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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Critical Impediments Facing In-service Teachers during Distance Education: A Case of Kwame Nkrumah University in Zambia

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Abstract: This paper outlines the major impediments that in-service teachers undergoing distance education encounter at Kwame Nkrumah University. An impediment is a challenge, problem, or hindrance. The study used a qualitative approach, structured interviews, and document analysis methods. The marginal theory backed by tenets of equitable management underpinned the study. The study shows that in-service students are molested by their school managers when they need permission to attend residential schools. The students are bombarded with numerous responsibilities at their duty stations and hence fail to concentrate on their studies. In-service students have limited time to learn because residential schools are only conducted during the holidays for school-going children. Distance education learners depend on face-to-face learning. Other modes of learning such as Moodle are not favorable because most of the students come from rural areas where internet connectivity is a serious challenge. The study further reveals that in-service teachers are not considered for scholarships by the Higher Education Loans and Scholarships Board (HELBS) in Zambia. Due to financial constraints, some students drop out of school and withdraw from their studies while others delay completing their studies. Most in-service distance education students graduate while owing the institution which warrants their certificates to be withheld.

Keywords: Distance education; impediment; in-service; molestation; teachers.

1. Introduction

The paper presents the major impediments that in-service teachers undergoing distance education face during their studies at Kwame Nkrumah University in Zambia. According to Siame (2023), an impediment is a challenge, problem, or hindrance during the distance education of in-service teachers. The United States Distance Learning Association (n.d.), defines distance education as the “acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance” (n.p.). Distance education can be obtained either using online teaching and learning or face-to-face or a combination of both online and face-to-face instruction which is referred to as blended learning (cf. Grahman, 2006). According to Garrison & Kanuka (2004), blended learning is a flexible approach that allows for personalised learning experiences, promotes active engagement, and enhances student outcomes. It can be argued that blended learning is suitable for in-service students undergoing distance education



because apart from face-to-face interaction with educators, students can easily access online education within the confines of their homes.

Distance education is meant for teachers who are already deployed in the teaching fraternity and are fully occupied at duty stations during the term for school-going children. This entails that the upgrading of studies for such teachers to either first or second-degree level can only be done during the holidays when school-going children close the schools. Besides, school managers and other responsible officers at district, province, and national levels cannot easily grant study leave to all the in-service teachers at once as the move might paralyse the smooth running of early childhood, primary and secondary education. Kwame Nkrumah University in Zambia offers distance education to in-service teachers in the following schools; education, humanities and social sciences, natural sciences, and business studies. The authors are mindful of the other Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana which is the source of inspiration for Kwame Nkrumah University of Education in Zambia.

Many studies have been conducted on the general challenges facing both pre-service and in-service students undergoing distance education at various universities such as (Ohene & Essuman, 2014; Lubungu & Mudenda, 2017; Nsiah, 2006). It is worth noting that many in-service teachers have the vigor to upgrade their academic qualifications. However, it must be pointed out that as in-service teachers upgrade themselves academically, they face many hindrances which contribute to the retardation of their academic progression. This paper, therefore, aims at identifying and analysing the impediments that the in-service teachers undergoing distance education encounter. The paper progresses as follows; literature review, theoretical locale, methodology, results and discussion, and the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Literature is excavated from the African perspective in general and universities in Zambia to have a deeper understanding of the critical impediments hindering the effective implementation of distance education to in-service teachers.

Ohene & Essuman (2014) explored and provided an up-to-date picture of the challenges faced by distance education students at the University of Education, Winneba in Ghana. The study shows that among the identified challenges faced by learners undergoing distance education are; institutional, instructional, social, psychological, and financial constraints. The above challenges are faced by both pre-service and in-service students undergoing distance education. However, the present study specifically deals with the challenges faced by in-service students studying distance education at Kwame Nkrumah University.

Nsiah (2006) outlined the challenges of the distance education system concerning access, quality, equity, and relevance faced by the students at the University of Ghana as follows: distance education students have inadequate infrastructure and info-structure that includes poor infrastructure, inadequate classrooms, teaching aids, and poor learning environments due to neglect of the physical facilities at the various centers. The second challenge is the lack of adequate staff development programmes for a sustainable career structure. The third challenge is inadequate instructional materials, books, and learning materials. The fourth challenge is gender disparity which is more pronounced in rural areas of Ghana. The fifth challenge is declining standards in quality with learner achievement test results compared to other countries in Africa. The sixth challenge is the lack of funding from the government as well as the lack of effective monitoring of the management.

Nsiah (2006) also shows that there is inadequate directional, relevant, and functional curriculum. Inadequate teaching and learning facilities are leading to poorly prepared students and a lack of self-confidence in student graduates. There is a lack of correct and reliable operational data and statistics for education planning. The university has inadequate administrative procedures and lacks a systematic approach to information communication

technology (ICT) to use in distance education settings. The scholar points out that the above challenges are attributed to different political systems, population growth, international and national decrees, and a new socio-economic dispensation.

Musigafi et al, (2015) investigated the challenges facing open and distance learning students at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The results show that open and distance learners are challenged with a range of obstacles in their course of studies. The most reported challenges are lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in accessing and using ICT, ineffective feedback, and lack of study materials. The scholars argue that the above challenges are a recipe for many other problems associated with distance learning such as the high rate of students' dropout and late completion of studies. The scholars add that distance education students are affected academically, psychologically, and financially. They conclude that a lack of study materials forces students to submit sub-standard assignments and are most likely to get to examinations without enough preparation which results in poor academic performance.

A study conducted by Lubungu & Mudenda (2017) revealed that content, organisational, pedagogical, communicative, and personal growth competencies still haunt the distance education area at Kwame Nkrumah University. Furthermore, the study reveals insights into factors linked to the expectations, and support of students and lecturers alike, which proved influential in terms of lecturers' output and students' resilience and motivation to remain on course. Students' progression rate and their stay on the programme depend on the support provided while lecturers' motivation to deliver quality information depends on their competencies and the support they get from the managerial system. The study also shows that growth in enrolments depends on the institution's capacity to provide appropriate academic and student support and, therefore assessment of programme inputs and outcomes is a crucial component of educational effectiveness.

It can be observed that the above-reviewed literature deals with the general challenges faced by both pre-service and in-service students undergoing distance education. However, the present study specifically problematises the critical impediments faced by in-service students studying distance education at Kwame Nkrumah University.

3. Theoretical Locale

The study is informed by the marginal theory (McClusky, 1963) and is backed by tenets of equitable management (cf. Siame & Lubungu, 2023). The marginal theory looks at the potential restrictions to participation in the management of educational affairs. Restrictions hinder the active involvement of in-service students undergoing distance learning in planning and education. In this paper, the above restrictions lead to the marginalisation of in-service trainee teachers in university educational planning and implementation. Restrictions also hinder cohesion and unity between in-service students and the university management (cf. Marten & Kula, 2014). Siame & Lubungu (2023) opine that restrictions in the area of academic advancement for those that are already in formal employment, such as in-service teachers, lead to a lack of appointments to positions that require higher academic qualifications.

Drawing insights from tenets of equitable management, teachers who are curriculum implementers must be given due consideration when they decide to upgrade their academic qualifications (cf. Siame, 2022a). To account for critical impediments affecting the in-service teachers undergoing distance education to upgrade their academic qualifications, we adopt tenets of equitable management as a corpus to decolonise the management of in-service students who are eager to improve their teaching skills and knowledge. Siame & Lubungu (2023) opine that the tenets of equitable management can be used to redeem equity of implementers of education that is in-service teachers, whose voices are usually caged. The choice of the marginal theory to address issues that surround critical impediments facing in-service teachers undergoing distance education is befitting in this

study because it aims at removing potential restrictions that hinder smooth academic progression (cf. McClusky, 1963).

For distance education to flourish at Kwame Nkrumah University, management is expected to uphold equitable management characteristics. Tenets of equitable management are required to effectively manage the welfare of in-service students studying by distance education. It is hoped that the effective application of the tenets discussed below would help to address the critical impediments affecting the in-service teachers undergoing distance education which would in turn improve enrolment levels both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Figure 1 presents the eight tenets of equitable management which can be adopted in the management of in-service distance education at Kwame Nkrumah University:

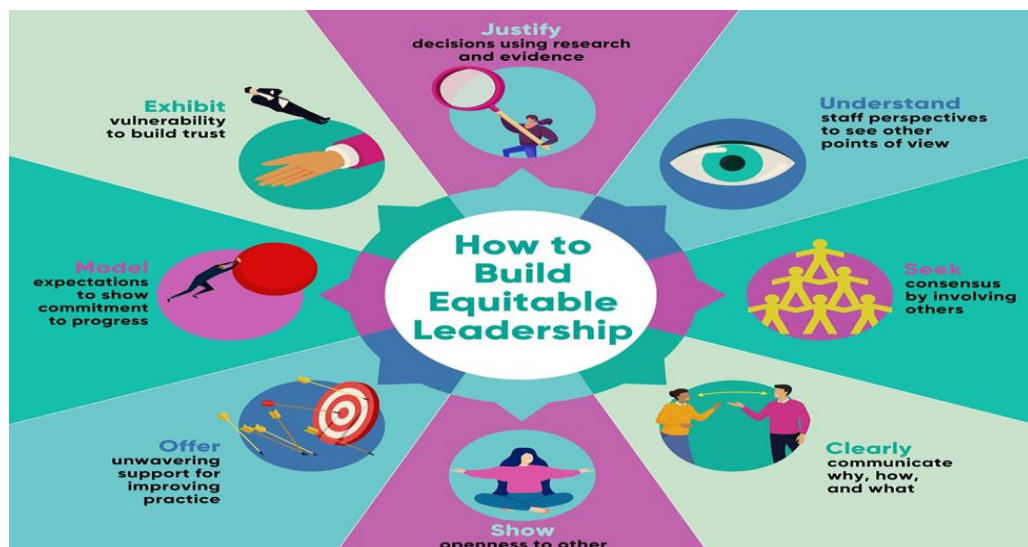


Figure 1. Equitable management of in-service teachers undergoing distance education (Adopted from Siame, 2022a)

Based on the characteristics of equitable management of in-service teachers undergoing distance education at Kwame Nkrumah University (cf. Siame, 2022a; Siame & Lubungu, 2023), the university management needs to research to ascertain the challenges faced by in-service students undergoing distance education before they make certain decisions. For instance, the hardships in-service students face when they are not considered for financial aid. The second tenet shows that the university management is expected to take into account the points of view of student teachers who are undergoing distance education. They should be allowed to express the challenges they face during their studies both at the university and at their duty stations during their course of study. This audience would help to find lasting solutions to the challenges in-service teachers face during distance education. The third tenet of equitable management requires seeking consensus by involving in-service teachers undergoing distance education before the university management implements any policy for or against the students. This situation would help to create a good rapport with the in-service students and would help to boost the enrolment levels due to cordial relationships.

The fourth tenet requires the university management to clearly explain the rationale behind the introduction of any policy for or against the in-service teachers so that they are psychologically prepared. Distance education students are sometimes caught on the web by being told that they cannot write either the end of the year or the final examination during the examination period because they are owing the institution. The fifth tenet encourages management to be open to in-service student teachers' ideas and suggestions regarding their education. The next tenet is about management offering unwavering support to in-service

students undergoing distance education. The seventh tenet encourages management to become role models in promoting the pride of in-service teachers when formulating policies to witness progress and good results in their endeavours. The eighth tenet requires management to exhibit vulnerability to in-service teachers undergoing distance education for students to build trust. The effective implementation of the above tenets of equitable management for in-service teachers undergoing distance education would yield better results for students and the university (cf. Siame & Lubbungu, 2023).

4. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design to guide the data collection and analysis. The results obtained using qualitative research are holistic, non-numerical, inductive, subjective, and process-oriented methods used to understand, describe, interpret, and develop a theory on a phenomenon (cf. Brink & Wood, 1998; Siame et al, 2023). The research findings obtained using the qualitative design are reported using words and sentential expressions (cf. Mutch, 2005; Siame, 2022b).

The structured interviews and document analysis methods were adopted to justify the descriptive objectives using secondary data (cf. Siame, 2019). Chaleunvong (2009) shows that identifying and retrieving secondary sources of data required for the study is the systematic starting point of efficient data collection. Data were elicited from twenty respondents using questionnaires during the April 2023 residential school who were selected purposively. Four respondents were first years, four were second years, four were third years, four were fourth-year students and four were postgraduate students at masters' level. Each intake and academic year had a representation from the school of education, humanities and social sciences, natural sciences, and business students.

Using the rationale of Mugenda & Mugenda (1999), data collection went hand in hand with analysis. Data from both oral and secondary sources were analysed analytically using descriptive, thematic, and tabular concepts. The documents which were analysed were accessed from libraries, the internet, and published works.

5. Results and Discussion

Results and discussions are presented side by side regarding critical impediments faced by in-service teachers undergoing distance education using the identified themes based on the responses from the questionnaires.

5.1 Molestation of In-service Students when Getting Permission for Residential Schools

Results from the questionnaires regarding the molestation of in-service teachers by school managers when get permission to attend residential schools are presented in the table 1.

Table 1. School managers molesting teachers over permission

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	15	75
Agree	5	25
Not sure	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Total	20	100

The table shows that 100% of in-service students who participated in the research suffer from molestation by school managers when they request permission to attend residential schools. This shows that there is resistance by school managers to allow in-service students to leave duty stations and attend residential schools. This is a critical impediment that counters Lubbungu & Mudenda (2017) who point out that the students' progression rate and their stay on the programme depend on the support they get from the managerial

system. Molestation of in-service teachers when getting permission has a psychological impact that affects their academic performance during residential schools and examinations (cf. Musigafi et al, 2015). School managers should, therefore, motivate the in-service distance learners because the skills and knowledge they acquire are meant to benefit their learners and uplift the academic performance of the schools.

5.2 Bombarding In-service Students with Numerous Responsibilities

The table 2 illustrates how in-service student teachers are bombarded with numerous responsibilities by their school managers at their duty stations.

Table 2. Bombarding in-service students with responsibilities

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	17	85
Agree	3	15
Not sure	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Total	20	100

The results of the survey affirm that in-service distance student learners are bombarded with a lot of responsibilities at their duty stations. This shows that in-service students have less time to concentrate on their academic work, hence it suffers drastically. According to Musigafi et al, (2015), this impediment leads to a high rate of student dropout and late completion of studies. For instance, some students fail some courses and are made to repeat such courses which are not only time-consuming but also expensive on the part of students who already have financial constraints. School managers must be considerate and relieve the in-service student learners with some responsibilities at duty stations to enable them to concentrate on academic work.

5.3 Limited time to Learn

The results on Table 3 represent the time that is allocated to in-service distance learners during their residential schools.

Table 3. Limited time for residential schools

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	20	100
Agree	0	0
Not sure	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Total	20	100

The study reveals that in-service students have limited time to attend residential schools which correlate with Musigafi et al, (2015) who report that students at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) lack sufficient time for study. Informants indicated that Kwame Nkrumah University gives them two or three weeks to cover the work that is learnt in three months by full-time students. This shows that in-service students have inadequate time to learn, as such, the uptake of knowledge and skills is limited. The finding also shows that there is a lot of panic even on the part of the educators to cover the required work within a short period. During the two or three weeks of residential school, students are expected to attend numerous activities, such as lectures, assignments, tests, and many more. Based on the frequency percentile, this impediment scored 100% in terms of strong agreement by the informants to indicate that it is critical and requires attention. The impediment is also critical because it is likely to affect the academic performance of students who settle down

by the time they are closing the residential school. This critical impediment is like a double-edged sword against in-service teachers because teachers are bombarded with responsibilities at duty stations (see Table 2) which leaves them with little or no time to study when they are teaching learners, and when attending residential schools, time is too short to study effectively.

5.4 *Over-dependence on Face-to-face Learning*

The table 4 represents results obtained from the questionnaires concerning the mode of learning in-service students are comfortable with.

Table 4. Blended learning is favourable for in-service teachers

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	0	0
Agree	5	25
Not sure	0	0
Strongly disagree	10	50
Disagree	5	25
Total	20	100

Results show that 75% of in-service students in distance education are not comfortable with blended learning. Blended education, also known as hybrid or mixed-mode learning, has gained considerable attention in recent years as a mode of teaching and learning that combines online and face-to-face instruction (cf. Grahman, 2006). It is a flexible approach that allows for personalised learning experiences, promotes active engagement, and enhances student outcomes (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). However, the study shows that despite the benefits of blended learning, in-service teachers are not comfortable with this mode of education due to challenges of internet connectivity and other technical challenges associated with technology. Apart from in-service distance learners shunning away from blended learning, the study shows that Kwame Nkrumah University lacks a systematic approach to information communication technology (ICT) to use in distance education settings which is in tandem with Nsiah (2006).

5.5 *Internet Connectivity*

The responses regarding challenges associated with internet connectivity are presented in the table 5.

Table 5. Internet connectivity is not a challenge at duty stations

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	0	0
Agree	5	25
Not sure	0	0
Strongly disagree	10	50
Disagree	5	25
Total	20	100

This finding shows that 75% of informants stated that internet connectivity is a critical challenge in their teaching stations which is in tandem with Musigafi et al, (2015) who report that students have difficulties in accessing and use of ICT facilities at ZOU in Zimbabwe. The challenge of internet connectivity is also echoed by Nsiah (2006) who observes that the University of Ghana also lacks a systematic approach to information communication technology (ICT) to use in distance education settings. This entails that most in-service students who are upgrading their academic qualifications either at the undergraduate or postgraduate level serve in rural areas where internet services are either extremely poor or not just available.

5.6 Lack of Consideration for Government Scholarships

Many in-service teachers undergoing distance education expressed concern over not being considered for government bursaries, loans, or scholarships. The results of the study are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. In-service students are not considered for scholarships

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	15	75
Agree	5	25
Not sure	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Total	20	100

The table 6 shows that 100% of informants agreed that the government of Zambia does not consider in-service students at Kwame Nkrumah University for loans and scholarships. The results show that in-service teachers are not considered for scholarships under the Higher Education Loans and Scholarships Board (HELSEB) in Zambia. This finding is in line with Nsiah (2006) who bemoans the lack of funding for distance education from the government. The loans and scholarships are only accessed by full-time students whether in-service or pre-service which is segregative. This trend is contrary to private universities in Zambia such as St. Eugene-DMI University and ICU where in-service teachers undergoing distance education are also considered for scholarships. Some are given 50% while others 75%. This situation reduces financial challenges for in-service teachers who are only required to pay 25%. The Higher Education Loans and Scholarships Board in Zambia can emulate private institutions by extending its hand to in-service teachers undergoing distance education.

5.7 Financial Constraints

The results (Table 7) which were collected concerning the financial position of in-service students studying distance education at Kwame Nkrumah University.

Table 7. In-service distance learners have financial challenges

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	18	90
Agree	2	10
Not sure	0	0
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Total	20	100

The frequency of the findings reveals that 100% of in-service students in distance education have serious financial constraints (cf. Ohene & Essuman, 2014). It is hoped that the university management can identify students with critical financial impediments and recommend them to HELSEB so that they are put on government scholarships. Some in-service students are breadwinners and are overburdened with responsibilities which warrants them to be described as vulnerable and such learners need financial assistance to activate their academic potential. These are the students who take more than the normal four years at the undergraduate level and more than two years at the postgraduate level to graduate. Due to financial constraints, some in-service students drop out of school. The study further shows that most in-service students withdraw from their studies due to financial constraints and delay the completion of their studies. These findings are in tandem with Musigafi et al, (2015) who argue that the above challenges are a recipe for many other

problems associated with distance learning such as a high rate of students' dropout and late completion of undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

5.8 Withholding of Results

The responses from first, second, third, and fourth years, as well as postgraduate students regarding withholding results at the university, are presented on Table 8.

Table 8. Withholding results for students

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	10	50
Agree	7	35
Not sure	2	10
Strongly disagree	0	0
Disagree	1	5
Total	20	100

Based on Table 8, 85% of informants agreed that the university withholds results for both returning and graduating students when they are owing the institution. This trend is meant to force the in-service students to clear the outstanding fees before they can either proceed to the following academic year or collect the results from the university. This shows that most in-service distance education students graduate with huge credits which warrant their certificates to be withheld, a situation that retards their progress if opportunities come their way such as appointments to higher positions. Musigafi et al, (2015) outline that this critical impediment for in-service distance learners promotes a high rate of student dropout and late completion of their studies. One way to go around this impediment would be for Kwame Nkrumah University to engage in-service distance learners to fill in stop order forms so that they are deducted from the salary monthly, provided students remain sincere and do not switch bank accounts after the engagement.

6. Conclusion

The paper has presented the major impediments that in-service teachers undergoing distance education face at Kwame Nkrumah University. The study shows that in-service teachers who upgrade their qualifications through distance education are molested by their school managers when they need permission to attend residential schools. The in-service student teachers are also bombarded with numerous responsibilities at their duty stations which makes them fail to concentrate on their academic work. The in-service teachers have little time to attend lectures because residential schools are only conducted during the holidays for school-going children. Distance education learners depend on face-to-face or physical learning. Other modes of learning such as Moodle are problematic because most of the in-service students come from rural areas where internet connectivity is a serious challenge. The in-service students are not considered for scholarships by the Higher Education Loans and Scholarships Board (HELSB) in Zambia and hence face financial challenges. Due to financial constraints, some in-service students drop out of school. Most in-service students withdraw from their studies due to financial constraints and delay the completion of their studies. Finally, most in-service distance students graduate with huge credits which warrant their certificates to be withheld, a situation that retards their progress if opportunities come their way.

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