance focuses on how the psychological and communication distance that separate the learner from the tutor can be accounted for, particularly through provision of interactive activities. Gorsky et al (2004) theory advances the dialogue issue embedded in Holmberg and Moore’s theoretical frameworks but argue that in the epistemological process, learning is an individual activity mediated by intra-personal dialogue. Thus, informed by these learner support theoretical frameworks, ODE institutions should be able to create conditions for adult teaching and learning that acknowledge the use of interactive methodologies that respond to learners’ needs and characteristics within various institutional contexts (Brindley, 1995), the ZOU included.

Andragogical implications for learner support provision in ODE.

As stated by Blondy (2007), andragogy has permeated the field of adult education despite ongoing debate regarding its usefulness and application. To this end, Knowles (1980, 1984) discovered through his work with adults that instructors or tutors need to care about the actual interests of learners instead of focusing on what instructors believe are learners’ interests. In Knowles’ opinion (Knowles, 1980, 1984), the best educational experiences are cooperative, guided interactions between the tutor and the learner with many available learner support resources provided. Jung (2009) opines that instructors should play a facilitator role and promote various interactive activities that focus more on adult learners’ experiences and ideas and less on the contexts itself. This means the institutions’ role would be to provide LSS that are responsive to these adult learner needs and
experiences. Henschke (2009) provides a summary of some of the andragogical implications as described below:

- The institutions should provide a physical and psychological learning environment which causes adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported, as well as a feeling of mutuality.
- Adults are more deeply motivated to learn those things they see the need to learn. In andragogy, therefore, great emphasis is placed on the involvement of adult learners in a process of self-diagnosis of needs for learning.
- A basic element in the technology of andragogy is the involvement of the learners in the process of planning their own learning with the tutor serving as a procedural guide and content resource.
- An andragogical learning situation should be alive with meetings of small groups, planning committees, learning-teaching teams, consultation groups, project task forces, and all these sharing responsibility for helping one another learn.
- Finally, andragogical theory prescribes a process of self-evaluation in which the tutor devotes energy to helping the adults get evidence for themselves about the progress they are making toward their educational goals.

**Statement of the Problem**

The context of ODL is such that the students and institution are separated in both time and space, hence, the provision of learner support services (LSS) is required in order to help students meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge requisite to academic and career success (Tait, 2000; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2003). However, despite efforts made by the ODE institutions, the ZOU included, to provide LSS to their distant students, the institutions have continued to experience problems related to low student motivation, low retention, and decreasing enrolments which are symptoms threatening institutional positive growth and better achievement of academic success and goals. According to Malcom Knowles (1980), these symptoms persist because adult education practitioners are failing to understand and to effectively apply the philosophy and principles of ‘andragogy’ which means “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980:43). To this end, the study employed a qualitative research paradigm to generate data from a purposive sample of students and staff at Masvingo Regional Campus about how best the ZOU can use the knowledge and philosophy of andragogy to enhance the design of appropriate learner support strategies for its students.

**The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to seek a basic understanding of andragogy as the philosophy that guides the understanding of the needs and characteristics of adult learners so as to get insights into the design of a more effective learner support provision at the Zimbabwe Open University. An effective learner support provision is likely to assist both students and institution achieve their educational goals. The study used students’ views and perceptions to describe the nature of learner support provision the students are experiencing, as well as those that they would want to experience at Masvingo Region of the ZOU. This information would act as a guide towards the development and enhancement of a more effective and integrated learner support framework that is likely to satisfy student needs and enhance their retention and academic success.

**Research Questions**

1. How can adult educators respond to students’ needs and characteristics when providing learner support services at ZOU?
2. How do students view their experiences with the current learner support provision at ZOU?
3. What nature of learner support services do students at the ZOU say they want so as to inform the provision of effective learner support services at ZOU?

Significance of the Study

The present study would benefit the adult learners in the sense that they would be given an opportunity to say what they think constitute a learner support service that is likely to maximise their teaching and learning. Matching students’ needs and the learner support provided ensures students’ satisfaction that enhances retention and academic success.

Findings of the present study would provide further insight into how best adult education practitioners can continue improving the existing learner support frameworks in order to address issues negatively affecting adult teaching and learning. This would further ignite more interest into future researchers who would be likely to search for the trustworthiness and credibility of results of this study through correlating the suggested learner support model with success and achievement of learners in various distance educational contexts, an aspect beyond the scope of the present study.

On the whole, discussions on some different adult educational philosophies that permeate through the study would help the readers to reflect upon their own educational philosophies on learner support in light of what they believe should be done and what they are actually doing.

Delimitations of the Study

The study focused on understanding adult learner needs and characteristics so as to develop an effective learner support provision for distance education learners studying with the ZOU. Informed by andragogical philosophy, the study drew information based on staff and students’ experiences and perceptions on learner support services provided at Masvingo Region of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Participants were fourth year undergraduate ZOU students and ZOU staff drawn from Masvingo region across faculties during the period of the first semester of 2013. Having spent at least three years with the university, fourth year undergraduate students were assumed to be information-rich as well as having wide experiences of how learner support services are provided at ZOU. A purposive cohort of two ZOU lecturers or programme coordinators and two administrative staff at Masvingo region acted as ZOU senior management representatives in reflecting upon the nature of learner support services provided at the ZOU.

The study used an interpretivist paradigm whereby a qualitative case study approach guided the generation and analysis of data leading to the results of the study.

Limitations

Because the study engaged adult learners as participants, the culture of adult learners sometimes becomes complex to the extent that the forms of data generation used could not have captured every nuance of the situation. To minimise this risk, I used maximum variation type of sampling as well as a variety of qualitative triangulation methods such as unstructured in-depth interviews, and participants’ observations to ensure that I accurately captured a wide description of participants’ experiences with learner support provision at ZOU.

Another threat to this study was compromised authenticity and genuineness of the data generated. Participants, in particular,
ZOU staff, might not have been at liberty to disclose all the information about learner support provision at ZOU as requested. This was because they could have felt uncomfortable with being involved in a study that questioned their ability and capacity to provide learner support to students of the very institution they were employed to serve. To restore my confidence and that of the participants, I asked participants to re-read the recorded descriptions of their experiences so that they cross-checked that I had accurately captured their experiences without the imposition of my presuppositions.

Personal bias could also have been another threat to this study. To minimise personal bias, I therefore diarised or recorded my thoughts, feelings and emotions when developing field notes. Awareness of my behaviour and actions guarded against bias during interpretation of the generated data. Selvik (2008) speaks of ‘bracketing’ meaning the researcher must ‘bracket’ his/her own preconceptions as he/she enters into the participant’s life world and uses the self as an experiencing interpreter.

Conceptual Definition of Terms

- Learner Support Services: These are defined as all those activities and resources that have been developed by institutions in ODE for the learners in order that they achieve their educational objectives (Tait, 2000; Thorpe 2003).
- Open and Distance Education (ODE) and Open and Distance Learning (ODL): In the study, the two terms are used interchangeably, however, with each term used where it best clarifies an issue. ODE refers to a form of education mediated by some form of interactive processes but with the learner and service providers separated from each other by time or space or by both (Bates, 1995; Keegan, 1980; Moore, 1990). ODL refers to distance learning with many factors that restrict adults from accessing university education removed (COL, 2003). Such is the context of ZOU.
- Adult Education: A philosophy that explains adult education as activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults (Knowles, 1980; Merriam and Brockett, 1997; Houle, 1996).
- Andragogy: This is a term coined by Malcolm Knowles (Knowles, 1968, 1980) to refer to adult education and more specifically, to the ‘art and science of helping adults learn’, as different from ‘pedagogy’. To link this concept more closely with this study, I will take Hardley’s (1975) observation. Hardley (1975), who advanced Knowles (1970) theory, views the purpose of andragogy as one aimed at education that grows from students’ needs at a particular time and in a specific context. Andragogical goals are continuously being created and reconstructed, but more importantly, the learner participates in this creation and reconstruction. Consequently, this study is about the adult learners believed to be participating in the creation and reconstruction of learner support services through experiencing them.

In Europe, according to Henschke (2009), the terms andragogy and adult education are now used synonymously. The same will apply in this study.

The term ‘University’ is referring to the Zimbabwe Open University.

The terms ‘students’ and ‘adult learners’ are used interchangeably.
Theoretical Framework

The study is informed by the theory of andragogy as explained by Knowles (1980).

Andragogy is defined as the ‘art and science of helping adults learn’ (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2007) and it depicts a learner-centered methodology in which the needs of the learner are considered first and the learner is afforded the opportunity to collaborate with the instructor in making decisions about his/her own education. The role of the instructor shifts from that of an authoritarian expert to a facilitator (Bolden, 2008). This is in keeping with the humanist and constructivist orientations that lay the foundation for the learner to reach full potential as a balanced emotional, psychological and intellectual entity (Knowles, 1980). The intention of such an environment encourages learner self-directedness that enhances self-esteem, promotes life-long learning and fosters critical and creative thinking. To this effect, this study sought for students’ perceptions about what their needs are, about their preferences for the support services and how they want these services delivered. This information partially fulfils the aim of the study which focuses on developing a comprehensive learner support framework for adult learners in ODE.

Methodology

The research design

The study described and analysed principles of andragogy as a philosophy underpinning learner support provision at the ZOU. It sought to answer the broad question: “How can understanding of andragogical principles be an influence towards the design and provision of LSS to distance adult learners at the ZOU?” To address this question, the study employed a qualitative case study approach drawn from an interpretivist ontological position. According to Kelliher (2005) and Myers (2008), an interpretive qualitative research paradigm seeks to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the social constructivist view of those who live it. Indeed this study sought to understand the lived experiences of the learner support phenomenon at the ZOU based on the students’ and staff points of view.

The sample

A purposive sample of ten participants comprising six fourth year undergraduate students and four university staff at Masvingo Region, participated in the study. The participants were assumed to be information-rich (Patton, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) with the phenomenon of learner support provision at Masvingo Region of the ZOU.

Data generating techniques

A triangulation (Patton, 2002) of qualitative data generating techniques, comprising participant observation and unstructured interviews (Guion, Flowers, Diehl and McDonald, 2011) were used to solicit information about adult learner needs and students’ and staff learner support experiences at the ZOU.

Data analysis

Data were analysed through inductive means that allowed critical themes to emerge (Patton, 2002). These themes were examined and interpreted in a holistic fashion to really find what the participants intended to communicate.
Verification of trustworthiness and credibility

Trustworthiness and credibility of the study were verified through using triangulation of data sources, member checking and bracketing (Patton and Cochran, 2002).

Ethical and legal considerations

The study complied with ethical and legal considerations through seeking informal verbal consent, voluntary participation of the participants, as well as reassuring them that their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were protected by concealing their identities from the public. Participants were also informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research process without being affected in any way. In addition, the researcher also sought permission from the ZOU authorities to conduct research in their institution.

Results

This qualitative study focused on discovering the extent to which the knowledge of andragogy influences the design and provision of effective learner support services in ODE using the ZOU as a unit of analysis. A total of 10 participants that embraced 6 students, 2 lecturers and 2 administrative staff drawn from Masvingo Region of the ZOU participated in the study. Participant observation and in-depth unstructured interviews were used as data generating instruments that solicited information directed towards addressing the study’s research questions.

1. Question 1: How can adult educators respond to students’ needs and characteristics when providing learner support services at ZOU?

In response to the above question, the main ideas expressed by the participants were that they (the students) are adult learners, some of whom have been out of school for some time. They are returning to resume studies because they are motivated to fulfill some of their life and career aspirations. Furthermore, they are adults with so many responsibilities such as being a parent, guardian, worker or breadwinner, a spouse, or community leader. All these roles are constraints that easily interfere with their learning process. Nevertheless, they return to school (university) at a point they feel they are ready to do so and can take charge and have full responsibility for their learning. In the same vein, they opt to study through distance education because they are highly motivated and task-oriented as observed by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) and Knowles (1980). They have also gone through vast life experiences that can now guide them to make informed decisions and capable of handling independent learning. To this effect, one of the informants had this to say:

By coming back to school, old as I am, it does not mean that I am blank. I have undertaken so many roles in life, the experiences and knowledge of which can facilitate understanding of what I learn.

Participants also said that they are no longer children, hence they have a need to decide for themselves about what is important for them, for example, deciding on an education programme that can change their status or satisfy a career aspiration of being getting promoted at work and earning more money or getting recognition in the community. Thus what they learn should be of relevance and of immediate application to their lives.

An analysis of these needs and characteristics show that they are not different from Knowles andragogical assumptions about adult learners (Knowles 1980, 1984). Sandlin (2005) concurs and says that andragogy, as a philosophy, creates an image of adult learners based on the notions
that they are self-directed and independent learners who need to know what is important for them, and who are ready to use their vast experiences to decide upon what is of immediate value to them.

On the other hand, the main ideas expressed by staff at Masvingo Region pointed to the fact that they are aware of the students’ needs and characteristics but it is difficult to cater for each and every student’s needs because each distance learner has a profile which may be similar or different from that of others. However, what is possible is to create a comfortable physical and psychological climate that provides an open and flexible arrangement that in turn allows students to access resources of their choice and need.

2. Question 2: How do students view their experiences about the current learner support provision at ZOU?

Participants were asked to express their views about the current learner support experiences at the ZOU. The main issue that came out was their delight in being able to access university education whilst learning at a distance. Participants pointed out a range of academic and non-academic facilities and resources that enabled them to study and achieve their academic goals. Some of the resources mentioned included the use of the module which they described as informative, portable, content-laden and user-friendly. They also commended on the availability of the module but went on to say that they would want a 100% guarantee from the university that the module would not run out at any stage and level of their studies.

Participants appreciated the provision of face-to-face weekend school tutorials but lamented about the following issues: instances when tutors come unprepared, sometimes lack of proper communication between them and the university, and time loss caused by one trying to do too many things at the same time. When probed, participants said that on the day of weekend school tutorial, of which the venues are situated close to the Regional Centre, a student would want to reduce cost by doing the following tasks, for example, submitting/collecting assignments, paying fees, visiting the library or also checking on one or two registry issues. All these activities are too involving, they retorted, and cause a lot of pressure. As supportive evidence to these sentiments, one of the participants said:

I come from Mwenezi District which is 160 kilometres away from the Regional Centre. Therefore, whenever I go to the Regional Centre I try as much as possible to attend to as many issues as possible regarding my studies. This causes a bit of some pressure.

Students also expressed that they applauded the nature of customer care provided by the Regional staff. However, they were not happy about the turn-around period of certain processes such as the return of marked assignments, feedback on queries presented, among other processes. They also appreciated the establishment of a computer laboratory and library with internet connectivity but lamented the lack of ICT literacy skills on their part.

Financial learner support dominated the issues raised. One of the informant commented:

I want to learn but the issue of fees is my biggest challenge. I have three children who are at boarding high schools. I need to provide food and also attend to medical matters. My wife is still at college and I am a civil servant. How do you think I manage?

Even though the University has put in place some favourable fee payment arrangements that include paying fees through the Salary Service Bureau (SSB) stop order facility over five months, students still appeal to the University to consider lowering fees and improving the fees payment arrangements.
3. Question 3: What nature of learner support services do students at the ZOU say they want so as to inform the provision of effective learner support services at ZOU?

During in-depth unstructured interviewing, students identified a number of gaps that characterise the current LSS at the ZOU. Although generally, they appreciated the kind of support the university is providing, particularly the provision of learner support in terms of financial support, both students and staff felt the university should strive more towards striking a balance between what students can afford and what makes the university viable. Whilst the students admitted that the fees level charged was fair and reasonably comparable with other institutions of higher learning, they categorically stated that they were struggling to raise that kind of money, considering that the majority of them are civil servants who take home a monthly net salary averaging $400. Thus, students want a financial support system that is flexible, affordable and manageable. Students also said that they want a LSS that acknowledges and takes cognisance of their diverse needs and challenges. When probed to explain, the participants called for a negotiated planning process when designing administrative programmes in terms of setting deadlines for submitting assignments, doing registration and payment of fees. Lecturers and administrative staff interviewed were at pains to accept this position but generally they said that they were committed to meet every student’s needs and they would always encourage students with individual problems to approach them.

Findings also revealed that students want training in various skills, viz, ICT skills, higher order study examination writing skills, advanced research skills, computer literacy and on-line service skills. Students also want an enhanced communication system that involves a variety of social media networking, for example, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Whatsapp, among other social media platforms. Because the adult learner in a distance learning context is often isolated, students demanded that it is the university’ prerogative to connect them to some groups of community learners, peers, and alumni in order to promote a collaborative and highly participative andragogical learning experience (Henshke, 2008). Students also want to be connected to their future employers through attachment to various prospective employment opportunities.

Finally, the andragogical theory prescribes that adult learners want something that is relevant and of immediate application to their lives (Knowles, 1980). In line with this, one of the participants had this to say:

I don’t see myself coming back to do a post-graduate programme because the university does not have a Masters programme that is directly related to my first degree. I am a Geography student. Where is the Masters programme in Geography studies?

Indeed, it is the researcher’s observation that the participant was reflecting on what is currently a true picture of academic programmes provided. The university is currently offering very few post-graduate programmes from which students can choose. Most of them end up taking post-graduate programmes that are not directly relevant to what they want, thus, in the process, distorting their academic profiles. What students were saying was that they want a LSS that strengthens their academic profiles through introducing post-graduate programmes that are market driven and relevant to their needs.

**Conclusion**

In light of the above discussion about andragogy as a philosophy, the study revealed that andragogy has undoubtedly influenced thinking and practices of distance adult learners. Because of who and what they are, adult learners want a learner support
framework that integrates several potentially useful ideas about their learning and what they want to achieve. The study has also inspired adult education practitioners to realise that what they think they provide as learner support may not be in line with what students say they want. Findings have also shown that the current group of adult learners are performance-centred in their orientation to learning; hence, their demands might transcend the general and ordinary type of learner support systems provided by many ODE institutions. Thus, andragogy, as a theory and philosophy, has a very strong bearing on what adult learners expect and on what institutions can provide as learner support for their students.

Recommendations

Reflecting on the above discussion on andragogy as a philosophy underpinning learner support provision in ODE, the study proposed the following recommendations.

• **Involvement in planning and diagnosis of students’ own needs**

Since the andragogical philosophy requires that adult education practitioners have knowledge about the adult learner needs and characteristics (Knowles, 1980), the study recommended that the university should, as much as possible, involve students in the planning and decision making process when it comes to designing programmes that involve meeting of deadlines, deciding on cut-off dates, or those that bind students to certain dates, venues or timetables so that a certain amount of flexibility and latitude is incorporated to accommodate the diverse needs of students.

• **Seeking alternatives for financial support**

Whilst fees charged by the ZOU is fairly reasonable and comparable with other institutions of higher learning, the university should still continue considering alternative fees payment levels and arrangements that meet the needs of their clientele who are mainly civil servants.

• **Widening communication networks and platforms**

With the advancement in ICT currently being enjoyed by the general populace of Zimbabwe, it was recommended that the university should widen its base of official communication platforms so that they embrace many social media networks such as Facebook, Linkedin, or Whatsapp in conjunction with the use of mobile telephoning, SMS packages and e-mailing in order to make the communication landscape a more natural, more pleasant and more user-friendly learner support facility.

• **Engaging students in ICT training and workshops**

The andragogical philosophy acknowledges that students enrolled in ODE institutions are old students but are ready to learn (Knowles, 1980). Because they are old students, it might also mean that these students missed early opportunities in the training of ICT skills as evidenced by their demand of it now. The university, therefore, should engage students in ICT training so that they can effectively participate in academic research and communication through use of modern ICT communication channels.

• **Introducing programmes that are demand and market driven**

Finally, the andragogical philosophy acknowledges that adult learners are task-oriented and want to learn things that are of immediate value and application to their lives. Participants in the study affirmed this position by demanding that the university introduces a variety of relevant post-graduate programmes that strengthen and enhance their academic and career profiles. The university should therefore introduce as many post-graduate programmes as possible so that they meet the market and career prospects of the students.
References


