

**Key issues in designing and managing a successful university adult education programme in a developing country**

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**Abstract**

*This paper draws on experiences from the University of Zambia to propose a framework for discussions on designing and managing university adult education programmes in a developing country. The paper is premised on two arguments. The first argument is that the success of any adult education programme largely depends on its responsive nature to the needs of the various stakeholders it caters for. The second argument is that when challenges to adult education arise, the programme should reflect carefully on the appropriate response so as to avoid embracing suggestions that would be inimical to the field and render it irrelevant to society. The paper provides key issues in designing and managing adult education programmes framework that is anchored on the creation of sustainable systems. The basic elements of the framework are: diversity in staffing; responsive programmes, structured succession programmes; a structure for encouraging institutional memory; a structure for promoting communicating and sharing of diverse ideas and innovations; and a strong monitoring and evaluation system.*

**Introduction**

This paper is aimed at providing a framework for structuring discussions on designing university adult education programs. The paper is premised on two central arguments. The first the argument is that the success of an adult education program largely depends on its responsive nature to the needs of the various stakeholders. This paper draws lessons from experiences of designing and managing adult education at the University of Zambia. The central argument of the paper is that the success of adult education at University of Zambia has largely been due to its responsive nature and its synergy drawn from diversity in perspectives of program developers. The second argument is that when challenges to adult education arise the program developers should reflect carefully on the appropriate response and not embrace suggestion that would render the field irrelevant to society. Therefore, certain skills should be identified as the basic skills in adult education.

The focus of the paper is on the lessons that can be drawn from designing and managing a successful university adult education program. As pointed out earlier, participation of educators in designing and managing programs in institutions of learning is limited by restrictive structures of operation that are often tied to issues of resources (Mbozi 1991). The benefits of using a participatory approach in management have been elaborated by Flood and Romm (1996).

Historically, adult education has arisen as a response to particular needs of society. Adult education has a symbiotic relationship with the environment in which it occurs. It tends to respond to social change and further social change. An analysis of adult education programs requires the interrogation of the several factors that influence its design. *But adult education can and should play an integral role in improving not only individuals' lives but also improving society; adult education can promote change as well as respond to it.*

It matters how education is perceived in the minds of the designers. For instance when education is perceived as an instrument of public policy, perceived national interests in social stability, in religious conformity, in defense and in skill training will be furthered by legislative means.

**Definition of adult education**

The Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies at University of Zambia have not adopted a definition of adult education. At the international level, attempts to define adult education have been plagued by controversies over goals, methods, content and over objectives. These controversies have been compounded by the nebulous definition of who an adult is. Various factors are used to arrive at definitions of an adult such as social responsibility, psychological development, biological development and legal maturity. The definition of who an adult is tends to be a function of the purpose for which the definition is being adopted, and thus the tendency to have a nebulous definition even within the same society. What is indisputable is the fact that all societies accept that they are human beings that are considered adults and that any form of organized, scheduled, systematic and purposeful learning for those adults can thus be classified as adult education.

At the international level, the tendency has been to minimize divisive controversies over the definition of adult education and rather focus on unifying elements of adult education. For instance, leaning towards an international oriented definition of adult education, Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) cited the UNESCO definition of adult education, which minimizes the controversies regarding goals, content and objectives as well as the definition of who is an adult. The 1976 General Conference of UNESCO adopted the following as its official definition of adult

education. "Adult education is a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values or skills." (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982:9). From such an international standpoint, Darkenwald and Merriam adopted the following as their definition of adult education.

The term adult education denotes the entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behavior in the twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic, and cultural development. (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982:9)

The definition adopted by Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) is accepted as comprehensive and adequate for use in this paper.

### **Perceptions of the functions of adult education**

It matters how adult education is perceived in the minds of the curriculum designers because the perception influence the goal of education. For purposes of this paper a few common perceptions are provided. First adult education is perceived as an instrument of public policy. When education is perceived as an instrument of public policy, defined national interests such as social order and stability, peace, civic education, national development, religious conformity, national defence and skill training are furthered by legislative means. The role of a public university such as University of Zambia would be to implement the national policy on adult education. Examples are the Land Grant Universities in the United States of America that had to implement the Cooperative Extension Services programs.

Second, adult education is perceived as an instrument of personal development or growth. When adult education is perceived as an instrument of personal development or growth, then adult education becomes a means of achieving self-actualization as recommended by humanistic psychologists such as Malcolm Knowles. It also can be seen as a means of cultivating the intellect without the intention of impacting on the social goals or action. In its basic form this perception of adult education leads designers to focus on the promotion of learner-focused programs such as counselling programs, the Student Centered Individualized Learning Programs (SCIL), Self-directed learning and variations of distance learning which is now enhanced by advances in electronic technologies.

Third, adult education is perceived as an instrument of social or community development. In this situation, adult education is a means of group development. When perceived in this way, group learning within the community for purposes of facilitating change is recommended. The focus in this situation is on how groups learn such as organizational development and community development. The consequence of this perception of education is a thrust on groups that are perceived as specialized learner groups such as workers, women, youth, distant learners or illiterate adults.

Fourth, adult education is perceived as an instrument of social transformation. Much of this perception builds on the work of two radical adult educators: Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci. The central argument of radical adult educators is that personal as well as social development is constrained by unequal relations that are a product of economic domination structures that are reflected in all aspects of life including religion, law, education and culture. Freire and Gramsci argue that the purpose of adult education is to transform people's perspectives so that they can transform society to make it a more equitable and just society. According to Gramsci, educators should develop intellectuals that are capable of engaging in counter-hegemonic activities (Mayo, 1999). Similarly, Friere (1993), argued that educators' main task was to transform people's consciousness from uncritical, intransitive consciousness that makes people to accept dehumanizing conditions of poverty and oppression to critical consciousness that enables people transform their lived experiences.

The major theoretical approaches that have influenced the designing and prioritization of programs in adult education are the functionalist and the conflict frameworks. The functionalist framework is based on the assumption that pedagogic actions of families from different social classes, as well as actions of the schools work together in harmonious way to transmit a culture heritage which is considered the property of the whole society. The assumption is that the educational system promotes mobility in a fair and equal way (Rubenson, 1989).

The conflict theorists on the other hand maintain that the structure of symbols and of knowledge in educational institutions is that the dominant culture and control education is an instrument of domination that perpetuates the inequalities of society – inequalities that are reflected in the selection and lack of mobility that occur – schools reproduce and legitimate ubiquitous power structures of today’s society. A third position is that there is need to formulate a coherent account of change that acknowledges both structure and agency if we are to come to terms with Marx’s aphorism that men make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing.

### **Key issues in designing and managing adult education programmes**

The key issues in designing and managing adult education programs can be summed up into one phrase: Creation of sustainable systems.

#### **Creation of sustainable systems**

- The vision and mission should be sustainable. A vision that is sustainable is one that mobilizes people and one that is shared by all members. In order for a vision to possess a mobilizing capacity it should be made explicit. Similarly the mission (which is the process for achieving the vision) should be shared by members. Every member should be clear on how their individual role contributes to achievement of the vision. The best way of developing a vision is to engage into a participatory visioning exercise.
- The program should be responsive to the changing environment. The element of dynamism is critical for sustaining the program through the changing social contexts.
- A structured succession program. A succession program ensures the building of capacities of new members of staff as well as the integration of new ideas. The process of training new leaders and mentoring new members is as important as strategic recruitment of staff.
- A strong monitoring and evaluation system. An evaluation system that incorporates critical reflection events and builds on deliberate comprehensive evaluation is necessary for sustainable systems. Further the evaluation should be conducted by both internal and external evaluators as the two complement each other. The monitoring and evaluation processes should include review of courses that are supported by data from tracer studies, industry relevance studies and social context studies.
- A structure for encouraging institutional memory should be formulated. Documenting experiences of innovations as well as adopted and adapted ideas and practices creates a structure for critical reflection. Conference proceedings are one such avenue for encouraging institutional memory. Reports of institutionally commissioned research studies are another.
- Incorporation of diverse ideas through a well-established structure for communicating and sharing challenges, innovations, ideas and practices. Conferences, journals, and seminars are all part of the structure for communication.

When the Department of Adult Education is assessed against each of the above key issues in designing and managing adult education programs it becomes apparent that the Department excels in the majority of cases and attempts to perform better have been made in the remaining areas. The Department has been responsive to the changing socioeconomic context of the learners,

#### **Diversity in staffing**

The staff development program provided opportunities for study in programs that permit the cross pollination of ideas, thus creating the needed synergy for development of new programs. Diversity of ideas also implied diversity of frameworks or theoretical positions. The major theoretical approaches that have influenced the designing and prioritization of programs in adult education are the functionalist and the conflict frameworks. The functionalist framework is based on the assumption that pedagogic actions of families from different social classes, as well as actions of the schools work together in harmonious way to transmit a culture heritage which is considered the property of the whole society. The assumption is that the educational system promotes mobility in a fair and equal way (Rubenson, 1989).

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### **Responsive programme**

In response to the needs of the Zambian community the Department of Adult Education at the University of Zambia has developed various programmes and training methodologies. The Department currently runs forty-three credit programmes, three of which are run at the Great East Road campus. The programmes at the Great East Road campus are:

- Bachelor of Adult Education (full-time),
- Bachelor of Adult Education through distance learning, and;
- Master of Education in Adult Education.

From time to time, non-credit programmes are also run at the various provincial centres under Extension Studies unit. The programs are designed to meet various needs of learners and thus the objectives, contents and structure vary from program to program. The credit Certificate and Diploma programs are targeted at adult learners that are not able to take full time studies for extended durations and are thus, relatively short. It takes a year to complete the Certificate Program and two years to complete the Diploma Programme.

The course structure and contents for the Bachelor of Adult Education degree programs is the same. However, it takes only four years to complete fulltime studies and six years to complete the same degree through distance learning. The distance education program is suitable for people who cannot take a continuous period of four years from their family and work responsibilities.

The Master of Education in Adult Education was established as a response to the need for higher level training in adult education. The program follows the general eighteen-month duration of masters programs at University of Zambia.

Credit programs in the Department target two broad categories of people. The first category is that of de facto adult educators or people who are involved in the education of adults as trainers, facilitators or administrators without skills in adult education. Some students in these programs are people who may hold Bachelors or Masters degrees in other areas but find themselves in need of adult education skills. The second category is that non-adult educators who are interested in developing a career in adult education. This group of students includes teachers of adolescents in primary and secondary schools as well as school leavers.

The structure of courses for credit programs are developed based on needs of learners and diversity in specializations of members of staff. Needs assessments are one influencing factor in the development of courses. Courses such as Non- governmental Organizations and Emerging Issues in Adult Education respond to the current challenges in the Zambian socioeconomic and political context. Training methods are in turn influenced the assumptions and perspectives of educators. This is not unique to Zambia, the evolution of various philosophies and consequent training methodologies have been linked to how educators perceive to be the ideal functions of adult education. Knowles (1970) developed his concept of andragogy to serve his perceived humanistic functions of adult education. Similarly, Argyris (1978) working with Schon developed the concept of double-loop learning to serve their purpose of adult education which is building learning organizations to improve practice. Yet another adult educator that links the functions of adult education to learning methods is Paulo Freire. Freire's concepts of praxis, dialogue and generative themes were adopted and developed to serve the function of conscientization and social transformation

Courses are also developed based on the diversity of specializations of the academic members of staff. In the 1980s and 1990s the Department used to explicitly encourage members of staff to select institutions and universities that offer different subject areas and that are located in various regions of the world. Academic members of staff have completed post graduate programs in countries such as Canada, United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia, in addition to programs in Africa.

The programmatic focus of institutions and universities around the world vary depending on the ideologies and philosophical values of program developers. Quite often adult educators in the third world have been associated with radical adult education and critical pedagogies, but they have also been associated with humanistic education. The blend of adult education courses at University of Zambia has been due to adaptations of knowledge, skills, and value perspectives obtained from universities around the world as much as due to the need to respond to the needs of learners. Undergraduate adult education courses at University of Zambia can be grouped into broad categories as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Broad Categories of Undergraduate Course in Adult Education**

Broad Category of Area	Examples of Courses
Radical adult education/ Critical pedagogy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Popular education</li> <li>2. Emerging Issues</li> <li>3. Participatory approaches to Development</li> <li>4. Mass education and Development</li> </ol>
Courses dealing with social dynamics of the environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Non-Governmental Organizations</li> <li>2. Emerging Issues in Adult education</li> <li>3. Contemporary Issues in Adult education</li> </ol>
Administrative/ management courses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Program planning</li> <li>2. Management of adult education programs</li> <li>3. Program evaluation</li> </ol>
Training Methods / Facilitation courses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Instructional Methods &amp; Techniques</li> <li>2. Community Development</li> <li>3. Dynamics of Planned Change</li> </ol>
Specialized Learner-group course	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Workers' education</li> <li>2. Literacy and Learning environment</li> <li>3. Gerontology</li> </ol>
Social Science / philosophy courses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Psychology of adult learners</li> <li>2. Philosophical foundations of adult education</li> <li>3. Sociology of adult education</li> <li>4. History &amp; Development of education</li> </ol>
Skilled based/ practice courses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Statistics</li> <li>2. Research methods and techniques</li> <li>3. Comparative adult education</li> <li>4. Communication skills</li> </ol>

The non-credit extension programs (also referred to as class programs) in the Department are demand driven and have been quite responsive to the perceived needs of learners. In the 1980s, learners demanded classes that would enable them pass the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level examinations. Major factors influencing the demand for class programs are: The effects of the Structural Adjustment Program, poverty and growth of social protection programs leading to a rise in the number of non-governmental organizations, The growth of the women's movement leading to general awareness of gender inequality, and consequent rise in women focused non-governmental organizations, the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the need to manage these effects, and technological changes particularly rising utilization of the computer in the country. The introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program in Zambia brought about the loss of jobs that led to high unemployment rates in the country. The consequence of this unemployment was a demand for skills that would enable graduates to change their careers. The rise in the numbers of non-governmental organizations led to demands for skills in project management and participatory approaches. The increase in HIV/AIDS led to an increased demand for courses in social work and counselling. Technological changes led to the introduction of computer software application skill programs

### **Challenges requiring attention**

The Department of Adult Education and Extension studies at University of Zambia is faced by three related major challenges: The first challenge is the issue of a labour market for its graduates. What employment positions are the graduates expected to fill? The second challenge is societal perception of adult education and its role in society. If we start providing programs at university level in every all areas of need, the basic question is really is do we still have a niche in society? What really is the purpose of adult education? What is the distinct place of adult educators in society? What shall be our course content? The third challenge is what is motivating students to study adult education? Are our students expecting to work as adult educators? Do our students expect to perform adult education functions? Are student motivations in line with the goals of the Department?

In addressing the challenges that the Department faces a few realities of the current context must be dealt with. First, although the majority of the students in the Department are serving teachers, the current structure does not seem to require as many adult educators as it requires other categories of teachers. This has led other categories of specialized educators such as special education teachers, physical education teachers, careers and guidance teachers, to *tag-along teaching subjects* that are considered priorities in schools such as Mathematics, English, History, Geography. While *tag-along subjects* may solve the perceived problem in the Ministry of Education it certainly only goes to further define adult education as adult literacy and evening classes and thus limit the niche for adult education. What, would an adult education specialist be doing at a primary school or secondary school? Would they be managers? Then why

not specialize in educational administration and policy studies? Would they be handling students in the re-entry program? Then why not specialize in careers and guidance program that offers counselling? Unless the role of teachers with an adult education background is clearly defined, schools would eventually prefer what they consider *full-time* teachers.

The second reality is that the perceived need for adult educators in other Ministries in Zambia such as Health, Agriculture and Home Affairs is not any better than the Ministry of Education. In the cited Ministries, the central technical training of the professionals seems to be the constraining factor. Students that take adult education as the only professional training do not have the necessary technical training in fields that qualify them to be educators in the above mentioned specialized areas. While professionals in these fields may see the need for training in adult education so as to enhance their work, the students that come directly into adult education do not have the advantage of working in these specialized fields beyond being training officers.

The third reality is the question of roles and functions of adult education. And this reality is premised in the argument that here are some basic skills that are considered basic to adult education if adult education is to fulfil its mandate. How do we handle the question of functions of adult education? Unlike the field of preparatory education where there is similarity in the roles and functions educators play, in adult education there is often a great disparity between the formal roles adult educators occupy and the functions they perform. In general adult educators, whatever their designated role, perform a great variety of educative functions than do their counterparts in preparatory education (Darkenwald and Merriam 1982).

The basic functions of adult education are instruction, counselling, advocacy and program development and administration. Program development refers to the design, implementation and evaluation of educational activities. The program development process involves assessing learner needs, setting objectives, selecting learning activities and resources for learning, making and executing decisions necessary for learning activities to take place and evaluation of outcomes. The current program is to a large extent aligned to the basic functions of adult education and in reviewing it is important to address the question of the focus of adult education.

### **Conclusion**

The adult education programs are designed according to the needs of the community and tend to be more dynamic than programs outside the field of adult education. The nature of adult education is such that need for immediate use of a skill after acquiring it influences the viability of a skill. This is reflected in the way programs in adult education have been designed over time.

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