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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADEA	Association for Development of Education in Africa
AERA	American Educational Research Association
BEC	Botswana Examination Council
BGCSE	Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education
BOCODOL	Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning
CKGR	Central Kalahari Game Reserve
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CSC	Community Study Centre
DE	Distance Education
DEASA	Distance Education Association of Southern Africa
HSB	Human and Social Biology
ICT	Information and communication technology
IGCSE	International General Certificate of Secondary Education
IGNOU	Indira Gandhi National Open University
LMC	Learner Management Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
RADO	Remote Area Development Officer
RLA	Remote Learner Advisor
RNPE	Revised National Policy of Education
SAIDE	South African Institute of Distance Education
SSBM	Small Scale Business Management
TGLP	Tribal Grazing Land Policy
UB	University of Botswana
UK	United Kingdom
UNISA	University of South Africa
UP	University of Pretoria



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## ABSTRACT

This study pertains to the provision of learning support to remote distance learners from the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities in Botswana who enrolled for a secondary school-leaving certificate. The purpose of this case study was to document these learners' perceptions and experiences of learning at a distance and to improve service delivery. The literature on distance learning support emphasises the importance of making learners' voices audible as these help gauge the efficacy of learning support. The study was informed by an interpretive paradigm using a mixed-methods approach and is underpinned by Holmberg' theory of conversational learning (2003). Qualitative data methods collection involved semi-structured interviews, journals, document analysis and observations while a questionnaire provided nested quantitative data. Data sets were triangulated and trustworthiness was enhanced by using Atlas.ti® for qualitative analysis and SAS version 8 software to generate percentages. The key findings showed that distance learners exhibited high intrinsic motivation and 72.1% of them were satisfied with the learning support provided. This substantiates that learner motivation remains a key attribute for successful distance learning in any context. However, policy and managerial flaws did frustrate and unintentionally disadvantage these remote distance learners. Despite their adverse circumstances positive perceptions and experiences were exhibited where learners had access to personalised academic and affective support from empathetic tutors. Implications for practice include policy reviews, ODL staff training and adoption of best practice. A needs assessment to establish learner needs, expectations and aspirations is critical for the design and development of relevant learning materials, and for the delivery of quality learning support to enhance the academic experience of remote learners from marginalised communities. Recommendations may be applicable in other underdeveloped distance learning contexts. Topics for further research exploration in learning support, policy and curriculum issues have been suggested.

**Key words:** Developing country, Distance learning, Experiences, Instructional dissonance, Learning support, Marginalisation, Perceptions, Remote distance learner, Transactional presence.

## Chapter 1 Overview of the study

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### 1.1 Introduction

Traditionally, students enrolled for modules offered via distance education have at least a fixed abode and a postal address. They may even have access to learning support through a telephone or by visiting a learning centre close to where they live. But, for example, how would Gcagae Xade - a descendant of the first people of the Kalahari Desert, living a nomadic lifestyle in a very remote area of Botswana - cope with the demands of learning at a distance? It is learners like Xade who captured my interest while I worked as a regional manager of Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), responsible for the provision of learning support in settlements that are both remote and underdeveloped. During 2003 and 2004, I encountered poor academic performance and a low level of course completion by distance learners enrolled for Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE). Annually some learners did not sit for their externally administered end-of-course examinations and those who took their examinations attained poor 'E, F, and G' grades, they achieved less than 50%. Few attained 'C' grades meaning they achieved between 50% and 59% (*see Addendum 1*) This puzzled me as the provision of learning support is well established and aims to reduce the academic challenges faced by distance learners. However, the academic performance and through-put of BOCODOL distance learners at BGCSE level is generally inadequate compared to other programmes like Small Scale Business Management (SSBM), despite the provision of learning support in various modes. My study specifically explores the perspectives and experiences of Basarwa and Bakgalagadi distance learners in Botswana with special reference to learning support and is guided by the following critical question:

*How do distance learners from marginalised communities perceive and experience learning support?*

I have endeavoured to make audible their voices by documenting their views on the efficacy of learning support in underdeveloped regions.

## 1.2 Brief contextualisation of the study

Since the 1960s Botswana's correspondence education has been similar to that of Malawi, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The similarity in the development of distance education in these countries could be because they are all former British colonies that adopted the British education system. However, in Botswana, distance education was only effectively introduced after 1998 when the Distance Education Unit at the Department of Non-Formal Education was transformed into the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL). The transformation was necessitated by the desire to expand access to and improve the academic performance of distance learners through the provision of effective learning support systems. Although situated in Gaborone, the work of BOCODOL is decentralised through a network of five regional centres and 90 learning centres that are strategically located across the country. The Kang Regional Centre that I managed for six years is one of the five regional centres (see *Addendum 2*) and is located in the western part of Botswana, an area inhabited by marginalised communities, namely the Bakgalagadi, Basarwa<sup>1</sup>, BaHerero and Coloureds. Basarwa communities now live in very remote settlements since the government relocated them from the wildlife national parks. The government of Botswana prefers to refer to the Basarwa as 'Remote Area Dwellers', a term that is inclusive of other communities living in distant areas but some Basarwa do not accept this description.

The main resource in these remote, underdeveloped settlements is land albeit arid and sparse and these marginalised communities, commercial farmers and the government's Department of Wildlife, share it. This semi-desert area has a very low and unreliable rainfall (250 mm per annum), generally inadequate for cultivation. The land use policy adopted before independence in 1966 led to the creation of settlements, villages<sup>1</sup>, national parks, game reserves and wildlife management areas. This forced change in territory has led the Basarwa - traditionally a nomadic people - to adopt less mobile ways of living while keeping domestic animals and working on farms. To a limited degree, they do still carry out their hunting and gathering activities as part of their subsistence survival but this occurs on a restricted scale as official hunting licences are now required. The settlements are located faraway from service centres and have limited employment opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Basarwa means more than one. For singular, we say Mosarwa. Whilst some Basarwa do not mind being called Basarwa, others prefer to be called 'Bushman' as this signifies their attachment to the land they call their ancestral territory, the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) Other prefer to be called the San.

Despite limited employment, each settlement has a primary school and a health post built by the government. Communities have free access to these amenities. For instance, children attend school at no cost and the government provides school uniforms and feeding for all children at school. All households identified by government social welfare officers are provided with food rations every month and are at times engaged in the food for work programmes within their villages or settlements. The Basarwa communities that moved out of the game reserve and wildlife management areas were given at least five head of cattle or fifteen goats by government. However, some community leaders and international non-governmental organisations, have over the years, contested this scheme as they felt it interfered with the lifestyle of the Basarwa, a people for whom hunting was a significant activity.

In terms of secondary schools, the western part of Botswana has only two that are amongst the 28 senior secondary schools offering the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) subjects. The schools are run by government. Young adults in the area who fail to get a place at any of these senior secondary schools after completing junior secondary schooling are restricted as far as proceeding to high school is concerned. A number of them end up enrolling at BOCODOL. The enrolment fee for those identified by social workers as poor is either paid for by the local government authorities or some non-governmental organisations. Obtaining an academic qualification is viewed as an opportunity for breaking the cycle of poverty. The out-of-school youths and adults in this area fervently believe it opens up the possibilities for employment in urban areas. Their academic performance and record of completing courses is poor percentage-wise (%), despite the claims of learning support. The reasons for poor academic performance and low completion rates remain speculative with no supportive empirical evidence. Their perceptions and experiences of distance learning support have not been documented. I shall endeavour to render their voice as clearly as print permits.

### **1.3 Rationale**

Between 2002 and 2005 there were 497 enrollees from the 25 satellite learning centres in the Kang region and only 54 managed to complete their courses. Of the 443 remaining, only 132 were active and 311 were inactive in their studies (BOCODOL Kang Regional Office, 2005.) It is in the light of the low rate of completion and the overall poor BGCSE academic results despite the provision of learning support that I became motivated to undertake this study. My professional interest lies in acquiring an in-depth understanding of how Basarwa and

Bakgalagadi distance learners who have enrolled for the BGCSE, perceive and experience learning support in terms of its potential to enhance their academic performance.

From my experience as a regional manager from 2002 to 2007, I observed that the Remote Learner Strategy Consultancy Report (Lelliot, 2002) has not been transformed into a College policy document. It is still in its original state of being a consultancy report. It is this document that is meant to guide the delivery of learning support to distance learners in remote areas including those from marginalised communities. The strategy does not make any mention of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi despite their uniqueness. It is carefully worded and avoids being specific about any group and explains the term *remote learners* as

*... within the context of the whole of Botswana, remote learners should be considered as falling on a continuum from those who are remote, isolated and inaccessible to those who are accessible but have no access to a community study centre (CSC)...” (Lelliot, 2002:6).*

The report assumes that learners from the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities fall at the extreme end of the continuum, which is remote, isolated and inaccessible (Lelliot, 2002). Whilst the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi fall within the said continuum, the report is meant to apply to all distance learners in the same way, disregarding the fact that the needs of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi at Inalegolo are different from the needs of the Bakwena<sup>2</sup> at Kopong just outside Gaborone, who can see aeroplanes landing and taking off as the airport is nearby. At Inalegolo, they wonder what kind of a bird flies so high and never comes to the borehole like other birds for water. Lelliot’s (2002:6) continuum presentation is:

*Remote, isolated and inaccessible <-----> accessible but not reachable*  
*CSC e.g. Inalegolo e.g. Kopong*

Kopong is only 30 km from Gaborone and is well connected by tarred roads, has radio and television reception and households own such equipment and have access to libraries and other educational resources. The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi traditional educational system is culturally rich, and differs markedly from the other ethnic groups that are Bantu speakers and share interrelated languages and cultures.

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<sup>2</sup> The Bakwena are part of the dominant Tswana ethnic group which long ago during pre-colonial times and after ruled over the lands of the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi just like the other Tswana ethnic groups did. They own large herds of cattle and have the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi as herd boys at their cattle posts.

I also observed that the need to plan for learning support is critical for enhancing the academic performance of distance learners. I recollect my first visit in 2002 to a learning centre that is 800 km away from the regional centre where I found learners who shared their experiences of isolation and alienation believing that it would lead to their poor academic performance and failure to complete their Botswana General Certificate in Secondary Education (BGCSE) programme. Apparently, the remote strategy recommended in the Remote Learner Support Consultancy Report (Lelliot, 2002) that BOCODOL had commissioned had not yet been implemented in the area at the time of my visit. Dzakiria (2005) records similar observations from Malaysian distance learners who had either limited or no access to learning support and experienced desperation, frustration and isolation. Learning support interventions in distance education in Botswana are new. This meeting with the learners prompted me to realise that there was more to learning support than just sending out study materials and feedback on assignments.

Empirical work on distance learning support in Botswana is limited (McLoughlin 2002; Wheeler, 2002; Robinson, 2004; Wheeler and Amiotte, 2005) and as such I was compelled to look at learner support literature of which learning support is a subset. Furthermore, I have also noted that inadequate planning for learner support in distance education, even in some parts of the developed world has resulted in some distance education providers ignoring the importance of planning for such services (Levy and Bealieu, 2003; Robinson, 2004). When distance education institutions fail to make plans for the provision of learner support services, the more likely outcome is that distance learners will drop out of their programmes or courses. A study by Passi and Mishra (2004) on selecting priority areas for research in distance education found that 60% of respondents advocated that research should be conducted on learners and learning. Prideaux (1989) quoted by Usan (2004) observes that the effectiveness of student support has not been adequately evaluated. Recently, Rowe and Wood (2008) have urged that research be conducted on student experiences in particular, of feedback. The need for empirical literature in the area of learning support is therefore critical for the development of effective distance education systems.

Robinson's (2004) review of literature on learner support, and earlier findings by Moore and Thompson (1997) arrive at the same conclusion, namely, that most of the literature available on learner support is more on general progress reports than on empirical studies. They agree that

research and publication on learner support has practical value. Robinson (2004) claims that most of the empirical studies on learner support lack theory and that some studies are unsubstantiated or lack validity when transferred to other contexts. She also argues that some studies have methodological shortcomings, particularly the use of small samples where quantitative approaches have been adopted. One study that lacks theory is by Sharma (2002) and the one with methodological shortcomings in terms of small samples, is a pilot study by Wheeler (2004).

Recent literature focusing on learner support in southern Africa (the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), 2006; Nonyongo and Ngengebule, 2008) addresses the issue of learning support but not in an underdeveloped context. The literature tends to report progress made by distance education (DE) institutions in southern African countries. There is therefore need to conduct systematic research in the area of learning support. Understanding how learners perceive and experience learning support provision can help management improve on strategies of supporting learners in order to enhance completion and academic performance.

I was also motivated to undertake this study because, as a distance education practitioner, I was keen to have an understanding of how policy undertaken made by BOCODOL guides the provision of learning support to distance learners from marginalised communities in less developed contexts. I was particularly keen to understand how the different types of learning support enhanced distance learners' academic aspirations, knowledge, attitudes, and skills. I also aimed to document both positive and negative perceptions and experiences of the learning support programme as a part of my contribution to ODL policy and practice.

Literature on supporting remote distance learners in underdeveloped contexts in southern Africa appears to be sparse (ADEA, 2002, Dodds, 2005, DEASA, 2006, Ngengebule & Nonyongo, 2008). This study is distinctive as it documents the perspectives of Botswana distance learners living in remote geographical areas who are in transition from a traditional nomadic way of life to a more settled modern context. I explain the key terms I have used in my study in the next section in order to ensure mutual ground with the reader and to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of issues I discuss in my thesis.



#### 1.4 Explanation of key terms

In this section I present, in alphabetical order, key terms used in this study and explain their contextual use in order to enhance a common understanding.

**Academic performance** - refers to learners' active participation in learning events, course completion, (Nonyongo and Ngengebule, 2008) and to achievements measured through grades achieved, for example, in assignments and examinations. Academic performance also encompasses things like self-perception of performance and learners remaining active in a programme as opposed to dropping out.

**Developed context** - refers to areas that are economically rich like most industrialised countries e.g. United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Developed countries are known as the 'First World' (Stuart, 1994). They have a high standard of living, have advanced technology, and are thus able to offer technologically supported learning that contributes to increased course completion compared to developing or underdeveloped contexts.

**Developing context** is made up of less industrialised countries or low-income countries that are developing economically (Stuart, 1994). The countries in a developing context may have reasonable necessities like housing, food, education and health services. They are, however, not rich and have a far lower standard of living compared to developed countries. Developing countries are as the 'Third World' and include countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Some of the developing countries have made significant strides forward towards developing technology although most of these countries still have areas that are underdeveloped. Examples of such countries include India and Botswana. Developing countries face major challenges when it comes to education matters and most have adopted distance education (DE) methodologies in order to circumvent the challenges they face. Nevertheless, completion of programmes and courses through DE remains a major challenge, particularly in remote rural areas where infrastructure including roads, transport and telecommunication systems are virtually non-existent.

**Distance education** - is the delivery of learning opportunities to out-of-school youths and adults who are separated mostly by time and space from those who are teaching. The teaching is done through a variety of mediating processes used to transmit content, provide tuition, and



conduct assessment or measure outcomes (Moore and Anderson, 2003). However, the unavailability of telecommunication infrastructure widens the digital divide and makes the print to remain the more user-friendly technology in delivering education in underdeveloped contexts.

**Experience** - refers to how a learner enrolled in distance education programme emotionally feels about the event. In this case, the learner may feel satisfied or dissatisfied by the types of learning support rendered by the distance education provider. However, the narration of the events may be subjective, in the sense that it may have errors, biases in terms of personal interpretation and perceptions (Van den Aardweg and van den Aardweg, 1993, Cook, 2006). In this study, distance learners' subjective experiences are described. Distance learners may also share positive or negative feelings: e.g. enjoyment, confidence, and success or confusion, isolation, frustration, and rejection.

**Indigenous** – this is a highly contested term. In this study, I use it to refer to the first people who occupied southern Africa before the arrival of the Bantu speaking groups and colonists. The first people to occupy southern Africa are the Basarwa or San and; *...share a distinct and identifiable cultural 'deep structure' that most commonly manifests in language, social organisation, economic activity, religion, and historical experience (Suzman, 2001:3.)*

They consider themselves distinct from other communities and other communities do recognise them as such. The Basarwa's social, cultural, and economic conditions distinguish them from other populations in southern Africa. They are determined to develop, preserve, and transmit their culture to their future generations (Begum and Al Faruque, 2005).

**Learner** - refers to an out-of-school youth or young adult enrolled for a distance education course. The age range of learners involved in this study is between 18 and 45. In open and distance learning (ODL) circles, the term 'learner' has become more common and its usage is preferred rather than the term 'student'. Recognising them as learners may help to foster positive attitudes towards learning. One of the functions of learner support is to cultivate and instil positive attitudes towards learning through the distance education mode.

**Learner support** - is a broad term referring to the services that are provided to distance learners so that they can overcome the barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully. Learner support consists of three subsections namely; learning support or academic support, personal support and administrative support (Simpson, 2000; Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002). In practice it is difficult to separate the three subsections. The provision of learner support is imperative in distance education and aims to enhance the academic performance of distance learners.

**Learning support** - is the academic assistance given to a learner enrolled for a distance education course in order to enhance academic performance (Simpson, 2000; Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002). The activities that make up learning support delivered to distance learners in an underdeveloped context are the subject of my investigation and include orientation seminars, group tutorials, assignment feedback, tutorial letters, radio, mock examinations, individual help by tutors, weekend tutorials, study skills, and motivational seminars. These activities are currently core in supporting distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana.

**Marginalised** – means people deprived of access to social opportunities and financial or material means or otherwise of well-being and security (Commonwealth of Learning, 2004). In the words of Molteno, (1988:1):

*The 'marginalised' are the poor and powerless, too busy with life at the edges of survival to be able to acquire the skills or material support that would let them get out of the trap they were born into, or have been pushed into. They are unable to scramble on board as the engine of change hurtles the rest of us onward – where, we can't tell, but we're holding on because the alternative is too scary. The marginalised remind us of that.*

In this study, 'marginalised' refers to the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities.

**Open learning** - refers to an educational philosophy that emphasises giving learners choices about media, place of study, pace of study, support mechanisms, entry and exit points (Commonwealth of Learning, 2004). It refers to policies and practices that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to enrolment time, assessment, age, gender or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning. These policies need not be part of a distance education system but complement it. The importance of this approach is to place the

responsibility of self-direction in learning on the learner (Commonwealth of Learning, 2004). The perception of access has led out-of-school youths and adults from marginalised communities to enrolling for DE courses.

**Perception** – in the context of this study, perception means the belief, strong or weak, that influence reactions in terms of learning support activities (Van den Aardweg and Van den Aardweg, 1993). The beliefs may be true or false, close to reality or far from it, but still influence the learner to make subjective judgements on the impact of learning support interventions in terms of whether they are effective and good or ineffective and bad. Perceptions can be positive or negative and even erroneous. The higher the percentage of participants who indicate a positive perception, the more likely that the learning support activity may have made a positive difference. However, if a higher percentage of participants indicate a negative perception, then the more likely that the learning support intervention was less effective. Given possibly errors in perception, I have undertaken to employ triangulation of data sources in this study to disprove or confirm assumptions that might emanate from participants' perceptions.

**Poverty** - refers to an inability to meet one's basic needs. Basic needs refer to nutrition, access to adequate shelter, clothing, recreation and the ability to meet social commitments (Nteta et al., 1997). Poverty also implies a lack of choices, in other words, having no alternatives. The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities living in the remote settlements are reliant on government food subsidies.

**Remote learner** - is a learner who studies independently without access to a learning centre as a result of geographical isolation, unavailability of appropriate facilities, lack of transport or the fact that there are not enough other learners to run a viable centre. Remote distance learners fall on a continuum from those who are geographically isolated and inaccessible to those who are easily reached but have no access to a learning centre (BOCODOL, 2002).

**Psychological distance** - Psychological distance (as described in Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance) is created or exists between the learner and the tutor (or DE provider) whenever there is an absence of or inadequate dialogue. In other words, a psychological communication gap or space has the potential to create misunderstanding between the tutor and the learners. A learner, who experiences acceptance by or closeness with the DE provider

or has a sense of belonging to a learning community, has a minimal psychological distance from the DE provider. When the course structure is rigid and has less dialogue a psychological distance is also experienced. Dialogue is a purposeful and constructive exchange between tutors and learners, learners and learners, with each party valuing and respecting the contributions of the other. On the other hand, structure is the extent to which the course's instructional design is rigid or flexible, for instance; the extent to which the course objectives, teaching strategies and evaluation methods respond to each learner's needs. A course structure that is too rigid makes it hard for the distance learner to interact with it, or make sense out of it, and this creates a psychological distance that can adversely affect academic progress and result in negative experiences for the learner, especially if learning support measures are inadequate (Moore, 1993, 2003).

***Underdeveloped context*** - refers to a physical area within a developing country characterised by distorted or inadequate development. Mainly those in power impose change and the community suffers (Stuart, 1994). The area is characterised by very low economic development in that it lacks investment, public infrastructure and offers a very low standard of living. This is the case in most remote rural parts of sub-Saharan African countries. All the sites involved in this research study experience acute unemployment as there are barely any investment opportunities.

### **1.5 Scope of the study**

Open and distance education in underdeveloped contexts has a recent history particularly with regard to the provision of decentralised learner support systems. This study focuses on open distance education provision in the remote areas of Botswana. It explores distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support offered by BOCODOL. The study covers the period from 2003 up to 2007 in terms of the description. The quantitative and qualitative data sample and interviews relate to the 2006 cohort of learners. Forty distance learners from the Bakgalagadi and Basarwa communities living in remote rural settlements in the western part of Botswana acted as research participants. In this study, I did not look at other programmes like Diploma programme and the Small Scale Business Management (SSBM). The two programmes attracted employees and were not living at the settlements. There was no problem of completion and academic performance in the SSBM since it was a paced programme. The Diploma programmes were all new.

## 1.6 Research design and methodology

In this section I briefly justify the theory that informs this study, substantiate and explain the research design, methodology, methods and ethical considerations undertaken to carry out this study.

This study is informed by Holmberg's (2003) *theory of conversational learning*. I use Holmberg's (2003) conversational theory in interpreting data about the learning events, that is, data from both contact (face-to-face) and non-contact support (written) in order to establish distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support in a less developed context. My initial assumption was that the theory would be limited in the sense that this study focuses on distance learners studying secondary school level programme in an underdeveloped context. Holmberg's theory was previously applied in a study that focused on MBA learners in a developed context by Kanuka and Jugdev (2006) rather than at a secondary school level.

The research design I use in this study falls within the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2005). An interpretive paradigm involves taking people's experiences as the essence of what is real for them. I thus made sense of my participants' perceptions and experiences by interacting with them and listening carefully to what they told me. The interpretive paradigm was pertinent to my study because it helped me explore, in a natural setting, learning support as perceived and experienced by distance learners from marginalised communities.

The interpretivist paradigm assumes that each individual constructs reality, thus multiple realities exist in any given situation (Creswell, 2005). In this paradigm, I relied on the voices and interpretations of the research participants, a method commended by other scholars such as LeCompte and Preissle (1993), Creswell (1994) and Leedy and Ormrod (2001). The advantage of an interpretive position is that it recognises the existence of multiple social realities and the need for a researcher to explore how individuals interpret and make sense of their social experiences (Clarke and Dawson, 1999). I therefore approached the research context with an open mind and allowed multiple perspectives of learning support to emerge.

In my inquiry, I let the research design unfold as the research progressed, guided by the research participants and my interpretations of them as suggested by Clarke and Dawson

(1999). The reasoning behind this was to have an in-depth understanding and interpretation of the perceptions and experiences of participants on learning support and its influence on their academic performance. From an interpretive standpoint, the context can help one understand a social programme, like the BOCODOL learner support model. I spent a total of six years as an employee and a researcher in an underdeveloped area and experienced the context within which the learner support programme operated.

I used mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative techniques) to collect data. The qualitative techniques were dominant, because my focus was on an in-depth understanding of the distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support. I chose to combine qualitative and quantitative techniques since they have complementary strengths and can be used sequentially or simultaneously as noted by Neuman (2000). Clarke and Dawson (1999) and Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), encourage the use of mixed-methods on the basis that they are now an established feature of research and policy evaluation studies. The mixing of methods or techniques has the advantage of being able to accommodate both the subjective, where insights, feelings and emotions count and are obtained through the use of more qualitative methods, and the specifically numerical quantitative data. The mixing of methods also provides the breadth and depth necessary in understanding and interpreting learner perceptions and experiences.

In order to have an in-depth understanding of the research participants as the unit of analysis, I decided to use a case study. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context using multiple sources. In a case study, a particular individual or a group of persons, programme or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time (McMillan and Schumacher, 1993; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Creswell, 1994; Leedy and Ormrod, 2001; Yin, 2003). Whilst one may not be able to generalize from a single case study, this technique was, however, an ideal design for my study as I focused on discovery, insights and understanding the perspectives of the participants. A case study offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base, policy and practice of education in a local context (Merriam, 1988), and it allows for the use of rich and varied strategies and data sources which Descombe (1998) notes is one of the strengths of the case study approach in data collection.



The tools I used to collect data were a questionnaire, interview schedule, journals, and observation. In the first phase of data collection, I administered a questionnaire designed with closed and open-ended items. In the second phase, I conducted interviews that were tape recorded and later transcribed. I coded the transcribed data to identify themes. I also used journals that I had requested research participants to keep and I kept my own journal. I consulted documents, including official records that were available at the Regional Centre. Quantitative data were analysed using the statistical package SAS Version 8 from which percentages were generated while themes emerged after a qualitative data analysis using Atlas.ti®. I therefore, applied mixed methods research techniques in this study for purposes of triangulation and trustworthiness of data as recommended by other scholars (Creswell, 1994; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Before and during the process of data collection I endeavoured to adhere to internationally accepted ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, informed consent, safety in participation, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, trust and withdrawal of participants at any stage. I respected my participants and made sure that I used non-discriminatory language as advocated by others (Creswell 2005; AERA, 2006). I was very aware that my participants were less privileged and from the marginalised communities and I thus took time to explain the purpose of my research in order to help them understand the implications of their participation, a point Chilisa and Preece (2005) emphasise. I also explained to all participants how the information I would gather was going to be used and how it was likely to help improve the provision of learning support but also contribute towards my PhD qualification.

The research design, methodology and ethical considerations I have briefly described in this section, are explained in detail in chapter 4 of this study. Despite the rigour I applied in developing the research design and applying it, I experienced constraints undertaking this study. The next section briefly explains those I anticipated and how I minimized them to enhance the trustworthiness of my study.

### **1.7 Anticipated research constraints**

The participants in this research were distance learners from marginalised communities living in an underdeveloped context in the western part of Botswana. My intention, in the first place, was not to generalise. I have, however, provided a detailed description of the profile of the

participants of this study and their contexts in Chapter 2 to enable readers to make sound judgments should they be interested in transferability to similar contexts.

Another constraint is the possibility of bias and subjectivity as I conducted this research as an employee of the DE provider under scrutiny. At the commencement of this study, I was a regional manager, responsible for the provision of learner support in the area in which this study was undertaken. As an ODL practitioner and a product of learning at a distance, I have my own beliefs on learner support. I experienced learner support services in the past in different capacities, that is, as a distance learner, a distance facilitator and as a regional manager. During data collection and analysis, I was aware of possible limitations due to my bias emanating from my past experience. In order to overcome all these constraints and challenges, I used a variety of sources such as, multiple participants, official records and journals.

Whilst I had six years of experience working amongst the participants, my grasp of their mother tongue, namely, SeKgalagadi and Sesarwa language is poor, so I sought assistance from two educators in the area who are proficient in both these languages spoken by participants. In order to adhere to ethical considerations and protect the research participants, the two educators were requested to sign a confidentiality clause. For the Sesarwa language, the Naro Language Project co-ordinator, who is a linguist and a specialist in the Sesarwa language helped with the translation. My secretary spoke SeKgalagadi as her first language and assisted wherever translations were needed. Translations were shared with those participants who were accessible and no discrepancies were identified. In the next section I provide the outline my inquiry.

### **1.8 Outline of study**

In my systematic investigation, I focused on the research question stated at the beginning of this chapter and employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the perceptions and experiences that remote participants had of learning support from their anecdotal and empirical evidence. Documents, a brief questionnaire and interviews with facilitators and tutors were used to corroborate the evidence given by the main participants of this study.



The thesis comprises six chapters. In this chapter, I have focused on the research background and given an overview of the study. In Chapter 2, I provide an account of the geographical and socio-cultural context of the communities from which the participants of the study were drawn. The chapter describes the rich context of the participants and their status in Botswana. Chapter 3 focuses on the literature I reviewed which helped to contextualise my study. It also provided a theoretical framework that helped in the processing and interpretation of findings. It enabled me to position my findings within the existing body of knowledge related to DE learning support. Chapter 4 focuses on the research design and methodology. I document my reflections on my epistemological stance and the implications that it had for the knowledge creation in this study. I explain and justify my choice of using the qualitative approach, multiple methods of data collection and analysis. I also explain the strategies that I used to enhance the trustworthiness of my study. Chapter 5 constitutes the presentation of the empirical findings and my interpretation. It provides quantitative and qualitative evidence using numbers and thick descriptions (quotations) which I interpret within the context of this study. Chapter 6 focuses on the significance, implications for policy and practice and recommendations. I suggest possible areas for further research in the area of learning support.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explained how I located the study within the available literature and drew on my practical experience as a regional manager (2002 to 2007) of a DE service provider responsible for the provision of learner support. I clarified the rationale for this study by highlighting the possible silence in the literature related to learning support provision to distance learners from marginalised communities in underdeveloped contexts. I justified the necessity of this study by indicating the importance of providing learning support to distance learners (Tait, 2000; McLoughlin, 2002; Thorpe, 2002; Shin, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Dzakiria, 2005) regardless of context. I highlighted the uniqueness of this study and explained the key terms that are to be understood within the context this study. I also, stated and justified the research design and methodology I adopted to conduct a systematic investigation of the problem. I justified my choice for adopting a qualitative approach by indicating the need for an in-depth understanding of distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support. I also indicated the research constraints and steps I took to



minimise these. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed description of the participants' context and their socio-cultural and economic status within the Botswana society, in order for the reader to appreciate who these distance learners are as well as the significance of the findings of this study.

## Chapter 2                    The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities in context

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### 2.1        Introduction

In Chapter 1, I presented an overview of this study and highlighted the need to have an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of learning support of remote distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana. In this chapter, I describe the research site's geography and refer to its history, socio-economic, political and cultural features in order for the reader to appreciate the unique circumstances in which the research participants live and learn. They belong to one of the two marginalised communities - the Basarwa<sup>3</sup>(also called the San or Bushmen) and the Bakgalagadi. I describe their traditional lifestyle and how these communities have been marginalised. I also briefly discuss the provision of educational facilities in their areas. This contextual description provides background for understanding the perceptions and experiences of these learners studying via distance mode in remote areas of western Botswana.

### 2.2        Geographical and social context of marginalised communities

Botswana is a landlocked country, roughly the size of France or Texas (Nage-Sibande, 2005; Tlhalefang and Oduaran, 2006). It is located in southern Africa and shares borders with Zambia to the north, South Africa to the south, Zimbabwe to the east and Namibia to the west (**See Figure 2.1**). It has an area of 582 000 square kilometres, of which 84% is covered by the Kalahari Desert (Hanemann, 2006; Pfothenauer, 2009). The eastern part of the country is occupied by the Tswana-speaking groups and has good soils and rainfall for agriculture. The Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi communities, along with other ethnic groups currently inhabit part of the Kalahari Desert in the western part of Botswana. This semi-desert area has no permanent surface water, poor soil, great variation in rainfall (between 150 mm and 375 mm) and frequents droughts (Saugestad, 2005). It also has extreme seasons with temperatures reaching 39°C in summer and dropping to below 2°C in winter (Botswana Government, 2003). The climatic conditions are not favourable for practising even subsistence crop cultivation, hence, the communities are not able to produce enough food for survival from arable farming initiatives. However, the area has bush and shrub savannah vegetation that

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<sup>3</sup> I use the appellation Basarwa since it is the official term used in Botswana.

attracts wildlife, hence hunting and gathering activities have been part of the communities' traditional lifestyle for a long time.

Figure 2.1 Map showing Botswana and the research study sites



Botswana has a relatively small population, estimated to be about 1.85 million (Pfothenauer, 2009). The Tswana-speaking group account for almost 90% of the

population whilst the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi, each account for about 3% of the population (Beaugrande, 2000; Wagner, 2006; Hanemann, 2006; Pfothenauer, 2009). The Basarwa are part of the Khoisan-speaking group whilst the Bakgalagadi are a Bantu-speaking people. The Bakgalagadi came into Botswana from South Africa just before the Tswana-speaking groups around 1600. The Basarwa had lived in Botswana for centuries before the arrival of the Bakgalagadi, the Tswana, and the Europeans (Hitchcock, 2002; Gjern, 2004; Pridmore, 2006, Modiba, 2008).

The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi have, cohabited and developed highly flexible land use strategies in order to cope with an uncertain environment. The Basarwa are historically considered the 'First People' of the Kalahari or the 'indigenous' people of Botswana and are generally recognised as such (Hitchcock, 1999; 20002, Saugestad, 2001; Valadian, 2002; Boko, 2002, Bourne, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Gjern, 2004; Begum and Baroque, 2005; Pridmore, 2006, Wagner, 2006; Modiba, 2008). It is problematic defining who is indigenous and who is not. Bourne (2003) quotes the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 of 1989, which defines indigenous as:

*...tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations.*

Another definition of indigenous is one quoted by Begum and Al Faruque (2005) from the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations 1986 that states:

*Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those, which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed in their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form, at present, non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.*

I find the above definition more comprehensive and it is thus the preferred term in this study. Begum and Al Faruque (2005) further point out that indigenous peoples the world over, are still being deprived of their land and access to life-sustaining resources and that some governments appear to be reluctant to formally recognise indigenous rights to land. Land has a deep cultural and spiritual meaning to indigenous people. For



instance, in Botswana, the Basarwa believe their removal from their ancestral lands would make them extinct (Mogwe, 1992). The Basarwa argue that historically they are the original inhabitants of Botswana because they have lived undisturbed for years, together with the wildlife, long before the arrival of the Tswana-speaking groups and the Europeans. Furthermore, they contend that the land they had come to know as theirs was taken away from them by other Africans and Europeans (Mogwe, 1992). Historical evidence that includes rock paintings supports the view expressed by the Basarwa that they are the indigenous people of Botswana (Hermans, 1980; Good, 1993; Tlou and Campbell, 1996). However, the government of Botswana does not recognise that the Basarwa have a culture and way of life different from other ethnic groups in Botswana (Modiba, 2008). It rejects the notion that the Basarwa are indigenous and says all Batswana are indigenous (Hitchcock, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Modiba, 2008). This rejection appears to be based on the government's need to ensure unity rather than on any historical evidence. This meant the assimilation of the minority groups into the dominant and majority Tswana group (Boko, 2002; Wagner, 2006). The unintended consequence of this policy decision has given rise to problems unique and specific to the Basarwa, Bakgalagadi and other minority groups and to the fact that they have been neglected (Wagner, 2006).

Nevertheless, the Basarwa have distinct socio-cultural, religious, and economic activities that qualify them to be deemed indigenous (Suzman, 2001.) As a people, they meet the criteria that define indigenous people. The defining criteria for recognition of an indigenous people include occupying a position of non-dominance, being a numerical minority, having livelihoods based on the adaptation of resources and territories that differ from those of the majority. The criteria also include perceiving and being perceived by others as different from the majority and defining themselves as indigenous (Bourne, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Begum and Al Faruque, 2005).

The Bakgalagadi on the other hand, were the first Bantu speakers to settle side by side with the Basarwa. The Tswana-speaking groups found them living on the fringes of or within the Kalahari Desert (Hitchcock and Smith, 1982). In Setswana, the language of the Tswana, the word *Mokgalagari* refers to a person who lives in the Kalahari Desert by foraging and is of inferior status (Hitchcock and Smith, 1982). Historical evidence shows

that years back the Bakgalagadi lived in a similar way to the Basarwa. They trapped game and eked out an existence by collecting wild plants and hoeing with a sharpened stick, did not have fixed homes, were mobile and lacked centralised leadership and political organisation (Hitchcock and Smith, 1982). Their marginalised status is yet another common factor although the Basarwa are in a worse position than the Bakgalagadi. The Bakgalagadi are slightly better because they have been practising agro-based economy for years unlike the Basarwa who have been hunter-gatherers. This is elaborated on in section 2.3. Out of approximately 50 000 Basarwa in Botswana, only a handful are able to pursue their traditional hunting and gathering on a significant scale (Dube, 2002; Gjern, 2004; Hanemann, 2006). The majority of Basarwa lack access to vital resources as they were relocated to government settlements outside the national parks and wildlife management areas. As a result, many of them have become increasingly dependent on government-sponsored aid programmes. This dependency perpetuates the loss of cultural identity and their alienation from the age-old traditions, skills and lifestyle (Gjern, 2004). The Bakgalagadi, on the other hand, engage in agricultural activities. They mainly keep domestic animals and when there has been a good rainy season, they do try cultivation of crops, but due to frequent droughts this is usually not successful. The Bakgalagadi also face problems in their pastoral farming activities as water sources dry up and predators kill their livestock.

In some settlements, like New Xade and Inalegolo, foraging provides a crucial source of subsistence for the Basarwa and the Bakgalagdi. Some households combine searching in the wilds for food with the keeping of some goats and cattle. They also make handcrafts, especially bows and arrows and tan animal skins to sell. During my visits, I found a number of them idle at the settlements whilst others spent their time drinking and gambling.

A first time visitor to the settlements who is familiar with African rural life would at first not notice any suffering. Children play and some adults move about the settlements. Staying a little longer until around sunset time, the visitor will then be most surprised. Not a single fire can be seen aglow in any home. In any traditional African village setup, a fire is made in each home in the evening to prepare food. However, at the Basarwa settlements, in most cases, there is no reason to make a fire, as families do not have

any food to prepare. The only food they get is through monthly rations from the government. It is eaten sparingly in the morning and afternoon and there just is not enough to cover the usual three meals that other people enjoy. Should the visitor stay even longer than a full day at the settlement, the hardships, and suffering that the Basarwa endure daily will be revealing. It is not surprising that conclusions are made by some authors (Hitchcock 1999; Boko; 2002; Le Roux, 2002; Campbell; 2004) that the Basarwa suffer hardship at the settlements because of the loss of their traditional livelihood and they now lead a life of hopelessness and despair, manifested in unemployment, poverty, and alcoholism.

Some of the Basarwa have not found settlement life easy and, as a result, leave the settlement citing as reasons high levels of social conflict and that they do not have access to resources and employment opportunities (Hitchcock 1999; Boko; 2002; le Roux, 2002; Campbell; 2004). They go back to the bush surviving, living close to nature, relying on whatever remains to be hunted and gathered and risk being arrested whilst others go to nearby farms and cattle posts to be cattle herders (Boko; 2002). Boko (2002) further claims that the Basarwa work under conditions of slavery, or near slavery, and their situation is that of abject poverty and deprivation while the official position of government acknowledges the Basarwa to be the poorest of the desperately poor.

The Basarwa who live at D'Kar were displaced from their territories when ranches were created and they found themselves as squatters on a farm belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church. They lead a difficult life because they do not stay in a government-gazetted settlement. They are therefore not entitled to any District Council subsidies like other Basarwa in government settlements. However, they are helped by the Church and Kuru Development Trust. Some of them try to find jobs on the nearby farms. They lack respectable shelter. Their dwellings are made of temporary structures like the one shown in **Figure 2.2**. The shelter is made of mud stuck on poles and this is home to primary school-going children. The children of the Basarwa, living under such deplorable conditions, are nonetheless expected to attend school regularly and excel in their academic work just like those from villages and urban centres and compete for the limited spaces in government public secondary schools in order to do their BGCSE.



**Figure 2.2** Traditional shelter at D'Kar



New Xade is one of the settlements that the government created for the Basarwa who were relocated from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. The government provided money for each household to construct permanent structures, yet the Basarwa continue to make their traditional grass shelters. This suggests that the communities are reluctant to break with the past and desire to maintain some kind of identity. They have, at least, built pit-latrines using bricks as shown in **Figure 2.3**. They were encouraged to build pit-latrines by governmental health educators.

The concern about identity has seen the Basarwa take the best of their traditions from the past into the present through their traditional education system. Their traditional education system is informal with a wide curriculum that includes history, culture, traditional beliefs, songs, dances, folklores, norms, values, ceremonies, language and survival skills like hunting, gathering, medicine, and defence (Tlhalefang and Oduaran, 2006). They teach the young ones in various ways. The common way is through songs, dances, games, story telling, sharing of life experiences, and celebrating special events. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like the Kuru Development Trust have helped the Basarwa celebrate their culture through sponsoring an annual cultural festival.

**Figure 2.3** Traditional shelter at New Xade and a pit latrine



The Kuru cultural festival attracts participation of the Basarwa and other minority and marginalised ethnic groups in Botswana. **Figures 2.4 and 2.5** show a typical Basarwa dance performed during the 2006 cultural festival. The young and the old, the females and males, all dance together. This ensures inculcation of equality, respect and the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. The Basarwa thrive on their culture as it values peace, non-violence and free interaction between adults and children (Le Roux, 2002).

Despite their marginalisation, other communities including the dominant Tswana tribes have adopted traditional Basarwa song and dance. Their songs and dances are now being exploited as they are being used as part of cultural tourism. Unfortunately, due to the lack of copy- or patent-rights, the Basarwa, as individuals or collectively as communities, are unable to claim any royalty money generated from their cultural pursuits that have been pirated by some commercial music groups from the dominant Tswana ethnic group.



**Figure 2.4** Traditional dance during the 2006 Kuru cultural festival



The changes due to relocation from wildlife management areas and game parks have encouraged some of the Basarwa households to try agricultural ventures like keeping livestock. Livestock farming is part of the government's strategy to encourage the Basarwa to be more settled. During relocation, the Basarwa households had to choose either fifteen goats or five cattle. The government gave them the livestock at no cost as part of the package for agreeing to relocate. **Figure 2.6** shows some of the livestock at the New Xade settlement. The keeping of livestock is a departure from their nomadic lifestyle and has its own challenges. One restriction is that the grazing area lies between private ranches and the game parks or wildlife management areas. A limited grazing area prevents the Basarwa from engaging in the nomadic pastoral system that they were used to as is the case with the nomadic pastoralists in Kenya, Somalia and the Horn of Africa (Bosch et al., 2004).

**Figure 2.5** An elderly woman playing a traditional game during the Kuru cultural festival in 2006



**Figure 2.6** Cattle at New Xade given by government



### 2.3 Marginalisation of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities

The marginalisation of the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi communities manifests itself in many ways, for instance, in the loss of their original territories, a Constitution that does not recognise them, national policies that are neutral and as such neglect their unique needs, their relocation to settlements that are remote and an education curriculum that neglects their needs and aspirations. Marginalisation in this study refers to being outside mainstream society and of not being part of the decision-making process with regard to national issues. Whilst marginalisation may not necessarily describe a state of disadvantage or poverty, in this study it does. I am aware that there are people who decide to choose a lifestyle other than the mainstream for religious, ideological, or other cultural reasons and are marginalised out of choice, an observation documented by Jahnukainen (2001).

In this study, the disadvantaged and poor Basarwa and Bakgalagadi are marginalised, not by choice, but because of a combination of many factors, including their geographical location, legislation, national policies, loss of land, and their socio-economic status. I fully realise that being marginal may take different forms, hence my contention in this study is that the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi are marginalised because they find themselves in a state of poverty, where they are unable to meet their basic needs and aspirations as a result of being relocated far away from their original territories. In other words, they have experienced being deprived of what they regarded as their land. Marginalisation implies a lack of access to opportunities and means, material or otherwise, of well-being and security in terms that are important to individuals and their communities (Commonwealth of Learning, 2004). The marginalisation of the Basarwa in particular, also includes their inability to make use of opportunities to uplift themselves and participate fully in social and civil life. The absence of national political representation, access to their ancestral lands and other factors, such as easy access to secondary schools, make them feel socially isolated and deprived of their political and human rights (Peace, 2001; Campbell, 2004; Wagner, 2006).

The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities have been marginalised for decades. Their marginalisation by the dominant ethnic group is institutionalised through the country's Constitution and national policies, which were designed to bring about unity and equality



amongst the diverse ethnic communities in Botswana. However, the unintended results of the policies are a complex phenomenon characterised by controversial decisions and subsequent perpetuation of marginalising the minority groups, including the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi. The Constitution and the national policies on land use, wildlife management, and conservation and on education have, over time, served as instruments that have deprived the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi of their rights and privileges.

The history of Botswana (Hitchcock and Smith, 1982; Good, 1993; Tlou and Campbell, 1996) shows how the Basarwa, the Bakgalagadi, and other minority groups were dispossessed of their lands by the more powerful Tswana-speaking groups and Europeans during the pre-colonial and colonial period. It also shows how the dispossession was systematically carried out through Acts, policies and programmes after Botswana gained independence in 1966. The Basarwa, the Bakgalagadi and other minority groups became marginalised, as they could not defend their rights over land and animal resources (Hitchcock and Smith, 1982; Good, 1993; Tlou and Campbell, 1996). Good (1993) singles out the Basarwa and argues that they were deprived of their humanity by those who had excess power, the Tswana speaking groups, and the Europeans.

The marginalisation of the Basarwa after Botswana gained independence in 1966 was more systematic as legal instruments and policies were enacted and implemented, (VonBen, 1988). For instance, through the 1975 Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP) implemented in the 1970s, the government promoted freehold land tenure. Actually, the TGLP guidelines specify that people should be compensated with land if their land is taken over for other purposes, and the Tribal Lands Act allows the Land Boards to gazette land in the name of the communities. However, in relation to land rights of Basarwa, the official government opinion has been that the Basarwa have always been true nomads and as such have no right of any kind to land except to hunt and gather (Mogwe, 1992). The implementation of the TGLP had the unforeseen effect of depriving the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi of their right to occupy land that they previously held communally, (VonBen, 1988). In practical terms, the effect of the loss of land through the TGLP was that the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi could not continue enjoying their

cultural livelihoods as before, especially hunting and gathering. Hunting and foraging, as a way of life for the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi has been severely restricted due to the creation of commercial farming areas resulting in the two communities finding themselves virtually totally enclosed by ranches (Good, 1993). Furthermore, hunting has been almost terminated because exclusive hunting rights are the prerogative of the ranch owners, while the indigenous Basarwa and Bakgalagadi are perceived as potential poachers (Good, 1993).

Other government instruments that have further contributed to the current marginalisation of the two communities include gazetting of land and restrictions on hunting through the National Parks and Game Reserves Regulations of 2000 (Botswana Government, 2000) and the Wildlife Conservation and National Parks Act No 28 of 1992 (Botswana Government, 1992). These instruments, like the TGLP, have further restricted the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi traditional hunting and gathering activities. For instance, a large number of Basarwa have been rendered destitute, as they can no longer subsist without government assistance. This state of affairs in which the Basarwa have found themselves, with no land and in poverty, confirms their marginalisation (Boko, 2002; Campbell, 2004) and has had other consequences. For instance, loss of self-esteem, dignity, and identity and most of them have turned to excessive drinking of locally brewed beer.

The loss of land either to freehold farming or to government control has been a threat to the Basarwa's status. The Basarwa, believe that they belong to the land and the land belongs to them (VonBen, 1988; Boko, 2002; Wagner, 2006). The Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi who lost their traditional territories were either relocated to government-gazetted settlements or found themselves as squatters on farms and near Tswana villages (Wagner, 2006). The Basarwa of New Xade claim to have been forced to leave the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (CKGR) in 1998, whilst government argues that they moved voluntarily (Wagner, 2006). Evidence provided during the 2006 High Court case in which the Basarwa took the Botswana government to court over the relocation, confirms the Basarwa claim of forced relocation (Minority Rights Group International, 2008, Modiba, 2008).

The majority of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi who were relocated are poor and marginal. The Basarwa are always associated with cattle posts and the bush and, as such, are deprived of any significant role in the village (VonBen, 1988) and during my seven year stay with them, I observed this to be still true. The Basarwa lack the means to meet their basic needs. They are poverty-stricken, lack employment opportunities and a dependable source of cash income. Those who are employed are in low-paying jobs (Boko, 2002; Wagner, 2006) and many D'Kar residents who are Basarwa, struggle on a daily basis to find adequate employment, acceptable nutrition and a means to stay healthy (Kuru D'Kar Trust, 2006). Hunting and gathering is no longer possible without acquiring a hunting licence and this has worsened their predicament. Changes in the lifestyle were confirmed during an interview with a learner at one of the research sites.

*Interviewer: Is it not your culture to hunt and gather?*

*Learner: Yes, it's our culture but these days things have changed and we are now in modern days.*

*Interviewer: Who changed them?*

*Learner: The government, it's now the law of Botswana. We only get the meat when we are called to the kgotla to cook the meat and we are supposed to finish it the same day at the kgotla.*

*Interviewer: Who usually hunt?*

*Learner: Boer, there is a white man who hunts.*

*Interviewer: Why and for whom?*

*Learner: Because he has a ranch and he kill for villagers who gather at the kgotla to cook and eat.*

*Interviewer: Are you allowed to take your share to your houses?*

*Learner: Only if there is plenty/enough meat but if there is not enough we eat at the kgotla (P 5:20 144:166)*

Coupled with unemployment and unable to practise their traditional lifestyle, enrolling for distance education programmes is just one way of trying to overcome their predicament.

The Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi distance learners who were participants in this study live in four remote settlements. Remoteness in this case is defined in terms of more than 40 km distance from a service centre that provides essential services like hospitals, educational services, and shops. Because of their geographical isolation, they pay higher prices for commodities than people living in urban areas or in villages. The four settlements are: Kang which is 420 km from Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana; Inalegolo which is 476 km from Gaborone and is not accessible, except by a 4x4 vehicle; D'Kar is 840 km from Gaborone and New Xade is 910 km from Gaborone. These physical distances from the major service centre and the underdevelopment experienced



with the exception of Kang, make them remote. For example, they do not have a telecommunication infrastructure, reliable water sources, and good road networks. The settlements have poor radio reception and an unreliable cell phone network. Moreover, there is no public transport to help the inhabitants get to service centres. Inalegolo and New Xade settlements are located next to wildlife management areas whilst D'Kar is located inside a church farm. The settlements have few opportunities for employment. Whilst the three settlements, Inalegolo, D'Kar, and New Xade each have a primary school and a health clinic, none of them has a secondary school. The nearest secondary school for Inalegolo is 76 km, for D'Kar it is 40 km and for New Xade it is 110 km. These distances make it difficult for individuals to access secondary education from these three settlements without government assistance. Kang village on the other hand, has infrastructure that is better than the other three settlements in that it has telephone landlines, cell phone signals, a library, shops, and a number of government offices. It is located along the Trans Kalahari Highway that connects Botswana and Namibia. It has two secondary schools and a clinic with a maternity wing.

The economic development that occurred after 1980 because of diamond mining initiatives helped Botswana develop its educational system. At the time of independence, Botswana was among the 25 poorest countries of the world and today it is classified as a middle-income country by the World Bank (Hanemann, 2006). It then had only 8 secondary schools, but now boasts more than 234 secondary schools country-wide (Gatsha, 2004). Despite this progress, marginalisation of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi is also evident in the education system. There are only two senior secondary schools that offer the BGCSE in the western part of Botswana. The two schools are part of the allocation of 28 senior secondary schools run by the Botswana Ministry of Education and Skills Development and they do not have the capacity to accommodate all junior certificate graduates. Some junior certificate graduates end up being taken in by senior schools in other parts of the country, but due to the stringent academic competition and limited spaces at the 28 senior secondary schools in the country, not all learners can continue their schooling formally. Some therefore, opt to study for their BGCSE through distance learning provided by BOCODOL, which is able to reach all out-of-school youths and adults in the country because of its open access policy and its decentralised learner support model. Those who opt for distance

education are the youths whose academic achievement at Junior Certificate Level examinations did not earn them enough points to be admitted to any of the 28 senior secondary schools. The senior secondary schools have the capacity to accommodate 66% of the Junior Certificate level graduates based on how they fared in passing their examinations. The majority who fail to meet the cut-off points are usually from the western part of the country and are mainly Basarwa and Bakgalagadi.

Whilst government policy is to give the same opportunities to all citizens of Botswana, in practice, as stated before, there are no secondary schools amongst the Basarwa communities since the communities are regarded as too small and isolated to sustain any secondary school. Basarwa children are therefore sent to boarding schools that are far away from their settlements. The Basarwa children in boarding schools have experienced ill-treatment from their fellow students and non-Basarwa teachers (Mogwe, 1992; Polelo, 2003). By way of example, they have complained about the use of corporal punishment meted out to them for not knowing Setswana (Mogwe, 1992; Polelo 2003). Corporal punishment is detrimental and generally makes it difficult for the Basarwa children to progress academically. Corporal punishment administered to Basarwa children for not knowing Setswana is unfair and unjust given that it is either their second or even third language. It is tantamount to discrimination typical of that which the Basarwa are likely to face, both as individuals and as a community (Mogwe, 1992; Polelo, 2003).

The setup at boarding schools affords Basarwa children the opportunity to receive education but it is driven by a curriculum that lacks content that relates to the Basarwa's cultural and socio-economic needs. The curriculum is more orientated towards the dominant Tswana-speaking groups (Mogwe, 1992; Polelo 2003). The education provided to the Basarwa is therefore alien to their way of life and this raises some cultural fears. Basarwa parents view the education of their children at boarding schools with suspicion. Their concern is that their children at boarding schools are given food that is not the same as what they normally eat and because their children grow up away from home, it estranges them from their families and their culture, and that they end up not fitting into their communities again when they come back. This is the reality that the

Basarwa face - that education is changing individuals, their families and their culture (Mogwe, 1992).

Botswana followed a British system of education until 1998 when it localised its school curriculum. The current curriculum is benchmarked according to the University of Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). The localisation of the curriculum meant that the contents of the subjects were enriched by incorporating themes related to the Botswana environment, history, and culture yet the British influence still prevails because of Botswana's historical link with the United Kingdom (UK) as a former colony. The current curriculum still does not seem to address the needs of all ethnic groups in Botswana.

My interaction with the Bakgalagadi revealed that their children are equally as affected as the Basarwa's children are. Their children are made to feel inferior and are teased by fellow students and non-Bakgalagadi teachers who are from the dominant ethnic groups. This is because of their limited command of the Setswana language. They speak Setswana with an accent so other ethnic groups can easily identify them as Bakgalagadi. This affects their self-esteem and identity. The curriculum in all schools in Botswana is delivered in English while the medium of communication in and outside the classroom is Setswana. Basarwa children therefore face serious language challenges right from primary schooling (Mogwe, 1992; Polelo 2003). The effect of instruction conducted in Setswana, is that some Basarwa children fail to proceed to secondary schools, despite the fact that there is automatic promotion (Mogwe, 1992). Failure to proceed with schooling (by passing BGCSE) results in the Basarwa being socially excluded. The consequences of this discrimination, at times, are that they are accused, arrested, and sentenced to jail for committing criminal offences. During my tenure in the western part of Botswana, the Regional Centre enrolled 25 youths from the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities who were in prison for alleged crimes that included; rape, stock theft and hunting without a licence.

One of the reasons why learners from the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities under-perform is that the educational infrastructure and resources necessary to enhance teaching and learning are below par. When it comes to information and communication

technology (ICT) infrastructure most remote settlements where marginalised communities live have none. This is despite the acknowledged importance of ICTs when it comes to addressing issues of educational equity and social exclusion (Gulati, 2008). Internet usage in Botswana is as low as 5% of the population as most rural areas lack electricity, (Isaacs, 2007). The disadvantage faced by Basarwa and Bakgalagadi in terms of ICT connectivity is similar to the Maori of New Zealand, who are also worse off in their country (Cullen, 2002).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are perhaps the greatest tool to date for self-education and value-addition to any community's development efforts, yet poor rural communities do not have the necessary awareness, skills or facilities to enable themselves to develop using ICTs, (Gray & Sanzogni, 2004). The inadequate telecommunication infrastructure for rural areas where indigenous peoples are found across the world is a challenge. For example in South Asia, the majority and those with least resources are being left out of the benefits of the ICTs and more importantly, remote rural areas do not even have a foothold in the revolution that ICTs are ushering in, (Pringle & David, 2002). Similarly the Maori in rural areas of New Zealand are adversely affected by inadequate telecommunication infrastructure (Galpern, 2005) and as such are disadvantaged like the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi in Botswana. However a study by Galpern (2005) indicates that Wireless Network technologies (WLAN) are raising new hopes for sustainable internet diffusion in the rural areas of the developing world as they allow drastic reductions in network deployment costs, particularly for last-mile connectivity in low-density areas. Although the digital divide remains, it needs to be addressed and the issues of geographical, weather and finances should not be an excuse in the near future. Galpern (2005) further argues that the new generation of WLAN technologies can significantly alleviate the constraints that limit internet connectivity to the wealthy and urbanised areas.

Another contributing factor for underperforming is that many Basarwa adults are still not able to read or write - a state of affairs that compares unfavourably with other ethnic groups in Botswana. Probably the most critical reason for underperformance is the use of languages unfamiliar Basarwa children as the medium of instruction. The official languages used in the country are Setswana and English and the latter is the medium of

instruction at upper primary and at secondary schools, while the former is used during the first three years in primary schools. The Basarwa, like any other community, are very proud of their mother tongue. They do not like being taught in Setswana. They want their children to be taught first through their mother tongue before learning other languages. The advantage that Setswana speaking group have is that they grasp concepts taught in Setswana faster than the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi do. The issue of teaching in mother tongue was addressed in the Botswana 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) (Botswana Government, 1994) yet it would appear that the government has been reluctant to implement this facet of the policy pronouncement. Most of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi parents aspire to an education that respects their own language, culture and traditions while assisting youngsters and the community to interact successfully with the dominant society (Bourne, 2003).

In Botswana, the social status of the Basarwa has been contentious for some time. In a symposium in 1997, the word marginalisation was prevalent in all discussions that focused on the Basarwa. The symposium report indicates that everyone seemed to agree that the Basarwa are marginalised (Nteta et al., 1997). The reports points out that the Basarwa were not consulted fully when they faced relocation. In the same symposium, a church minister remarked that the Basarwa were never understood by the British colonial government and, after 30 years of independence, the Botswana government still did not understand the Basarwa's unique needs. The church minister further argued that it was high time to find out why a child from the Basarwa community would never become a professor (Nteta et al., 1997). The debate of the social status and lifestyle of the Basarwa reached the highest point during the 2002 to 2006 High Court battle in Botswana, in which the Basarwa struggled for their land rights. Despite the High Court ruling in their favour, the Basarwa still face challenges in trying to return to their ancestral land to follow their traditional lifestyle.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided a description of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities. The participants involved in this research study come from these remote communities and their experiences and views give this investigation a unique dimension. I endeavoured to create an understanding of the isolation in which these distance



learners try to complete their studies and the many challenges they face in terms of their socio-economic and political status. In the next chapter, I review the literature related to learning support and position my study within a theoretical framework to ensure that it is informed by theories in the field of distance education.

## Chapter 3 Literature review on learner support in ODL

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### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I provided contextual background for understanding the distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana who participated in this study. In this chapter, I review literature related to the theoretical frameworks in distance learning and learning support as a subset of learner support. The purpose of the review was to understand the conceptual and theoretical perspectives that underpin learning support in order to situate this study, interpret the perspectives and experiences of participants of this study, and build on existing research in the domain of DE.

Learner support appears to be of lesser concern in some distance learning institutions as planning strategies for learner support do not exist, (Levy and Bealie, 2003, Robinson, 2004). An absence of such plans could imply that issues related to learner support, including perceptions and experiences of learners from marginalised communities in underdeveloped contexts, may not be known. This could be due to several constraints, such as financial cost, inadequacy of appropriate human resources for learner support or, alternatively, the role of learning support may not be considered a matter that deserves attention. Empirical literature on learner support for distance learners from marginalised communities, similar to those described in the previous chapter, has been difficult to locate. This is not surprising as such disadvantaged groups generally have no advocacy and thus mainstream society commands more attention. However, literature describing learner support as provided in developed contexts is prolific and differs from what happens in developing contexts. In the latter case, available literature comprises progress reports on what various institutions are doing (Robinson, 2004, Nonyongo and Ngegebule, 2008). For instance, Nonyongo and Ngegebule casebook (2008) on learner support in Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) institutions is primarily a collection of progress reports produced by ODL practitioners. None offer evidence of any empirical study on the perceptions and experiences of learning support for distance learners from marginalised communities in underdeveloped contexts.



I first discuss the provision of education to marginalised communities as well as the concept of open and distance learning. I then briefly examine three applicable theoretical frameworks and the literature on learner support to establish a conceptual framework for this study. I next proceed to discuss the empirical literature on learning support experiences in both developed and developing contexts and indicate what exists and what gaps my study addresses. Inter alia, my study contributes to the literature by giving a voice to adults enrolled for a secondary school certificate in isolated disadvantaged circumstances.

### **3.2 The provision of education to marginalised communities**

Education is a basic human right (Curtis, 2009). All people including those from marginalised communities should share this. However, in practice, the right to education is not enjoyed equally by all. Marginalised groups in various regions of the world suffer disproportionately from unequal or restricted access to quality education and inappropriate education strategies (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009). Observations by Bourne (2003) COL & COMSEC (2007) COMSEC (2009) is that education provision for marginalised communities in Africa and elsewhere does not adequately reach marginalised communities nor adequately address their needs and aspirations. In other words, adequate education provision has failed to reach nomadic populations and marginalised indigenous communities. In India, the enrolment rate for Scheduled Tribal children in 1997-8 was only 66% nationally, in Namibia - in the 1990s - the scholastic enrolment of the Basarwa was only 21% compared to a national average of 83%, in Australia in 1999, nearly half of all indigenous people aged 15 or over had had no formal education and only 5.5% were participating in years 11 and 12 at the top of the secondary school (Bourne, 2003).

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (1999) and Human Rights Council (2009) make it clear that education is an inalienable human right and is more than a commodity or a service. It is regarded as crucial for the realisation of other rights and an indispensable agency for the expansion of human capabilities and the enhancement of human dignity. Education is further regarded as critical as it plays a role in socialization for democratic citizenship and represents an essential support for community identity. It is also viewed as a means by which individuals and communities can lift themselves out

of poverty and is also a means of helping minorities overcome the legacies of historical injustice or discrimination committed against them, (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009). It is therefore critically important that people from marginalised communities should have the right to a fully-fledged education, given that the lack of or limited education impinges on civil and political rights, as well as the rights to freedom of movement and expression. Lack of education also limits participation in public affairs, e.g. voting rights and limits the access and enjoyment of rights to employment, health, housing and an adequate standard of living. Lack of education can also result in reticence to engage with law enforcement authorities inhibiting access to remedies when human rights are violated. Lack of or poor quality of education is a barrier, in particular, for marginalised people's progress and empowerment (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009).

The United Nations Human Rights Council (2009) further advocates for education to serve the dual function of supporting the efforts of communities to self-development in economic, social and cultural terms while opening pathways by which they can function in the wider society and promote social harmony. This therefore calls for education strategies that enhance rights and freedoms. Human rights are violated when, for instance, unwanted assimilation is imposed through the medium of education or enforced social segregation is generated through educational processes. (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2009). In the light of the rights and obligations recognised at the level of the United Nations, the right to secondary education of people from marginalised communities satisfies Article 13 (2) (b) of the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights . The said Article recognises that secondary education demands flexible curricula and varied delivery systems to respond to the needs of learners in different social and cultural settings. The United Nations Economic and Social Committee encourages alternative educational programmes which parallel regular secondary school systems (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1999). This is again echoed by the COL and COMSEC Report (2007) that calls for inclusive education, suggesting that deliberate and positive action should be made to ensure the realization of access for all kinds and conditions of learners including those from the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities in Botswana. The report further appeals to educators to explore flexible and innovative approaches in education provisioning to address the needs of

marginalised communities. Open and distance learning (ODL) is one flexible and innovative approach that is capable of reaching and addressing the needs and aspirations of marginalised communities.

### **3.3 Open and distance learning (ODL)**

Providing education to marginalised and at times nomadic communities in underdeveloped contexts is one of the most challenging and urgent issues facing education policy makers, practitioners and other role players within the field (COMSEC, 2006). The use of open and distance learning (ODL) methods to address the challenges in many countries including Botswana is now common. ODL has proved to be capable of reaching large numbers of people in developing countries (Hulsmann, 2004, Siaciwena & Lubinda, 2008)). The term open and distance learning (ODL) in the education field, has gained prominence in the past 20 years (COL, 2000).

Open learning is a system in which the restrictions placed on learners are under constant review and removed wherever possible. As a system, it entails policies that permit entry to learning with no or minimum barriers with respect to age, gender, or time constraints and with recognition of prior learning (COL, 2000). Open learning enables learners to learn at the time, place and pace which satisfy their circumstances and requirements. Open learning emphasises the opening up of opportunities by overcoming barriers that result from age, gender, geographical isolation, previous experience requirements, personal or work commitments or conventional course structures which have often prevented people from gaining access to training or schooling (Rowntree, 1992). In other words it provides learners with choices about e.g. the medium of knowledge transmission (print, on-line, television or video) or the choice of place to study (at home, workplace or on campus). It also allows learners to have a choice to pace their study and choose when to complete their courses. It allows for support by tutors, audio conferences or computer-assisted learning and also for entry and exit from the course when the learner so desires. The type of open and distance learning that is technology-based refers to systems of teaching and learning in which a technology other than print plays a major role (COL, 2000). This is the case at the University of West Indies where audio conferencing is used to link various campuses and learning centres. It is also the case at Athabasca University and at the Open

University of the United Kingdom where computer conferencing is used as a primary mode of delivery (COL, 2000). Various forms of tele-teaching via satellite television have also been used successfully, specifically as an academic support for secondary school learners in developing countries such as Brazil, India, Mexico and South Africa (Evans, 2005, Edrishinga, 1999, Shrestha 1997)

ODL is a blanket term used for learning systems that offer varying mixes of openness and distance (DFID, 2008). Its key features include: separation of teacher and learner in time or place or in both time and place; use of mixed-media courseware that is print, radio and television broadcasts, video and audio cassettes, computer-based learning and telecommunications (Valentine, 2002; COL, 2000; DFID, 2008). ODL also includes a two way communication which allows learners and tutors to interact and the possibility of face-to-face meetings for tutorials. The language and terms used to describe ODL activities makes it difficult to have one definition (COL, 2000). The commonly used terms related to open and distance learning include correspondence education, distance learning, open learning, technology-based education and flexible learning amongst others.

Correspondence is print-based with communication through postal services or telephone. Learners pursuing correspondence education do not have to leave their homes to study. In North America many university correspondence programmes have been renamed open and distance learning programmes in the last 15 years, (COL, 2000). Distance learning on the other hand occurs when a learner learns at a distance from a teacher using pre-recorded, packaged learning materials. The learner is separated from the teacher in time and space but is still being guided by the teacher, (Rowntree, 1992; COL, 2000).

Despite the different types of open and distance learning, the delivery of ODL programmes occurs along two continua, that is, the continuum of time and the continuum of space, (COL, 2000) as illustrated in **Table 3.1**.

**Table 3.1 ODL scenario**

	<b>Same time (synchronous)</b>	<b>Different time (asynchronous)</b>
<b>Same place</b>	Classroom teaching, face-to-face tutorial and seminars, workshops and residential schools	Learning resource centres, which learners visit at their leisure
<b>Different place</b>	Audio conferences and video conferences; television with one way video, two way audio, radio with listener-response capability; and telephone tutorials	Home study, computer conferencing, tutorial support by e-mail and fax communication

Source: COL 2000

The development of ODL has generated theories that inform the field. Three of the theories are discussed in the next section with the view to drawing on them for my own conceptual framework.

### **3.4 Theoretical frameworks underpinning distance learning**

Distance learning has evolved from correspondence education with no learner support provision to what it is today, namely, open and distance learning with learner support services. Today's technologies like video conferencing, interactive television, satellite transmission, audio-conferencing, the Internet and online learning, have made the provision of learner support services attractive and feasible to learners (McLoughlin, 2002; Wheeler, 2002). The available empirical literature addresses theoretical issues of distance learning in developed and developing contexts and appears to overlook underdeveloped contexts. The theories that explain learning at a distance include the following: Holmberg's (1983) *theory of didactic conversation*, Moore's (1990) *theory of transactional distance* and Gorsky, Caspi and Trumper's (2004) *theory of dialogue*.

Holmberg's (1983) *theory of didactic conversation* focuses on the learner. His point of departure is the formal education context whereby students express their ideas and the educator guides them by way of explaining, correcting, or redirecting those ideas. Didactic conversation plays a vital role in enhancing learning. It creates a personal rapport between the

educator and the learner. This leads to greater motivation on the part of the learner and increased learning outcomes. The learning support provided at traditional schools, for example, teacher-learner, and learner-learner interaction is the kind of learning support that distance education learners with previous conventional learning experience would expect to get during their course of study (Holmberg 1983). Holmberg (2003) has dropped the term didactic conversations in his theory and now prefers to use 'learning conversations' because the word "didactic," in many cases, is taken to indicate an authoritarian approach, the direct opposite to what was meant. The rest of his theory remains the same and he confirms it as still being valid (Holmberg, 2003). In his theory of conversational learning, Holmberg (2003) spells out factors that influence learning favourably and those that advance the learning process and empathy is one such factor.

Given the cultural sensitivity of the distance learners from marginalised communities, a sense of empathy between those who provide learning support and distance learners is necessary for their feelings of connectedness to the institution. Furthermore, constant availability of tutors, frequency of assignment submission and short turn-around times of assignments are necessary for advancing the learning process. Given the context of my study and the attributes of participants as described in the previous chapter, I filtered my analysis of the data collected using Holmberg's theory in order to reach an in-depth understanding of how distance learners perceive and experience learning support. Other elements of Holmberg's theory that explain the expected nature of transactions include effective communication between providers of learning support and distance learners and their motivation and satisfaction. Holmberg's theory further states that feelings of personal relations between the instructor and student tend to promote study pleasure and motivation, particularly if well-developed instructional materials and two-way communication between the learner and the educator support such feelings. He argues that communication within a natural conversation can be understood and remembered easily and that the conversation concept can be successfully translated for use by media and made available to distance students. All this can be achieved, provided thorough planning and guidance on the curriculum for organised study at a distance is made. As applied to my study, Holmberg's theory holds that I must expect that learning support enhances academic performance of distance learners because, in order to achieve effective learning, his theory underscores the importance of motivation in the attainment of study goals and that an atmosphere of friendly conversation favours feelings of personal relation necessary for enjoying

study at a distance. Whilst Holmberg's theory emphasises the conversational learning Moore (1990) has emphasised the psychological and transactional distance that learners experience when they study at a distance.

Moore (1990) advanced the *theory of transactional distance* and explains that "distance" is determined by the amount of communication or interaction, which occurs between learner and instructor. He further argues that distance was also determined by the amount of structure that exists in the design of the course. In other words, when a course is more structured and has less communication (or interaction), transactional distance is experienced. In this way, Moore explains that a continuum of transactions might exist in the model from less distant where there is greater interaction and less structure, to more distant where there may be less interaction and more structure. Moore (ibid) further recommends that, when designing effective distance education courses, one should include interactions between the student and their instructor, students and students, and students and the content. Whilst Moore's theory makes sense for the context of this study given the potential communication gap arising from the remoteness and geographical distance, Gorsky and Caspi (2005) argue that the basic proposition of Moore's (1990) transactional distance theory was neither supported nor validated by empirical research findings. They dismiss the transactional distance theory as tautology and being non-scientific as they believe relations between variables were ambiguous. Whilst they acknowledge the concept of transactional distance as a historical milestone since it emphasises that essentially *distance* in distance education is transactional, not spatial or temporal, they argue that, in practical terms, as a measurable dependent variable in a theory or model, the concept has little merit. However, I do not find this argument plausible, given distance learners' experiences of isolation, need for connectedness and transactional presence in distance learning as revealed in empirical studies by Wheeler (2002) Shin (2003) and Dzakiria (2005).

Gorsky et al. (2004) have advanced *dialogue as a theoretical framework* for distance education instructional systems. According to these authors, the key element of their framework is learning not the learner, not the instructor, and not the physical or temporal distance separating them. This appears to be coming from a specific epistemological stance and view of reality, it may also imply that the actual words used to construct the dialogue are the reality. I therefore see each word they use as important for analysing and interpreting data. Gorsky et al. (2004) argue that learning is an individual activity mediated by intra-personal dialogue. Their



assumption is that dialogue is enabled by structural and human resources. These theorists (ibid), explain structural resources for intra-personal dialogue to include all materials of any kind that students may learn from, whilst structural resources for inter-personal dialogue include all available communication media and the availability of instructors and fellow students. Human resources, on the other hand, are for inter-personal dialogue and these are the instructors and students who may engage in the instructional dialogue. They are of the opinion that students can utilise resources as they see fit, in accordance with their goals, abilities, and needs (ibid). Part of the context of this study as described in Chapter 2 is the lack the structural resources as explained in this section and therefore their theoretical framework may not suit all situations. Given the limited educational resources that can enhance learning in a less developed context, like communication media, for instance, and semi-literate and illiterate population learners may not have easy access to the kind of resources that Gorsky et al. (2004) anticipated.

I chose Holmberg's theory (2003) of learning conversations as the framework of this study firstly, because I find it embraces empathy, an attribute I consider key to delivering academic advocacy. Holmberg as quoted by Bernath and Vidal, (2007:433) has this to say:

*My modest theory simply means that a procedure that has proved helpful in traditional education is applicable also to distance education. Empathy between those who teach and those who learn is universally a good basis for learning. Easily understandable, conversation-like presentations and friendly interaction help students to learn. Empirical investigations support these assumptions.*

I secondly chose Holmberg's theory (2003) because it is the theory that explains what learners expect and experience in distance learning. To substantiate his theory, Holmberg argues that:

*My theory is of a different kind. It implies that the application of a methodological approach – empathy-creating conversational style – leads to increased motivation to learn and better results than conventional presentation of learning matter (Holmberg at 4<sup>th</sup> Eden Research workshop 25-26 Oct, 2006, in Bernath and Vidal 2007: 430).*

However, Peters (1998) criticises Holmberg's conversational style and argues that it results in overprotecting the students and prevents them from confronting the complexity of all that academia entails. I acknowledge Peters' criticism of Holmberg's theory if applied at a higher education level. But I consider Holmberg's conversational theory an acceptable point of departure for learners at secondary school level where they come from marginalised communities, who often find a culture clash in formal education because their traditional education is informal and incorporated into their everyday lives, an observation documented by Le Roux (2002). Given that the learners from the marginalised community struggle to pass and

often dropout out of school (Hanemann, 2006), the need for empathy and a conversational style in dealing with them is more appropriate. I also chose Holmberg's theory as my theoretical framework as I consider it appropriate for examining BOCODOL's decentralised learner support system given the fact that Holmberg's theory underpins what distance learners expect and experience from their respective study centres. However, where appropriate, I draw from each theory to interpret the perceptions and experiences of distance learners on learning support. The three theories have similar concerns, for example, learning, communication, or interaction between learner and educator and between learner and learner. The similarities that exist in the three theories are summarised in Table 3.1, and include the role of communication in learning.

**Table 3.2 Foci of the three distance education theories**

Theory	Aspect of learning support advanced
<b>Learning conversation theory (Holmberg,1983; 2003)</b>	Focuses on the learner, particularly feelings of personal relations between the educator and learner to promote study pleasure and motivation. Believes that conversation creates a personal rapport between the educator and the learner and this leads to greater motivation in the learner and increased learning outcomes
<b>Transactional distance theory (Moore, 1990)</b>	Focuses on distance and on the amount of communication or interaction between learner and instructor, learner and learner.
<b>Dialogue theory (Gorsky, Caspi &amp; Trumper, 2004)</b>	Focuses on learning not on the instructor and not on the physical distance separating them. However, takes note of the need for materials from which learners can learn, the communication media and the availability of educators and learners to engage in instructional dialogue

In the next section, I provide an explanation of the conceptual framework of learning support as situated within the learner support literature in the context of distance learning.

### **3.5 Learner support and learning support in distance learning**

In distance learning, learner support and learning support are closely related but the two concepts do not mean the same thing. The need for learner support and learning support arises from the need to reduce the barriers to successful learning. The provision of learner support and

learning support is meant to provide an environment that improves learners' commitment and motivation to learn (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005). Most distance learners are new to the system of learning at a distance and associate learning with being taught by a teacher being present physically. They find it challenging to learn on their own without a teacher. In most cases they are not confident of their capability to learn using unfamiliar learning materials (IGNOU, 2000) and therefore they need learning support. Learning support is one of the three kinds of learner support along with personal and administrative support. Learner support is a broader term than learning support. It focuses on providing students with the assistance they need to achieve the desired outcomes in a distance learning environment (ADEA, 2002; Roberts, 2004; Usun, 2004; Ukpo, 2006). The literature also uses other terms to refer to learner support; for example, student services and student support (Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2002; Moore, 2003; Tait, 2004; Dzakiria, 2005).

Thorpe, (2002) reviewed learner support in on-line intensive and interactive forms of teaching and learning with specific reference to how it was conceptualised and suggested that all aspects of an institution's provision, from the enquiry desk through to the quality of the interface on the CD-ROM, should be supportive in the sense of fostering high quality learning. Thorpe's review has limited application in this inquiry as computer technology as a channel for distance education is currently not readily available in Botswana. Similar to what Thorpe suggests, Tait, (2000) and McLoughlin, (2002) describe learner support as a support system intended to enhance and improve learning. They both note that it covers a wide range of skills that come to light from the initial registration, and are evident throughout the teaching programme until the results are released. Tait (2004) explains learner support in terms of its cognitive, affective, and systemic function, similar to the explanation given by Simpson (2002). Cognitive function in this case refers to supporting and developing learning through the mediation of standard course materials and learning resources for individual learners. Affective function, on the other hand, refers to providing an environment, which supports learners, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem. Systemic support refers to establishing administrative processes and information management systems, which are effective, transparent, and user friendly. In practice little distinction is made between the three aspects of learner support, namely, academic, personal and administrative. A holistic approach is usually adopted to address difficulties learners encounter (McLoughlin, 2002; Simpson, 2002; Holmberg, 2003; Tait, 2004; Alias and Rahman, 2005; Dzakiria, 2005). The difficulties learners encounter can be unexpected, that is, cannot be

anticipated by course designers, instructors, and administrators. Some difficulties crop up unexpectedly but can only be dealt with on a case-by-case basis because one cannot predict which individual learner is likely to encounter a particular difficulty (Moore, 2003; Robinson, (2004). Difficulties experienced could be emotional or academic. Such difficulties may hinder effective learning. The role of learner support in such cases is to reduce the difficulties in order to enhance the social well-being and academic performance of a learner. In the light of the difficulties distance learners experience, learner support can also be described as a safety net for the individual learner (Robinson, 2004).

Learning support as an element of learner support refers to academic support. Alias and Rahman (2005) point out that learning support elements aid the development of new knowledge, skills, and attitudes when individual learners interact with information and the environment. The elements of learning support in distance learning include study orientation, communication and study skills, face to face tutoring, and assignment feedback (Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2002; Moore, 2003; Holmberg, 2003; Tait, 2004; Dzakiria, 2005; Alias and Rahman, 2005). Learning support as it relates to academic performance includes assignment marking or feedback, support that is incorporated within the course materials and the tutorial sessions. It is essential to the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance (Robinson, 2004). However, the quality and quantity of learning support required might differ from one context to the other and from learner to learner (Robinson, 2004).

Several authors (Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2002; Moore, 2003; Holmberg, 2003; Mensah, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Tait, 2004; Dzakiria, 2005; Alias and Rahman, 2005) have provided evidence that suggests the need for learning support. However, I find Simpson's (2004) and Mensah's (2004) studies most illuminating. The former study (by Simpson) demonstrated the key function and the need for learning support as far as learner retention and throughput was concerned. It also showed that proactive measures, if taken appropriately, have the advantage of reaching learners who are more likely to drop out whilst reactive measures are designed to respond to learner-initiated contact or learners who are likely to be successful. The study also claims that proactive methods are more cost effective, an important consideration for any DE institution of scale. Mensah's study (2004) was on students' impressions of the learner support system in a distance education programme in Ghana. It demonstrates the need for face-to-face tutorial support and helpful and encouraging feedback on students' written assignments. I find both

studies relevant to this study given the similarities in rendering learning support to distance learners. Effective learning support is meant to help distance learners succeed in their studies. I consider learning support as conceptualised above critical for positive perceptions and experiences in distance learning.

### **3.6 Factors that influence perceptions and experiences in distance learning**

There is an abundance of literature that covers factors that influence perceptions and experiences in distance learning (Sanchez and Gunawardena, 1998; Bhalalusesa, Picciano, 2001; Fung and Carr, 2002; Gibbs and Simpson, 2002; Holmberg, 2003; Tait, 2003; Hughes, 2004; Krishnan, 2004; Stephen et al, 2004; Creed et al., 2005). The following factors are identified; proficiency in the English language, that nature of feedback, availability of educational resources, the use of familiar language or mother-tongue, the existence of policy frameworks that embrace social justice or equity and fairness. Other factors include perceived self-esteem, flexibility in the application of programmes, local partnerships and collaboration and curricula developed with the full participation of the recipients' representatives, persistence and family support. An analysis of factors among Asian-American, African-American and Hispanic students by Nickerson and Kristsonis (2005) identified parental involvement, time spent on tasks and study habits as having contributed to their success. When promoting educational experiences for learners from minority and marginalised communities emphasis on attributes of being a successful distance learner is a critical. The attributes include being able to progress through a study programme, being independent, having good learning skills and strategies, and being able to interact effectively with tutors, course materials and other distance learners at any time (Dzakiria, 2005).

Distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support can also be influenced positively by learning styles or approaches to learning and the contribution of tutors or distance education teachers. Certain learner attributes also influence positive perceptions, for instance, previous educational background, goals and motivations to enrol for a course. The approach distance learners use to master the course material determines the level of their perceptions and experiences of learning support outcomes. The quality of learning depends on the learning approach an individual learner adopts (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Biggs, 1997; Entwistle, 1997; Alstete and Beutell, 2004). Learners may adopt three major approaches. They are

surface learning, deep learning and the strategic approach. These learning approaches or learning styles lead to different achievement levels and academic performance. Surface learning focuses on memorisation and the recall of information or content without or with little understanding. It has to do with rote learning. It leads to low achievement. On the other hand, the deep learning approach is characterised by the search for understanding, transformational development and application of knowledge. Deep learning leads to a higher achievement than the surface approach. The strategic approach involves the adoption of a learning style that is driven by a search for a desired outcome, for example, high grades, examination success and the qualification itself. It is more competitive and ego-oriented and is based on strategic planning. The strategic approach emphasises the organisation of studies around study skills, assessment and what is deemed necessary for success (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983, Biggs, 1997, Entwistle, 1997). The strategic approach leads to academic success although the individual's learning circumstances and resources may also influence the academic performance. The provision of learning support aims to enable distance learners to adopt and apply deep and strategic learning approaches in order to enhance their academic performance.

The above approaches to learning are similar to other ideas expressed with different terminology for example, Venter (2003) talks about 'field independence' and 'field dependence'. Field independence and field dependence, as concepts, have become associated with the categorisation of learners involved in distance learning. Field independence refers to individuals who create their own means of organising and structuring learning, whilst field dependent refers to individuals who are reliant on information provided to them (ibid). The former is closer to the deep and strategic approaches whilst the latter is similar to the surface approach. The concept of 'field independence' is essentially concerned with the extent to which learners perceive analytically. Given the notions of independent and autonomous learning, 'field independence' has become particularly valuable in understanding distance learning as a particular facet of instruction (Venter, 2003).

Tutors or distance education facilitators play a critical role in equipping distance learners with learning skills that enable them to adopt the necessary learning approaches that can make them succeed. The different tutor roles in the provision of learning support are meant to improve learning outcomes. It is noteworthy that outcomes improve when



learners have regular and meaningful contact with tutors, as tutors are regarded as important for academic counselling, nurturing learners and for their role as mentors. Tutoring is thus not limited to academic advising or counselling but extends to mentoring and coaching. Tutoring should also be regular, motivational, sustained, positive, fair, unbiased, caring, and culturally sensitive if positive impact is to be realised. Other face-to-face tutoring activities like examination skills, extra tutorials and peer help can also contribute to positive learner achievement and foster social integration and academic performance.

Previous educational experience plays a major role in making use of learning support provided by the ODL institution. A study by Dearnly (2003) revealed that learners who have had a prior positive learning experience are more likely to perform better whilst learners who enter the course with negative schooling experiences prefer being told what to do and when to do something. Such behaviour stems from earlier experiences that encouraged dependency rather than autonomy in learning (Dearnley, 2003). Positive perceptions and experiences assist learners to cope successfully with the challenges of learning at a distance. My study builds on learning support experiences documented in literature in developed and developing contexts which I discuss in the next section.

### **3.7 Learning support experiences in developed and developing contexts**

There are several progress reports that describe what open and distance learning institutions are doing in the area of learner support in Southern Africa (DEASA 2006). Research that focuses on learner support issues mainly covers the developed contexts and some parts of the developing contexts (McLoughlin, 2002; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2002; Wheeler, 2002; LaPadula, 2003; Moore, 2003; Roberts, 2004; Tait, 2004; Qakisa-Makoe, 2005; Wheeler and Amiotte, 2005). The literature is not specifically on learning support but it is on learner support services. Issues of interest for my study covered in the literature from developed and developing contexts that relate to perceptions and experiences of learning support include culture, drop-outs, retention, persistence, success, social experiences, interaction and learner satisfaction.



### 3.7.1 Learning support experiences in developed contexts

Developed countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand over the years, offered secondary education through correspondence education. Correspondence education is a form of distance education without learning support (Perraton and Lentell, 2004). . Correspondence study materials are not interactive neither does this mode of learning embrace learning support. The advent of information and communication technologies has transformed the delivery of open and distance learning, in particular with regard to learning support provision. One advantage that information and communication technologies have brought is the narrowing of the communication gap. This has the potential to reduce the psychological distance that characterises distance learning. Efficient deployment of technology, also leads to effective learning support provision, as is the case with the Open University of the United Kingdom and other similar institutions in the developed world (Perraton and Lentell, 2004).

The provision of learning support via communication technologies has been successful in many parts of the world. One online survey by LaPadula (2003) involved sixty-three women and twenty-nine men. The aim of the study was to determine how satisfied the students were with the online student services and their suggestions about the types of services they needed in future. The results were that the majority of the online students were satisfied with the services they were receiving, as it was consistently available. This, however, is not an indication that learners in underdeveloped contexts without access to information and communication technologies would respond positively to similar items on student services, as the two contexts are so different. LaPadula (2003) study is similar to Wheeler (2002) in terms of designing a research tool for assessing distance learners' perspectives and experiences on learning support. The ideas are relevant for this study in terms of the questionnaire tool described in Chapter 4 of this study.

Townsend and Wheeler's (2004) study of online distance learning in the United Kingdom, focuses on teaching assistants' experiences of learning support. The study serves to confirm that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is merely a highly effective tool in delivering and developing learning. It reports that students

responded positively to the opportunity to manage their own learning, and they acknowledged the development of their own study skills, in presenting, analysing, reflecting and self-evaluation. The study concluded that it was the content of the course that had been important in developing the skills, rather than the method of its delivery. Their sample of thirteen students may be too small for purposes of generalisation yet the study might suggest that availability of ICT infrastructure in underdeveloped contexts and learning support may increase learner achievement rates.

Low through-put is a key issue in distance learning and has been discussed in studies conducted by Schloser, Anderson and Simonson (1994). One such study relates to a Canadian secondary school distance education programme. The study compared a group that completed a programme to a dropout group and found out that the group that completed the programme tended to have post-secondary education goals whilst the drop-out group tended to have secondary education goals. The group that completed the programme was also overwhelmingly positive in their attitude towards their tutors whilst the drop-out group held positive views. Another study was on dropping out. It found that students dropped out due to several factors such as lack of time, lack of prerequisite knowledge of the course content, lack of support from peers and family, stress, poor grades, procrastination, need for face-to-face interaction, pride, poor tutor feedback, weak goal commitment and fear of failure. The reviews do not indicate the kind of support given to students or the social experiences students had in order to avoid dropping out. The reviews provide opportunity for comparison particularly as the goals and the contributing factors for dropping out are similar to those found in my context.

The provision of an opportunity for distance learners to have social experiences appears to contribute to reducing dropping out and can possibly promote retention, persistence and success. These are issues of major concern in distance learning. LaPadula, (2003:123) has this to say:

*Institutions' experience and research demonstrate that students' retention, completion, and satisfaction depend heavily on achieving a sense of connection with the institution.*

A sense of belonging or connection to an institution is important. The importance of feeling that a learner is a member of an academic community has also been emphasised by other authors (Tinto 1993; Ashby 2004). The perceived human connection is more

than the institution. Kember et al. (2001) studied 53 Hong Kong students' perceptions of belonging. The study revealed that students' perceptions were strongest in respect of peers and teaching staff and much weaker in respect of departments and the university. This may mean that, when students feel connected to other students and tutors, they are likely to continue studying at a distance. Retention promoted through such a sense of connection may mean that students value interaction with tutors. Academic interaction may lead to successful completion of studies.

Distance learning, requires interaction between learners and distance learning facilitators. This interaction enhances academic performance. Sherry (1996) reviews literature on issues in distance learning and explains interactivity as an aspect of learning support. She maintains that the distance education system now involves a high degree of interactivity between teacher and student, even in rural and isolated communities separated by perhaps thousands of miles (ibid). Sherry appears to be talking about a context that has information and communication connectivity. In that case, I concur with Sherry, but the context of my study needs to undergo technological transformation in order to be capable of fostering such interactivity. In the meantime, before such technological transformation occurs, appropriate strategies for remote distance learners within their marginalised context need to be found in order to promote success, retention and persistence.

Studies (Cookson, 1989; Gibson, 1990; Wright, 1991; Sweet, 1993) in distance learning indicate that learner support in particular, learner–institution contact have been empirically verified and that regular learner contact with support staff has a positive effect on academic performance, persistence and completion rates. Factors, which correlate positively with course completion rates, include the use of course assignments, early submission of the first one, short turn-around times for assignment feedback and the pacing of progress. They also include supplementary audiotapes or telephone tutorials, the quality of learning materials and reminders from tutors to complete work. When it came to reasons for withdrawing from programmes, personal circumstances and lack of time were the most common reasons given. Studies by Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour, (2003) reached similar findings when it came to institutional contact satisfaction level and course completion rates.

Cain et al (2003) study used a control group that received neutral messages conveying general information and an experimental group that received more personal, caring messages. It was found that the group that was mentored had higher levels of satisfaction about being a member of the academic programme. Cain et al. (ibid) further indicate that another study that investigated the academic effect of online peer tutoring had results that showed that those students who received weekly peer tutoring had higher course completion rates than those who did not. Whilst these studies offer valuable experiences and lessons, they do not explain the effects of learning support in a context that lacks digital technology, although they do demonstrate that learning support does lead to improved student achievement. Robinson (2004) argues that replication studies in the area of learner support are few and frequently produce conflicting findings or fail to confirm the earlier ones. Her argument reinforces a study by Taylor et al. (1993) on student persistence and turn-around time in five institutions in four countries, which failed to produce results that had potential for generalisation and drew attention to the considerable differences between institutions and their practices, and the difficulties these create for achieving generalisations.

Other than the contextual challenge, policy meant to instil a culture of learner support practices is not being implemented in some institutions. Levy and Bealieu's (2003) study documents areas of open and distance learning in California (United States of America) that are planned and implemented in community colleges. They discovered that numerous institutions of higher learning were yet to develop strategic plans for their online distance learning programmes. For those that had plans, many key components, such as student services or learning support services, training and support were not included in the plans. Out of 108 community colleges offering online distance learning, only twenty-three colleges had plans for student services. On-campus students had full access to student services and less than half the online students had access to limited student services. The implication of this study is that student services continue to be an area that needs more attention in the planning process. Another issue for educators to bear in mind as they plan for learning support intervention is the psychological distance that learners experience.

Psychological distance is a major concern in distance education. The subject of a study by Wheeler (2002) involved understanding the nature of psychological distance in distance

learning. It was carried out with a sample of thirty respondents and explored the nature of psychological distance in distance learning in which some vital student issues were brought to light. The study revealed that distance learners who use a surface approach that is, studying with the aim of merely reproducing knowledge perceive a greater need for direction, whereas those who practise a deeper, meaning-centred approach require less direction and support from their instructors. The results also confirmed that remote students expected a great deal more from their instructors than their local peers in terms of social and practical support, probably due to the psychological distance they experienced. They expected less in terms of academic support, which may indicate that they perceive having fewer needs because of their independent learner status. Despite the fact that Wheeler's (2002) study was a pilot study, it exposes critical issues that are relevant to the context of my research participants, particularly the issue of psychological distance and learning approaches. It offers key variables that should be further explored in other contexts although the sample he used was small and the conclusions not sufficiently exhaustive. On further reflection on Wheeler's study, I assumed that remote learners in the context of my study would expect less learning support, but more affective support. I therefore tend to agree with Wheeler, (2002) when he proposes that distance learners who experience more remote transactional distance will tend to demand more social and practical support from their instructors. A question that arises from Wheeler's proposition is 'What happens if distance learners do not get the support they expect?' The findings of this study are critical in answering the question. Other than the psychological distance as a major concern in distance education, the issue of culture presents a challenge that I assume can be addressed through learning support strategies. The participants of this study described in Chapter 2 have a unique culture which learning support needs to take into account, hence the need to establish perceptions and experiences of participants of this study are critical for the delivery of appropriate learning support marginalised and isolated learners.

A study by Venter (2003) on the role of culture and coping with isolation in Europe and Asia indicates the extent to which learning is learner-centred or teacher-centred. Venter (ibid) argues that particular cultures exhibit learning preferences more suited to distance learning than other cultures. In the Asia Pacific sample, the findings were that structure, timetabling and reassurance were important so that individuals could assess their own progress and seemed to be significant. In the European sample, the emphasis appeared to be on knowing that one was cared for, that people were there to support one's particular needs and knowing that others

shared similar circumstances and could be contacted for informal support. Both groups of learners wanted academic guidance, feedback, and reassurance that they were on the right track. Few would dispute that this is a crucial part of any successful learning experience. It would be beneficial for educators to take into consideration the cultural values and past experience of the learners in the design and implementation of learning support interventions (Venter 2003). The implication of the above findings is that distance educators need to ensure that they consider the various factors, including cultural values, that impact upon preferences for particular learning strategies, to be able to support learners in adapting to, and developing self-direction for successful distance learning. In the light of the distance learning challenges just discussed, I now discuss empirical studies in developing contexts that share some similarities with my study.

### **3.7.2 Learning support experiences in developing contexts**

In a developing context, distance education dates back to colonial days and learning support has still not been adequately addressed (Perraton and Lentell, 2004). Learning support experiences in developing contexts are varied and more experiences have been documented in higher education than at secondary school level (Venter, 2000; Pretorius, 2000; Sonnekus et al, 2006). The learning support experiences include contact, mostly face-to-face tutorials and mediated support provided in the learning materials, assignment feedback and learning strategies.

An empirical study on self-directed learning, adult learners' perceptions and their study materials by Greyling, Geyser and Fourie (2002) in South Africa reveals that learners perceived themselves as learners who took responsibility for their own learning, but they also expressed their dependence on other learners, their reliance on the lecturer to explain to them exactly what was expected of them all the time and further more that achieving good grades was more important than really understanding something. The participants in the study were in a postgraduate programme. The finding raises the question: How then would remote distance learners from marginalised communities in underdeveloped pockets of Botswana perceive and experience learning support when distance learners in a postgraduate programme have such reliance on lecturers and other learners? This provides an interesting comparison.



A similar study was carried out at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) by Gaba and Dash (2004). Gaba and Dash (2004) study addresses key learning support issues relevant to my study. The study found that 64% of distance learners declared that learning support in the form of learning materials had few mistakes, resource persons were helpful and 88% were satisfied with assignment feedback and indicated that it was helpful in their learning and term-end examinations. The same study found that attendance during the face-to-face contact was low because of the great distances that distance learners had to travel to centres where face-to-face contact sessions were being conducted and that some distance learners were not aware of the contact session schedules. This study provides insights into the operation of distance learning support in the context of developing countries and the need for distance learners to have learning strategies to use in order to cope with their learning activities in the event of inadequate contact learning support. A study of the successful distance learners of the Post Graduate Diploma in Distance Education of IGNOU by Biswas (2001) reveals that distance learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have inadequate learning skills for coping with the courses they select. This is more likely to be the case for distance learners in underdeveloped pockets of Botswana who are at secondary school level and learn from materials written in English, a language of instruction that they hardly speak at home. Language is critical in the education of a person because it is through language that one starts the process of understanding learning, thinking and expressing, hence a good command of the language of instruction is an important component of successful education in any community (Paliwal, 2004).

Whilst empirical literature addressing issues of learning support in a developing contexts tends to concentrate on higher education, I find the Malaysian experience in open and distance learning, documented by Dzakiria (2005), of more interest to my study. It is one empirical study that tells a story of isolation, frustration and alienation as demonstrated by the students' voices. The study focused on the role of learning support in distance learning at the Universiti Utara in Malaysia although its assessment of learning support is limited to learner satisfaction and it does not allude to academic performance or throughput rates. The strength of this study lies in its qualitative approach that effectively used the interview as a primary instrument supplemented by students' journals and photographs. I use a similar approach in this study.

The Malaysian context comprised a complex mix of cultures, languages and rural factors almost identical to the context of my study. The findings of Dzakiria (2005) suggest that hindrances to

the learning process are infrequent face-to-face meetings between distance teachers, distance learners, and learners' dependency on their teachers. These two major factors led to learners' frustrations and impeded the learning process. Some distance learners were found to be unable to cope with distance learning. They found that the new way of learning and the expectations that went with it were too great to handle. Some distance learners expected distance teachers to help them come to terms with the new way of learning. Going through the findings of Dzakiria article (2005), one hears the learners' voices that are desperate for attention, for a human face to provide immediate response to their problems and to guide their learning. One learner is reported to have said the following (verbatim):

*I am lost most of the time. I do not really know if I have participated well, or if my contribution to the course is sufficient in the eyes of my instructors. You asked about technology and the use of it in my learning and the teaching of the instructors. That is the problem; technology lacks a human or personal touch. I just do not feel the satisfaction of being in the class physically and able to have eye contact with the instructor or to raise hands, ask a question and getting prompt response. The minute you post questions through e-mail, and do not get a reply in 5 minutes, 15 minutes, an hour or more, you feel frustrated (Dzakiria, 2005:100)*

The main challenge for open and distance-learning providers is to ensure that an effective learner support system exists to help learners make the paradigm shift from traditional learning to distance learning to stop them from expecting a teacher-centred delivery mode in distance education. Another striking finding revealed by Dzakiria (2005) was how cultural orientation may inhibit learning. Malaysian learners are reported to be more reserved and sometimes passive participants in classroom discussions and, as such, they sometimes felt at a loss when clear instructions were not given for work or assignments. Hence, they blamed their distance facilitators for a lack of knowledge or commitment as revealed in some of the students' narratives. I now turn my attention to my context.

### **3.8 The nature of learning support at Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL)**

The limited spaces in the 28 senior secondary schools discussed in Chapter 2, and the formal education system that is not flexible enough to meet the needs and expectations of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi are a challenge. Flexible modes of delivering education in other parts of Africa include open and distance learning and mobile schools for nomadic pastoralists in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda

(Carr-Hill and Peart, 2005). In the case of Botswana, open and distance learning is the mode that has been deployed to address the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi's challenges of accessing education. The success of open and distance learning depends on the effectiveness of learner support provided to learners. Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning is currently the only provider of secondary education through the distance mode and has a decentralised learner support in place.

BOCODOL's conception of open and distance learning is premised on promotion of open access to its programmes and flexibility in learning and programme completion (BOCODOL Learner support policy, 2001). What this implies is that there are no restrictions in terms of gender, age or location. All prospective learners who have completed a junior certificate level course or have equivalent prior learning can enroll for the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary (BGCSE). The BGCSE is a two year programme, however, because of BOCODOL's open access policy, learners are allowed to complete the programme within four years. They are also free to choose six subjects from the eleven that are currently available and to write examinations whenever they are ready. BOCODOL provides learning support sessions through community study centres (CSCs) and learning satellite centres (LSCs) but attendance is not compulsory.

In order to understand the nature of learning support provided by the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL), I use historical evidence from various college reports and documents like the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE), Botswana's Vision 2016 document, and the BOCODOL Act No. 20 of 1998. The development of distance education with a deliberate move towards the provision of a decentralised learning support system in Botswana is recent. The 1994 Revised National Policy of Education (RNPE) recommended the establishment of the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL). The BOCODOL Act No. 20 of 1998 established the College.

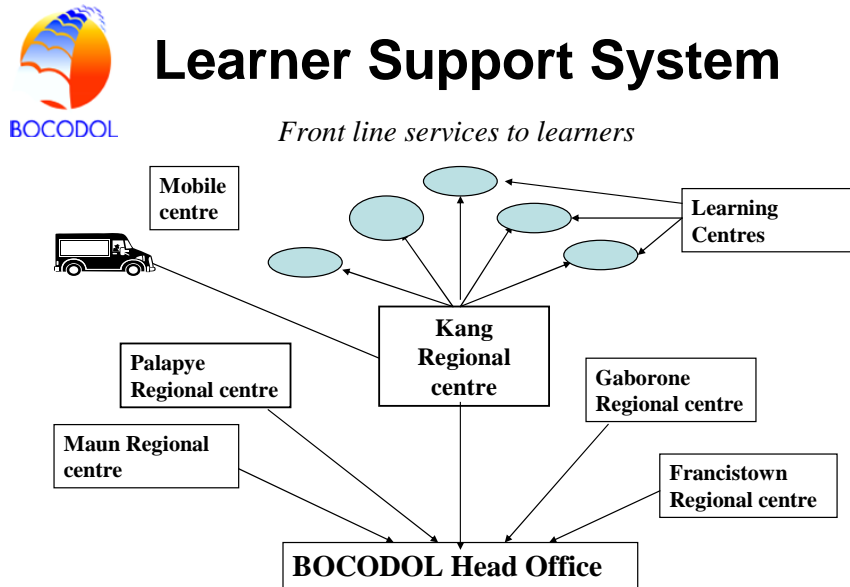
The RNPE was a product of countrywide consultation with the citizens of Botswana made by a Presidential Commission in 1993. During the consultations, the public called upon the government to improve access to basic education through distance education. The Presidential Commission recommended the establishment of BOCODOL as a response to the views expressed during the countrywide consultation. The BOCODOL Act No. 20 of 1998 stipulates

that the College Board shall authorize the creation of regional centres in appropriate locations to provide support services to learners and provide the means to establish positive relations between local communities and the College. It also states that a regional centre shall be run by a regional manager whose duty it is to oversee the establishment, resourcing, support, monitoring and co-ordination of community study centres or other learner support centres. Other duties of the regional manager indicated in the Act are the recruitment and training of part-time staff, establishing mobile centres where feasible and supervising the rendering of support to learners in remote areas where such a need is identified. The Act further outlines examples of learner support services that a regional centre should give, namely, amongst others, marking learner assignments, providing face to face tutorials, providing counselling support to learners, handling examination matters and carrying out any other activity that the College may from time to time determine (Botswana Government, 1998).

Two pilot regional centres were initially established in 2001, one at Gaborone (the capital, an urban centre) and the other at Kang (a very rural area). The pilot ran for a year and by January 2002, five regional centres across the country at strategic locations had been established, namely Gaborone, Francistown, Kang, Maun and Palapye (BOCODOL Annual Report, 2002/3). Four of the regional centres are located in urban centres whilst Kang is in the heart of the Kalahari Desert. This latter centre serves the population in the western part of Botswana. The establishment of the five regional centres was preceded by a number of consultancies that included a Learner Support Consultancy that focused on learner needs and profile. The Learner Support Consultancy designed a decentralised learner support system. This is the preferred system and is currently operational throughout the country. It uses the five strategically located regional centres to reach out to youths and adults who would otherwise not have access to secondary education. **Figure 3.1** shows the decentralized learner support system. It is premised on the open learning philosophy and on a learner-centred approach (BOCODOL Tutor Guide, 2002).

The development of a decentralised learner support system was also guided by a BOCODOL Learner Charter. The charter articulates what BOCODOL, through its Learner Support Division, commits to doing in terms of supporting distance learners. The needs of the youths and adults also dictated the kind of learner support system that the College was to develop.

**Figure 3.1 Decentralised learner support system**



*Source BOCODOL, 2001*

A decentralised learner support system meant that communities would be involved in the college initiatives and collaborate in providing resources necessary for supporting distance learners even in very rural remote areas. The decentralised learner support model was piloted in two places, Gaborone and Kang in 2001 before the other regional centres were established, (BOCODOL Annual Report, 2002/3).

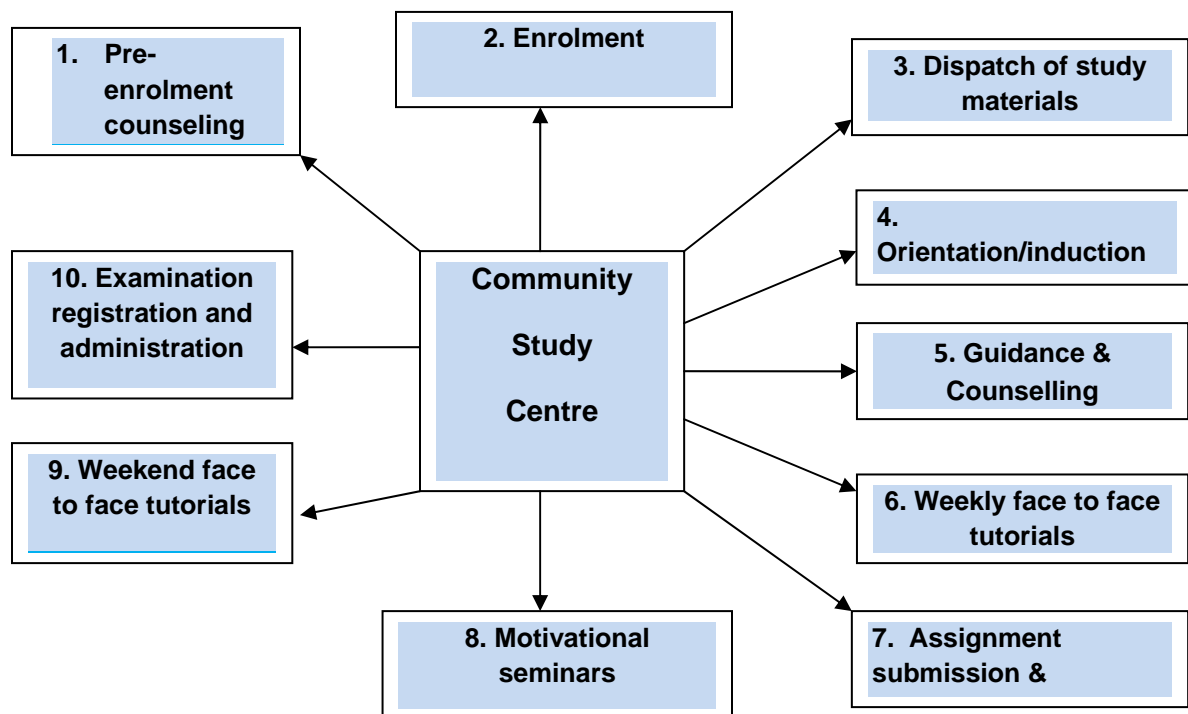
In 2003 the College (Lelliott, 2002; BOCODOL Annual Report, 2002/3) commissioned a consultancy specifically focusing on how to support remote learners. The consultancy recommended a remote learner strategy. The remote learner strategy led to the establishment of learning satellite centres across the country at some primary schools in villages, which have no secondary schools. Once the decentralised learner support model and the remote learner strategy were adopted by the College in 2001 and 2003 respectively, the task of implementing the model and the remote learner strategy commenced.

The learner support division at BOCODOL, headed by a Director, is responsible for implementing the decentralised support system. The learner support division consists of five regional centres, each headed by a regional manager, with at least ten supporting staff

members. Each regional centre establishes community study centres (CSCs) and learning satellite centres (LSCs). CSCs are established at secondary schools whenever fifty or more learners have been enrolled. A memorandum of understanding is signed between the host secondary school and BOCODOL on the shared use of facilities and other resources. Each CSC is run by a part-time supervisor. Face-to-face tutoring at a CSC is carried out by part-time tutors who are subject specialists recruited by the regional centre (Tau & Gatsha, 2009).

The activities that are carried out at a CSC include pre-enrolment and enrolment of learners, tutorial sessions, marking of assignments and group and individual study sessions (BOCODOL Tutor Guide, 2002, Tau & Gatsha 2009). In each CSC, there is a Learner Management Committee (LMC). Learner leaders from the LMCs are expected to help the CSC supervisor and tutors in running the community study centre and taking care of the facilities. A code of conduct for learners at each centre is made available. **Figure 3.2** shows the activities carried out at the CSC.

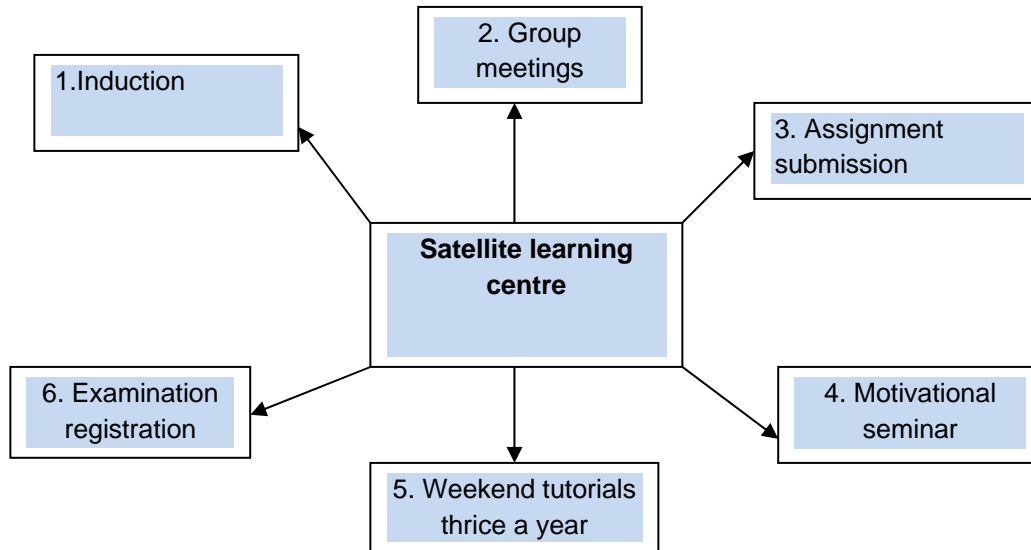
**Figure 3.2** Community study centre's activities





**Figure 3.3** shows the activities that take place at a learning satellite centre (BOCODOL Tutor Guide, 2002).

**Figure 3.3 Satellite learning centre's activities**



Learning satellite centres are also established at primary schools in settlements or villages that have no secondary schools. Learning satellite centres in the Kang region where this study was conducted specifically service distance learners from marginalised communities in very remote settlements. In order to have a viable learning satellite centre BOCODOL expects at least 10 learners to have been enrolled. In a learning satellite centre, a memorandum of understanding is signed between the host primary school or community agency and BOCODOL on the shared use of facilities and other resources. A learning satellite centre is run by a part-time co-ordinator. The part-time co-ordinators are responsible for organising and supervising learners at the satellite centres. They also advise learners on group formation and discussion techniques, maintain learner records, receive assignments and pass them to the Remote Learner Advisor (RLA) who is a College official. The co-ordinators also receive assignments from the RLA and pass them on to learners (Tau & Gatsha, 2009).

The activities carried out at the learning satellite centres focus mainly on learning support but do also address issues of personal support. The focus of this study is on how remote distance learners have perceived and experienced learning support at both CSCs and LSCs. These

perceptions and experiences are assessed through perceived satisfaction with the types of learning support; stories of distance learners' experiences and other anecdotal evidence; percentages (or grades) achieved in assignments and examinations and course completion.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the provision of education to marginalised communities, open and distance learning concept and then discussed learner support and learning support in distance learning. I identified and explained three distance learning theories applicable to this study. I also discussed factors that influence perceptions and experiences in distance learning and examined learning support experiences in developed and developing contexts. I further discussed the nature of learner support offered by the service provider at the sites under investigation. In the next chapter, I present, explain and justify the research design and methodology of this study in the light of the research questions and rationale for this study stated in Chapter 1, the uniqueness of the participants as described in Chapter 2 and the related literature as reviewed in this chapter.

## Chapter 4 Research design and methodology

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### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an explanation of the research process and justify the methods I have selected to explore the perceptions and experiences of remote distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana. I explain the major paradigms in research that is; the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. I justify my choice of using the interpretivist paradigm and mixed method approach by indicating my need to gain an in-depth understanding of distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support. I used quantitative data collection methods where appropriate as a way of complementing my qualitative methods. My aim was to allow readers to arrive at a reasonable judgment in the event of transferability to similar contexts hence the thick description provided in Chapter 2 of this study and detailed descriptions and justifications of my data collection methods, tools, procedures, my role as the researcher and the analysis. This chapter therefore facilitates replication and confirmability. I explain ethical considerations and steps I undertook to ensure trustworthiness of this study. I also indicate steps I took to minimise the constraints of this study. The research design and process described in this chapter made it possible to collect data for answering the following research question:

*How do distance learners from marginalised communities perceive and experience learning support?*

I explain the traditional research orientations in the next section in order to situate the research process I undertook.

### 4.2 Research paradigms

Two traditional orientations common to educational research are the positivist paradigm and the interpretivist paradigm. I chose the interpretivist paradigm because the research question focuses on distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support. An interpretivist paradigm involves taking people's experiences as the essence of what is real for them in their natural setting (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Creswell, 1994, Leedy and Ormrod, 2001). It is thus necessary to interact with them and to listen carefully to their voices in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions and lived experiences. An interpretive paradigm sees people as primary data sources, explores perceptions, attitudes, opinions, behaviour and

experiences using methods such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups, hence fewer people take part in the research compared to the positivist approach (Patton, 1990; Jacobs and Razavieh, 1996; Struwig and Stead 2001; Dawson, 2002; Mason, 2002; Chilisa and Preece, 2005; Creswell 2005). It recognises that reality can be known in an imperfect way because of the researcher's human limitations, hence the researcher can discover reality within a certain realm of probability (Creswell, 2005). It rejects knowledge being presented as a single objective reality as is the case in the positivist orientation, and sees knowledge creation as subjective or multiple perspectives of realities (Patton, 1990; Jacobs and Razavieh, 1996; Struwig and Stead 2001; Chilisa and Preece, 2005; Creswell, 2005). The interpretivists believe that perfect objectivity cannot be achieved, but with rigour in research methods, it is possible (Chilisa and Preece, 2005). They recognize that theories, hypotheses and background knowledge held by the researcher can strongly influence the research process or what is being observed or studied (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Creswell, 1994; Leedy and Ormrod, 2001; Chilisa and Preece, 2005). This may have been the case in this study given my background as a distance learner and practitioner as well as the influence of the distance education theories, particularly that of Holmberg (2003) that I described in Chapter 3.

I did not choose the positivist paradigm as a quantitative stance would not answer the research question of this study. Firstly, the positivist paradigm assumes that the nature of reality is single, tangible and relatively constant across time and in different settings. Secondly, it sees the researcher's role as that of discovering objective reality independent of the researcher's interest. Thirdly, it states that all inquiries should be value free in order to achieve objectivity and neutrality during the inquiry (Jacobs and Razavieh, 1996; Struwig and Stead 2001; Creswell, 2005, Chilisa and Preece, 2005). The positivist paradigm assumes that social objects can be studied as facts and the relationship between these facts can be established as scientific laws (Dawson, 2002; Chilisa and Preece, 2005; and Creswell 2005). This paradigm begins with a theory and is biased towards statistical responses. The positivist researcher considers it a form of conclusive research in that it involves large representative samples and tests a hypothesis as its primary role, seeking to discover principles that govern the universe and to predict behaviours and situations (Chilisa and Preece, 2005, Dawson, 2002, Struwig and Stead 2001, Jacobs and Razavieh, 1996). This study seeks an in-depth understanding of distance learners' perceptions and experiences in their context and deals with realities, which can only be fully explored by using an interpretivist paradigm. Both research orientations concur that

reality exists but differ when it comes to what each emphasises. Positivist research emphasises objectivity, and interpretive research focuses on subjectivity or multiple realities as indicated in **Table 4.1** (Gillham, 2005). Both research orientations permit case study research methods (Gillham, 2005). A case study is an intensive investigation concerned with pertinent aspects of a particular unit (distance learners from marginalised communities, the focus of this research) in a given situation (Botswana, in my study) (IGNOU, 2009).

**Table 4.1 Difference in foci between positivist and interpretivist paradigms**

Positivist Paradigm	Interpretive Paradigm
Experimental methods	Non-experimental methods
Deductive theorising i.e. hypothesis testing	Inductive theorising i.e. hypothesis seeking
Objectivity	Subjectivity
Detachment	Participation
Quantitative data to determine significance of results	Qualitative data to give meaning to results
Significance or otherwise of outcomes	Meaning of processes that lead to outcomes
Demonstration of changes that have occurred	Meaning of changes that have occurred
Data for generalisation of data sought	Generalisation regarded as suspect: context; specificity of data is recognised
Isolating the elements of behaviour for investigation	The importance of context in shaping behaviour
Constructing evidence	Searching for evidence

I used mixed methods to collect data although the qualitative techniques were dominant. The use of mixed methods is acceptable for instance, Leedy and Ormrod (2005) indicate that researchers often combine approaches in what is often called mixed-methods design. Qualitative and quantitative techniques have complementary strengths and they can be used sequentially or simultaneously (Neuman (2000). The mixing of methods also provides the breadth and depth necessary in understanding and interpreting learner perceptions and experiences and helps in the triangulation when data are merged in order to use the results to understand the research problem (Creswell, 2005).

I find a case study an ideal research strategy for this study because it offers the greatest promise of making a significant contribution to the knowledge base and practice of learning support in a context that is an underdeveloped and it allows for the use of varied strategies and data sources (Merriam, 1988; Descombe, 1998). A case study seeks a range of different kinds

of evidence out there in the case setting, which has to be abstracted and collated to get the best possible answers to the research questions (Gillham, 2005). It is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context using multiple sources (Chilisa and Preece, 2005; Gillham, 2005). In a case study a particular individual or one group of students, programme or event is studied in-depth for a defined period of time (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; McMillan and Schumacher, 1993; Creswell, 1994; Leedy and Ormrod, 2001; Yin, 2003.) I therefore used a case study strategy to find answers to the research question by following a research process which I outline in the next section.

### **4.3 Research process**

In 2005 when I registered for my doctoral studies, (see *Addendum 3*) I decided to investigate how distance learners from marginalised communities perceived and experienced learning support that was provided to them by the BOCODOL Kang Regional Centre. After I successfully defended my research proposal in August 2006 and had my ethical application clearance approval on 1 December 2006, I then conducted a pilot study.

#### **4.3.1 Pilot study**

The purpose of the pilot study was to check the clarity of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedule of items that I had developed. I conducted the pilot study from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006 using twenty-one participants who had at least one year's experience in distance education. I considered them well informed for the purposes of the pilot study.

I administered the questionnaire and semi-structured interview items to these distance learner participants and part-time tutors whilst they were at Kang for the end of year examinations. I also met with co-ordinators in their offices in Maun and Gaborone. I selected participants purposively as I desired to use only those who had the necessary experience to share. All the distance learners who were participants came from the settlements within the Kang region. I selected participant co-ordinators of learning support from outside the Kang region to avoid using those who were part of this study. Two part-time tutors and two co-ordinators were amongst the participants I chose for the pilot study. The research tools that I used in the pilot were peer reviewed.



Two colleagues at the college and my supervisor critiqued the questionnaire that I developed for this research before I administered them. There was a 100% return rate for the questionnaire. The items appeared to be fine except for two questions in the questionnaire that needed minor amendments. One of the items attracted a response in which participants struggled to come up with a definition of learning support and gave the impression they were looking for a dictionary meaning instead of providing a meaning from their own experience. The other item required that I separate issues from the item statement so that participants could respond to each issue without leaving any out. I therefore had to separate the terms I had combined before, namely, persistence, retention, completion rates and academic achievement. The amended questionnaire was shared with the supervisor and the statistician and, on their advice; it was refined technically and given a professional appearance.

Whilst the purpose of the pilot study was to check the clarity of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview items, it also raised a few pointers. It gave a rough indication of the underlying reasons for low academic performance and throughput and it highlighted the need for more rigorous data collection methods. I therefore decided to use multiple data sources and mixed data collection strategies as elaborated on in section 4.4.2 to triangulate and ensure trustworthiness. I was personally involved in carrying out the interviews. During the month of January 2007, I posted 20 questionnaires with a self-addressed and stamped envelope and letters requesting consent to participants. Sixteen were completed and returned with signed consent letters. I personally administered 24 questionnaires during my visits to the research sites in February 2007. Altogether, 40 participants completed the questionnaire. I conducted interviews with part-time tutors during March 2007. The interviews lasted between 25 and 30 minutes. I studied the interview notes I made with part-time tutors before conducting semi-structured interviews with distance learner participants during April and May 2007. I also kept a journal in which I recorded my observations, biases and reflections whilst in the field.

#### **4.3.2 Participants**

In order to answer the research question, I needed participants who were representative of the marginalised Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi communities, resided in remote settlements, and had been studying for the BGCSE programme for at least a year. The selection of participants was thus purposive. I chose distance learners who had at least over a year studying at a distance as these were likely to be 'information rich' in terms of

experiences (LeCompte and Preissle 1993; Creswell, 1998; Leedy and Ormrod, 2001; Henning et al., 2004; Creswell, 2005; Blanche et al., 2006). I invited the distance learners I had identified as suitable participants to participate in the study and followed all the required ethical procedures. Forty distance learners participated in this study, 29 females and 10 males with one not indicating personal information on gender. The age range of the participants was between 18 and 45. The participants spoke either Sesarwa or Sekgalagadi and were selected from four research sites. I had planned for ten participants from each site but two sites had fewer participants as those who matched the criteria had either migrated to bigger villages or moved to farms to seek employment. The other participants were eight part-time tutors who conducted tutorial sessions and marked assignments. Altogether, there were 48 participants. This number was large enough to generate adequate data given the fact that I spent long periods of in-site investigation.

#### 4.3.3 Research sites

The four research sites that I chose were located in small and remote settlements away from BOCODOL headquarters in Gaborone. The sites were Inalegolo (476 km<sup>4</sup>), New Xade (910 km), D'Kar (840 km) and Kang, (420 km). All the sites are in the western part of Botswana as shown in Chapter 2 **Figure 2.1**. Of the four research sites, only Kang has the status of community study centre and the other three are satellite-learning centres with Inalegolo and New Xade operating from primary schools whilst D'Kar operates from the premises of a non-governmental organisation (NGO). The activities of community study centres and satellite-learning centres are indicated in Chapter 3 (3.6) of this study. **Table 4.2** summarises the state of the research sites at the time I conducted the study. The administrative link for all the four learning centres was at Kang Regional Centre. Only Kang centre had a library nearby and weekly tutorial sessions. The other centres were not easily accessible except by 4x4 vehicle and had no weekly tutorial sessions except weekend tutorial sessions that were held only thrice a year. The distances of the learning centres from the capital city, Gaborone range between 420km and 910km. A description of each research sites is presented after Table 4.2.

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<sup>4</sup> It is the distance from BOCODOL Headquarters, at Gaborone the capital city of Botswana.

**Table 4.2 Research sites (2007)**

	<b>Kang</b>	<b>Inalegolo</b>	<b>New Xade</b>	<b>D'Kar</b>
<b>Distance from Gaborone</b>	420km	476	910	840km
<b>Administrative link</b>	Kang Regional Centre	Kang Regional Centre	Kang Regional Centre	Kang Regional Centre
<b>Tutorials</b>	4 times weekly	Thrice yearly	Thrice yearly	Thrice yearly
<b>Tutors</b>	Ten	Nil	Nil	Nil
<b>Library</b>	One library	Nil	Nil	Nil
<b>Telecommunication</b>	Available	Nil	Nil	Nil
<b>Accessibility of site</b>	easy	Difficult only by 4x4 vehicle	Difficult only by 4x4 vehicle	Moderate

#### *Kang Learning Centre*

Kang Learning centre is located at the BOCODOL Kang Regional Centre. It provides learning support to all the sites using part-time tutors who are university graduates. Part-time tutors are recruited from the two secondary schools in the village. Part-time tutors facilitate the face-to face tutorials four times a week and mark learner assignments including from distance learners in remote settlements such as Inalegolo.

#### *Inalegolo Learning Centre*

The Inalegolo Learning Centre is 76 km away from the Kang learning centre and 476 km from Gaborone. It is not easy to reach. It is linked to Kang learning centre by a very difficult sandy road. One can only access Inalegolo in a 4X 4 wheel drive vehicle. Unlike Kang, it has no weekly tutorial sessions except three weekend tutorials a year conducted by tutors who are university graduates. Tutors are transported from Kang to Inalegolo on these occasions since public transport between Inalegolo and Kang is not available. There is neither a library nor telephone communication system in place at Inalegolo settlement.

#### *New Xade Learning Centre*

The New Xade Learning Centre is 910 km from Gaborone and 381 km from the Kang Learning Centre and is linked to Gantsi Township, 110km to the southwest, by a dust road and it has no telecommunication network or library. It has no weekly tutorial

sessions but weekend tutorials are offered there thrice a year by tutors who are diploma holders and are transported by the Regional Centre from Ghanzi Township.

#### *D'Kar Learning Centre*

The D'Kar Learning Centre is 840 km from Gaborone and lies 311 km from Kang where there is a regional office and 40 km from Gantsi Township and is located in a church farm. It has neither public transport nor a library. There are no weekly tutorials but weekend tutorials are facilitated thrice a year by tutors who are diploma holders.

In the next section, I explain my role as the researcher for the reader to appreciate steps taken to avoid being bias in my interpretation of the findings.

#### **4.3.4 Role as the researcher**

I conducted my research as a well-informed insider and experienced distance learner and practitioner. In preparation for my PhD study, I did my undergraduate and post-graduate degrees through distance learning with the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of Botswana (UB). I carried out the research as a doctoral student independently. However, I was in constant touch with my supervisor. I consulted her through regular briefings during my visits to Pretoria, by telephone, and text messaging (sms) and e-mails. She also supported me through a visit and I took her to all the research sites so that she could appreciate the context. I also had assistance from a University of Pretoria statistician when it came to refining my research tools before administering them. I was also responsible for fulfilling the ethical requirements for clearance by the Faculty of Education Ethics committee (Addendum 5). My role as a researcher in this study was that of being more of a human videotape recorder (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) that is, I was the main research tool for data collection in this study. I observed, interviewed, recorded, analysed and interpreted as faithfully as possible what participants said and did as I interacted with them during the data gathering phase. Having explained my role as a researcher and the benefits both parties would derive, I ensured that I addressed ethical issues more comfortably and directly.

Being known as a researcher also enabled me to request access to the selected participants at the learning centres and to negotiate the collection of data by interviewing

participants and recording data during and after tutorial sessions. The fact that I was accepted as a participant observer also enabled me to seek feedback from participants on my data interpretation. Despite advantages of being an insider, I was aware of the possibility of researcher bias, hence I used colleagues who independently peer-reviewed my interpretations. I also held debriefing sessions with participants and wrote accounts of these debriefing sessions in my journal for reflection and analysis purposes. All participants knew me as a regional manager for BOCODOL and were familiar with my regular monitoring and evaluation visits at their learning centres. I explained in writing and verbally, my role as a researcher to all participants. I carefully detailed the purpose of my research stressing how it would benefit them as far as the future provisioning of better learning support services that would cater for their needs, was concerned. I shared with them how I would also benefit in terms of my improved understanding and management of learning support for all distance learners in similar circumstances and of course, my attainment of an enhanced qualification in the field of education. My close involvement on site did not come as a surprise to them.

#### **4.4 Data collection strategies**

Before I engaged in data collection, I revisited the issue of ethics in research given the fact that my investigation focused on learners from marginalised communities. Below I present the ethical considerations introduced to ensure that this study complied with international norms.

##### **4.4.1 Ethical considerations**

The importance of research ethics cannot be overemphasised given the fact it provides the moral values and principles that guide and underpin any research process (Litosseliti, 2005), particularly where human respondents are involved. I first requested permission from the Director of the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) to conduct my research (*see Addendum 4*). I only started collecting data after 1<sup>st</sup> December 2006 when I had the ethical clearance from the Faculty of Education Ethics committee (*see Addendum 5*). I was conscious of my position as a regional manager for distance learning within the community in which I was going to carry out my research. Before I began the data collection process and to eliminate any sense of coercion that could result from my position at BOCODOL, I availed all participants with a consent letter which each read and signed before participating in the study (*see Addendum 6*). In the consent letter, and before each interview, I guaranteed the research

participants confidentiality and anonymity. No traceable identification methods were used during data collection and I ensured that participants would not be adversely affected or experience loss of dignity. I pointed out that it could be through the purposefully designed research that a positive development could be expected as policy makers would be better informed and measures put to place to improve the provision of learning support. Finally, I admitted that I would also benefit personally from the inquiry by obtaining a research experience as doctoral student in distance education. I therefore endeavoured to adhere to widely accepted ethical considerations for social science research such as voluntary participation, informed consent, safety in participation, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, trust and withdrawal of participants at any stage. I protected anonymity by assigning aliases to the research participants in my analysis and reporting, a technique recommended by Creswell (2005) Gregory (2005) and AERA (2006). Since I was sensitive about my participants being from marginalised communities, I took pains to explain - in Setswana and English - the purpose of my research and the implications of their participation (Chilisa and Preece (2005). I used tools described in the next section to collect data.

#### **4.4.2 Research tools**

The research tools I designed for this study were influenced by the literature study on learning support found in both developed and developing contexts. My work experience in an underdeveloped context had an influence too. The tools I used were the questionnaire, the semi-structured interview schedules, document analysis, research journals and observations.

##### *Questionnaire*

I collected data from distance learner participants by means of a once-off questionnaire, which I developed and gave to two experienced colleagues to review. (see *Addendum 7*). Section A of the questionnaire had five items meant to establish participants' biographical data. Section B, had ten Likert-type of items and focused on how satisfied distance learners were with various types of learning support and their perceptions and experiences of learning support on their academic performance. It also had four open-ended items that invited qualitative responses. Apart from addressing learning support issues, other questions pertained to why learners had enrolled for distance education (DE) courses, what they were doing for a living and what they thought could improve their academic performance. The questionnaire was piloted at Kang



using distance learners who had come to write their final 2006 BGCSE examination. I personally administered the questionnaire from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006 to twenty-one participants who had at least one year's experience in distance education. This was done to ensure that the items were valid, clear, and precise. The items were later refined with the assistance of my supervisor and a UP statistician. The questionnaire was designed to take between 15 and 20 minutes for participants to complete in order to avoid participant fatigue. The questionnaire was answered by 40 distance learner participants. Initially the data were analysed manually in order to inform and refine the interview schedules and for the researcher to get a general feel of the responses and sense the tone of the inquiry.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are indispensable in a case study and, if particularly well done, semi-structured interviews can be the richest single source of data in a specific setting (Gillham, 2005) (see *Addendum 8*). I share Mason's (2002) view that knowledge and evidence is contextual, situational and interactional. I thus ensured that the interviews I conducted were at the research sites where participants lived and studied. A semi-structured interview technique was chosen owing to its flexibility, standard nature and for being 'unique' and personal and yet able to cover essentially the same ground for all interviewees (Gillham, 2005). I carried out semi-structured group interviews with learner participants during February and May 2007 at the four research sites (see *Addendum 9*). Groups were made up of males and females. There were more females than males. Groups have an element of flexibility and adaptability in terms of the setting and the participants (Litosseliti, 2005). The method offers the benefit of allowing insight into the world of the research participants in their own language, and one gains information on participants' views, motivations and perceptions on why people think and feel the way they do (Litosseliti, 2005). The group conversations were tape-recorded and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. **Table 4.3** gives a guide and focus of the group interviews that I carried out. Participants preferred being interviewed as a group rather than as individuals. This is probably because culturally, they emphasise group co-operation and achievement unlike Western communities (Sanchez and Gunawardena, 1998). They therefore felt more comfortable in groups. Even their cultural activities like songs and dances, hunting and gathering are done in groups and when they travel, the tendency is to move as a group (Tihalefang and Oduaran, 2006). Concentration by the interviewer during an interview is of critical importance (Gillham, 2005) and I thus recorded all interviews in order to get a comprehensive account, and I did not

want to be distracted by taking down notes and possibly missing what the interviewees were saying. I was able to listen to the tape-recorded views several times as I did the transcriptions. An unanticipated methodological constraint I encountered while conducting interviews was that participants were reluctant to provide information individually. I therefore accepted their wish to be interviewed in groups.

**Table 4.3 Interview Guide**

Participants	Selection Process	Purpose	Number of interviews	Area of focus
20 distance learners	Purposively selected	To gain their perceptions and experiences of learning support	One group interview per research site lasting 30- 45 minutes	How they perceive and experience learning support? -What do they do for a living? -Why did they enrol for DE courses? -What types of learning support do they get? -What impressions do they have of learning support? -What challenges do they face as DE learners? -What works for them if they are to improve their academic performance?

#### *Documents*

Consultation and close reading of the following official documents was made:

- Guidance and counselling policy (BOCODOL, 2001 and 2005)
- Learner handbook, (BOCODOL, 2004)
- Learner charter (BOCODOL, 2000) (*see Addendum 10*)
- Learner study guides (BOCODOL, 2004)
- English learning material (2001)
- Setswana learning material (2001)
- Learning support monitoring and evaluation reports written by regional staff who regularly visit learning centres
- Minutes of academic meetings
- Sampled assignment reports

The evaluation reports were based on randomly selected assignments that had been marked and were written by the tutor co-ordinator who supervises assignment marking. The reports are part of the quality assurance process. Reports on the examination results since 2003 were written by the learners' tutor co-ordinator, who also acts as the chief invigilator and runs the examination. I used the first four official documents listed above, to assess the implementation of the learning support strategy. All documents were used to verify claims made by research participants. The use of multiple documents helped with the triangulation procedure and validation of the data. The consultation of the official documents involved a close reading of the text. I specifically examined the appropriateness of the content that is, readability, examples used, and the quality of learning support embedded in the texts in terms of distance learners from marginalised communities and their context.

### *Research journals*

Two journals were kept in this study. One was my personal journal where I documented my own reflections (December 2006 – May 2007) during the research process in order to reflect on later and to detect any biases that I might have had. I also noted my impressions of learning support activities, my observations during the face-to-face tutorials, that is, reactions, and responses during interactions between learner and tutor and between learner and learner and the extent to which these enhanced learner participation in their learning. The other was a set of participants' journals in which they recorded critical incidents related to their experiences of learning support. For journal input from the participants, I identified eight tutors who taught English, Setswana, Mathematics (Maths) and Human and Social Biology (HSB) as these are the four most popular subjects with distance learners. I also requested five learners to keep journals for two months and four days as this constituted the first term of their academic year, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2007 to 4<sup>th</sup> April 2007. Over 160 entries were made by participants (*see Addendum 11*) Both tutors and distance learners were requested to make entries immediately after the tutorial session, after marking assignments and after receiving assignments. Each entry ranged from one to three paragraphs handwritten text. A paragraph was at least five lines of A5 notepad. I considered the number of participants and the duration manageable to sustain participants' interest given the disciplined task of keeping a journal whilst busy with their academic work and other domestic chores. In the journals, tutors were encouraged to record critical incidents related to the learning support rendered and the immediate contribution of such learning support. Tutors were also encouraged to record their impressions on the effect of their

face-to-face tutorials, assignment feedback, and informal conversations with learners. On the other hand, learners were encouraged to record their impressions after receiving learning support, for example, face-to-face tutorials, assignment feedback, and conversations with tutors.

### *Observations*

I watched distance learners and listened to what they said during their weekend tutorials. They were comfortable with the arrangement because I had a long-established rapport dating back to before they even enrolled when I carried out enrolment campaigns in their communities and visited their settlements. During the four tutorial session observations, I was aware of the observer effect, that is whether my presence made participants behave differently, especially given my role of managing learning support in the area. A researcher is a research instrument and like any other instrument used, contributes and has some effect on what is found (Gillham, 2005). I therefore checked privately with tutors and some distance learners as to whether what happened when I was present during their tutorial sessions, was characteristic of what usually occurred and they confirmed that it was. I also took photographs depicting their context and some of their activities (*see Addendum 14*).

## **4.5 Data analysis**

Data analysis implies making sense of the data I collected. It involves sifting data to determine individual responses and then putting it together, representing it in tables, figures, and pictures and drawing conclusions from it. It requires one to explain the conclusions drawn in words that provide answers to the research question (Creswell, 2005). I analysed data in two formats qualitatively and quantitatively, with the latter complementing the former. I coded the data from the closed-ended questionnaire items using numbers and analysed it quantitatively and the data from the open-ended items were analysed qualitatively using Atlas.ti®, along with the data I collected through interviews, journals, and observations. In the first phase of analysing data, I coded the data manually using numbers and the same statistician at the University of Pretoria who had helped me refine the questionnaire gave me further assistance. She captured the questionnaire details and generated a computer report using a statistical package SAS Version 8. I then went through each questionnaire item and response checking the correctness of data captured. I presented the data in percentages, tables, and graphs. This allowed me to see the trends in the different types of learning support in terms of biographical information. The process of analysing qualitative data from interviews, journals, and observations started during

the initial data collection phase and continued until all data were collected. I analysed data as I collected it since I feared that it could be too great a challenge if I allowed it to accumulate. In qualitative studies, the researcher does not wait until all data has been collected before beginning to interpret. Data analysis is an on-going process once collection has begun (LeCompte and Preissle 1993; Creswell, 1998; Leedy and Ormrod, 2001; Henning et al., 2004, Creswell, 2005). This iterative process is time consuming as it requires reorganising data. I first reflected on the notes made from interviews I held with distance facilitators and compared the reflections with responses from the questionnaires given by the distance learners. It was from these initial reflections that I developed hunches or working propositions about what the data I had collected meant. I sought to confirm or disconfirm the intuitions in subsequent interviews, journals and through official records. This process of data analysis was inductive.

I transcribed the subsequent interviews with the help of my secretary and a part-time co-ordinator. The part-time co-ordinator is a linguist with over 17 years' experience working with the Basarwa and has helped the community to develop and encode their language. Both persons helped with the translation of data from interviews and journals, where distance learners had used their first language and in areas where there was code switching. I personally transcribed interview data that was in English. I read the transcripts several times, reflecting on the meanings and developed codes using the exact words in the transcripts or words that were appropriate in describing what participants meant. Mbatha (2000) explains that data coding involves the way one differentiates and combines data that have been retrieved as well as the reflections one makes about the information. Data coding facilitates the categorising and connecting of themes to interpret data sensibly and is necessary for efficient analysis (Cooper and Schindler, 2001). Following Mbatha (2000) and Cooper and Schindler (2001), I regrouped the data I had coded into families or themes, for example; reasons for enrolling, expectations, perceptions and experiences. I repeated the process of coding and categorising data I had initially done manually, electronically using ATLAS.ti®. I identified statements that were related to the topic by separating the relevant information into small segments (codes) for instance, phrases or sentences that reflected a single specific thought (Henning et al., (2004). The relevant information was then grouped into categories that reflected the various families or themes related to the participants' perceptions, experiences and definitions of learning support. The codes generated through ATLAS.ti® were similar to the ones done manually but were more enhanced by the use of ATLAS.ti® because they had specific references. I therefore decided to

present the findings in Chapter 5 by using the code references generated through the use of ATLAS.ti®. The use of ATLAS.ti® helped to triangulate the data analysis. I also used evidence from official records like assignment marks, examination results, minutes, reports and field notes to validate claims that I make as a result of drawing conclusions from the interpretation of codes.

#### **4.6 Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness of this study, I have provided a detailed description of the research context and participants in Chapter 2 and briefly in this chapter under the section on research sites. I also had prolonged engagement at the sites, (both as a researcher and an employee of the distance education provider) that enabled me to achieve data saturation and to carry out member checks. This procedure required that I return to the participants who were available and presented to them the interview transcripts and interpretation derived from the interviews in order to confirm the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Rudestam and Newton, 2001, Cook, 2006). The data collection at the sites was spread over eight months of which the last three months were intensive, as my employer had granted me study leave. Other than the eight months of data collection, I lived on the property of a learning centre for over six years managing learning support activities in the region. My regional staff made monitoring and evaluation visits to all sites at least once every three months and on each visit compiled a report. I was also responsible for the management of the delivery of learning support to all the sites. I consider such prolonged engagement as adequate for the purposes of this study, as it allowed me to check the different perspectives of participants. Moreover, it also allowed participants to become accustomed to me and enhanced the research findings, as I could unearth some of the hidden insights as participants' volunteered sensitive information. I made the monitoring and evaluation visit regularly which Krefting (1991) suggests is an important aspect of this form of data analysis.

To enhance the dependability of this study I maintained an audit trail of the data collected that documented the rigour with which I conducted this study. My use of multiple data collection strategies facilitated triangulation as a process of corroborating evidence from either different sources or methods as suggested by various authors (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; LeCompte and Preissle 1993; Jacobs and Razavieh, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Leedy and Ormrod 2001; Struwig and Stead 2001; Dawson, 2002; Henning et al, 2004; Chilisa and Preece, 2005; Creswell,



2005). Triangulation was meant to enhance the probability that propositions and interpretations were credible. In other words, I investigated whether the data collected with one procedure or tool confirmed data collected using a different procedure or tool. I wanted to find evidence to collaborate my observations and conclusions in more than one way as recommended by Razavieh (1996). Triangulation is important when it comes to the verification of accuracy and credibility of data. By so doing, I sought to achieve trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba (1985). Apart from member checks as already discussed, my supervisor was actively instrumental in playing the role of “devil’s advocate,” (Rudestam and Newton, 2001:100), as she challenged my research questions, propositions, data sets, analysis and interpretation as a way of making me engage honestly with my research. **Table 4.4** summarises the strategies I used to establish trustworthiness.

**Table 4.4 Summary of strategies for trustworthiness**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>What was done in this study</b>
Credibility	Prolonged and varied experience of over 4 years; Field journal - for my thoughts, motives and decisions; Member checking -to confirm or disconfirm; accuracy of data captured; Peer examination- to review the various stages of my research
Transferability	Dense description of context- research sites and participants; Comparison of participants to the demographic; Data – in two age ranges that constitute the main participants; Time sample
Dependability	Dense description of research methods; Triangulation; Peer examination; Code and recode procedure
Confirmability	Triangulation; Reflexivity Confirmability audit

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined the research design and the methodology used in the study. Data collection involved the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, qualitative methods were more dominant as I used interview schedules, journals, observations, and the quantitative method was limited to the use of a once-off questionnaire. The motivation for collecting quantitative data was to complement the qualitative data collection methods. A case study research strategy in which I mixed data collection methods was used. The actual fieldwork or data collection was spread over six months from December 2006 to May 2007. However, documents retrieved and reflection notes date back to 2002 when a learner support strategy for remote learners that included distance learners from marginalised communities,

was conceived. Given the research approach, strategy and the various data collection tools described in this chapter, I managed to build an in-depth picture of learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support. In the next chapter, I present the findings based on the evidence from the collected data using the research design and methodology described and justified in this chapter.

## Chapter 5 Data presentation and analysis

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### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present an analysis of the data that sought to answer the question: *How do distance learners from marginalised communities perceive and experience learning support?* I interpret the findings by drawing on the empirical literature discussed in Chapter 3; taking special cognisance of the theoretical framework adopted for this study, namely, Holmberg's (2003) conversational learning theory. Learning support as offered by the service provider – BOCODOL is delivered via face-face support and mediated support. Learners had varying degrees of positive and negative perceptions of their distance learning experiences although 72.1% of the participants expressed overall satisfaction and 27.9% dissatisfaction. I conclude this chapter with a summary of the key findings and discuss three themes i.e. *transition*, *tension*, and *transactional presence* which emerged.

### 5.2 Learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support

In order to have an in-depth understanding of distance learners' perceptions of learning support, I ascertained their reasons for enrolling in a DE programme as well as their conceptualisation of learning support and expectations. I have used pseudonyms and *Atlas.ti*® references when quoting participants verbatim and visuals to facilitate data representation where appropriate.

#### 5.2.1 Learners' reasons for enrolling

Distance learners were asked, through the open-ended questionnaire items and semi-structured interviews, to indicate their reasons for studying for the BGCSE. All 40 respondents indicated their aspirations for obtaining a BGCSE certificate in order to further their education and increase their opportunities for employment. Given the transition from a hunter-gatherer way of life after the government settlement policy compelled all citizens of Botswana to have a permanent settlement, the Basarwa and the Bakgalagadi can no longer follow their traditional way of life as hunting is now restricted. Given their poor socio-economic status, the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi learners held the fervent view that a BGCSE certificate would change their lives by opening up opportunities to move out of poverty and enter the job market. Participants felt motivated to study at a distance by young adults from their settlements that had passed BGCSE and were now employed by local

NGOs. Marketing by word of mouth by previous distance learners positively influenced enrolment at the remote settlements. Participants indicated that even menial jobs required a BGCSE level of education because of the increased competition for limited employment opportunities in Botswana. Some participants were more ambitious and had longer-term plans:

- Dineo: *So that my certificate should be better, so that when I apply for something they can take me because of better results. Because I want to upgrade my studies.*
- Lorato: *To upgrade my educational level so that I can be in high position at work.*
- Tshepo: *To upgrade my results. I did not do well and I do not qualify for the course that I want to do, so I think enrolling in BOCODOL will help me.*
- Pau: *Because I wanted to upgrade my studies and pursue further studying.*

Kagiso was inspired by Vision 2016<sup>5</sup> to enrol for a distance education programme. Her response was:

*Because I do not have a BGCSE certificate and for job opportunities and due to day-to-day style of living I enrolled for BGCSE to have that opportunity to reach the Vision we are talking about. In addition, to do that "Motto" we engaged i.e. all of us is supposed to be educated in Vision 2016, that's why.*

Her voice demonstrates how the Vision has fuelled her ambitions and educational goals. This may suggest that community mobilisation through *Kgotla*<sup>6</sup> meetings could be used to enhance learning support in order to sustain distance learner perseverance and improve through-put rates in remote settlements. The reason for enrolling in order to upgrade and improve their chances of admission into higher education institutions was put forward by the group, aged between 18 to 30 years. Whilst this age group was attracted to employment, they also aspired to studying for degrees. Some participants aged between 31 and 41 were already employed. They had enrolled for a BGCSE certificate in order to increase their promotional opportunities. Participants in this study, unlike those in Bourke et al.'s (1996) aboriginal learners study, had not enrolled to please their families, to be with their friends, out of mere interest or to meet community

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<sup>5</sup> Vision 2016 is Botswana's long-term strategy to propel its socio-economic and political development into that of a competitive educated and prosperous nation. It is underpinned by seven pillars, of which the first pillar is education.

<sup>6</sup> A *kgotla* is a central meeting place in a village. Village meetings held at the *kgotla* are usually called by a chief whenever there is an important announcement or information to pass on.

expectations. Distance learner participants in this study were highly motivated and goal oriented. They had aspirations and some had this to say:

- Tshepo: I want to see myself in any Universities around the world.*  
*Interviewer: How about you; what motivates you to stay in distance education?*  
*Pau: I want to see myself in distance education doing Bachelor of Science.*  
*Interviewer: What about you?*  
*Sylvia: I want to see myself being a nurse (P1:9 95:105).*

The three learners had personal goals that went beyond just attaining a BGCSE certificate. This kind of focus appears to have motivated them to work hard and complete their studies. The three learners were amongst those distance learners who were successful and completed their BGCSE at the end of 2006 and enrolled for either diploma or degree programmes at tertiary education institutions in 2007 as indicated in section 5.2.7 of this chapter. The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi learners had enrolled striving to attain tertiary level entry qualification and possible employment. Adults sometimes enrol for a distance education programme in order to obtain knowledge, not credit or certificate and may therefore drop the course once they obtain the knowledge they desire (Rovai, (2002). However this was not the case in this study. In Kerala area of India, learners indicated that they had enrolled for distance education courses because of non existence of colleges in their locality (Krishnan, 2004). Whilst this was one of the reasons I expected, it was never mentioned by learners in this study. This means the need for a certificate qualification to improve their predicament overshadowed other possible reasons. Their conceptualisation of learning support was influenced by their previous educational experience at public schools.

### **5.2.2 Learners' conceptualisation of learning support**

The BOCODOL guidance and counselling policy (2005) describes types of learning support rendered to distance learners and include orientation, examination practice, study skills, and individual and group counselling. The data related to the conceptualisation of learning support were gathered from responses to the open-ended items in a questionnaire and from interviews. Distance learners at Kang site understood what was meant by learning support better than those at Inalegolo, D'Kar, and New Xade, probably owing to their proximity and easy access to tutors and ODL staff. The definitions below encapsulate the general conceptualisation of learning support that distance learners had:

- Kagiso: Learning support is all about brightening somebody's future and also a way of trying to achieve a pillar of vision 2016 which says an educated and informed nation.*
- Pau: Our learning support is very well because they give us some books, audios to listen to them as like a tutor is teaching in class and you can understand.*
- Ayi: Helping each other on tips of learning.*
- Dumie: Helping the community to do well or correct their results for the better, so that they can find good schools and jobs.*
- Anele: This is the support given by tutors.*
- Thila: Supporting others to learn so that they pass.*
- Charlie: Learning support is the advices that you are given in order to achieve high marks in our examinations.*

The view these distance learners had of learning support is similar to that discussed in Chapter 3 of this study and supported by conceptual and theoretical thinking recorded on this topic in the literature (Tait, 2000; McLoughlin, 2002; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2002; Wheeler, 2002; Holmberg, 2003; Moore, 2003; Robinson, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Tait, 2004; Alias and Rahman, 2005; Dzakiria, 2005).

Distance learners at D'Kar, Inalegolo and New Xade sites had an ill-conceived idea of learning support as they believed it meant being taught as in a regular classroom. During the interview, this is what Lizwe said:

- Lizwe: We don't want to come to class with some questions or problems that we encounter at home. We want to be taught not to be assisted where we met problems. I do believe most of us we don't understand what is meant by studying through distance learning. We still need to be taught not tutoring.*

His use of 'we' indicates that he probably speaks on behalf of others. He admits that most of them do not understand studying at a distance. Their misconceptions may be a result of language challenges experienced during pre-enrolment counselling resulting in ineffective orientation on how to learn at a distance. The officers did not speak the distance learners' mother tongue and used English as a means of communication - a third or fourth language for some distance learners. Distance learners' previous learning experiences at public schools also clouded their conceptualisation of learning support.

Given their contextual challenges and other issues, participants thought the following could work best for them in order to achieve better grades at the end of the year. Their paraphrased responses include:



- *Attending more weekend classes*
- *Submitting more assignments*
- *Group discussions*
- *If I had past year's examination papers, I think that would help me.*
- *Learner support courses should be conducted regularly*
- *I think submitting many assignments and studying hard can make me achieve better goals/results*
- *Weekend courses at least twice a month*
- *Assignments must be marked on time and sent back to us quickly*
- *Guidance and counselling sessions*
- *Tutors should help us even between the during the week*  
(P9:20 132:144)

Participants' conceptualisation of learning support as indicated in the responses above, fall into two categories: face-to-face support and mediated support. I discuss these two forms of support later under section 5.2.5. Participants also shared their expectations of learning support and anticipated that these would be addressed by the DE provider.

### **5.2.3 Learners' expectations of learning support**

Learners enrol for distance learning with particular expectations and if these are unmet, they feel misled and may withdraw (Fung and Carr, 2000). Learners need to know exactly what they can expect in support, how to interact with the institution, what their responsibilities are, and how to determine when they need assistance (Hughes, 2004). The BOCODOL Learner Charter (2000) and the BOCODOL Guidance and Counselling policy (2005) undertake to provide learner support to all distance learners across all programmes for the duration of their study. Distance learners were asked about their expectations during the interviews. Participants at the all sites (Kang, Inalegolo, D'Kar, and New Xade) concurred that they expected to be provided with teachers who taught like at a public school. This is not surprising as they were first time distance learners and their experience of teaching and learning was limited to what they had experienced while attending public schools previously. Three distance learner participants had this to say:

Interviewer: *When you enrolled with BOCODOL what did you expect from BOCODOL, and did you get that?*

Khumbu: *I expected to be taught but fortunately, I was a teacher by myself.*

Ayi: *I expected BOCODOL staff to provide us with extension materials but they provided us only with core materials.*

Dumie: *I expected them to give us more revision materials from past papers but they gave us only a few.*

Informal discussions revealed that distance learners expected tutors to be exceptionally good in their course delivery and to be knowledgeable. They believed in the common adage used in Botswana, that says ‘*teacher no mistake*. They did not expect a learner-centred approach to be used or learning material to replace the teacher. The journal entry of one tutor confirms such learner expectations:

*They dislike the learner-centred approach. Most learners prefer to be taught everything word by word as they are lazy. Their expectations are that tutors should teach and not facilitate, such that if there is no tutor there is no learning, most would want to go home and do other activities, (P4:36 108:111).*

The participants did not apparently understand the active role they ought to have played in terms of taking responsibility for their academic progress. Their misguided expectations suggest that pre-enrolment counselling and learner inductions had not been effective in sensitising them to the demands of studying via distance mode. This mismatch between expectation and experience may also have accounted for a loss of interest and frustration. Some distance learners had not read the ‘*How to Study Guide*’ and the ‘*Learner Handbook*’ because they were overwhelmed with the learning material package, hence their perception that their progress was dependent on the quality of tutoring or learning support provision. Distance learners at Kang, however, understood their responsibilities and expectations. Anele and Charlie shared an understanding of what they expected by learning at a distance.

Anele: *I had information before that distance courses need our commitment to study ourselves - I knew that this was going to be my own business (P9:3 26:28).*

Charlie: *It is important because you are given the chance to study at your place, any time and at your own pace thus making you free to perform other work like domestic work and looking after my children (P 5:3 18:20).*

Distance learners like these, are likely to engage in their studies more meaningfully and complete their programmes. In the next sections: 5.2.4 to 5.2.7 I present and discuss positive and negative matters together in same unit.

#### **5.2.4 Learners’ perceptions and experiences: biographical data**

Learning support should be provided on an equitable basis regardless of gender, age, mother tongue or geographical location (Learner Charter, 2001). However, the perceptions and experiences of distance learners regarding the learning support provided may differ as is evidenced in the following biographical data analysis:

### *Gender*

There were 29 female (75%) and ten male (25%) research participants. One distance learner did not indicate gender. There were more females than males because fewer males enrol since they spend most of their time away at the cattle posts<sup>7</sup>, hunting and searching for employment whilst females remain at the settlements attending to children and other domestic chores. This mirrors the enrolment pattern for BGCSE. For example, in 2005 there were 51 females and 19 males, in 2006 there were 130 females and 82 males and in 2007 there were 202 females and 85 males enrolled for BGCSE at the Kang regional centre as a whole (BOCODOL enrolment records 2005, 2006 and 2007).

**Figure 5.1** indicates that male learners were more satisfied than their female peers in eight types of learning support whilst females were more satisfied in only two types of support, namely the orientation and the motivational seminars. The 12% difference in male and female satisfaction suggests the support accommodated more male than female needs. It may also mean that females preferred the types of support that involved learners coming together. Orientation and motivational seminars brought learners together and addressed issues that included challenges posed by having multiple roles in the family whilst studying at a distance. Females perform multiple roles in the family hence they may have found discussions on issues related to their domestic roles more appealing than males.

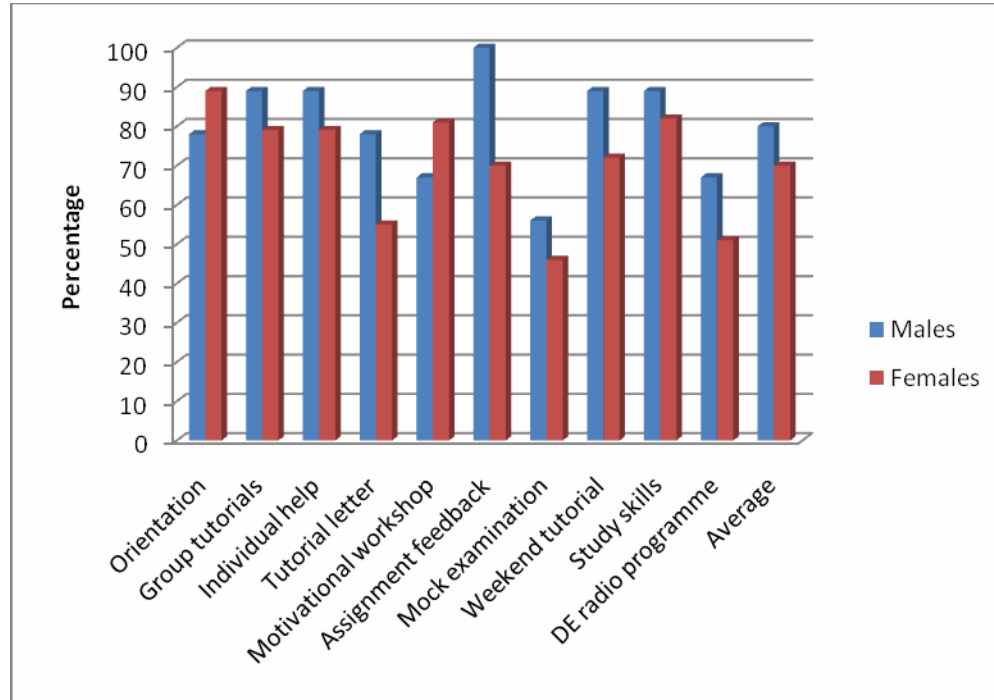
Mock examinations did not attract high satisfaction from either females or males possibly due to a lack of public transport linked to the exam centre. Writing mock examinations at Kang village also meant learners had to pay for their transport, accommodation, and meals. This was a challenge that most learners could not meet, given that 60% of the learners were unemployed and 40% were employed in lowly paid jobs as cleaners, baby sitters, and tuck-shop assistants. The expenses involved compelled them to undertake the journey only once during their final examinations at the end of the year as this was more critical than a practice examination session. As far as radio programmes are concerned, reception is poor in the remote areas where these learners live and this is why satisfaction levels were lower than in other types of support. Males, however, were more satisfied than females with this

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<sup>7</sup> A cattle post is a place where domestic animals are kept far away from the fields where crops are grown. Men and boys are responsible for taking care of cattle at the cattle pos throughout the year.

type of support because they have more time to listen to the radio than women who attended to household chores.

**Figure 5.1 Perceptions by gender**



Radio broadcasts for distance education are scheduled at 21:15 after the Setswana news bulletin. This time slot suited males as they did not have domestic responsibilities at this hour as was the case for female learners.

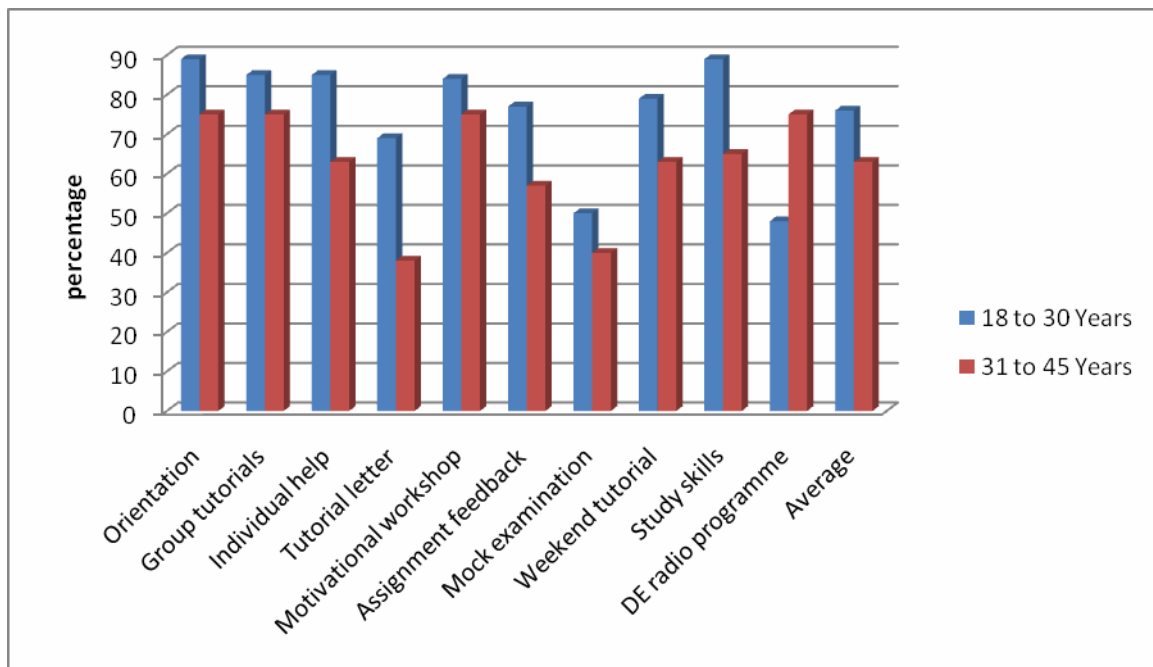
The levels of satisfaction differed in several respects between male and female participants. The discrepancies were most evident in perceptions about assignment feedback, tutorial letters, weekend tutorials, and the radio programme. Several factors seemed to favour males. The weekend tutorials and mock examinations were arranged at times which did not suit females who had to attend to domestic chores, children, the sick and often the elderly too. Assignments on the other hand, are individual tasks but given the multiple duties of females, they would have had less time than males to attend to them. Males had time between hunting and herding cattle and thus submitted assignments which were marked and returned with feedback – a motivating factor which increased satisfaction. Interesting to note in **Figure 5.1** is that males were satisfied with the types of support that demanded

more individual rather than collective application. Women, on the other hand, were more satisfied with group-oriented support.

### Age

In terms of age, the participants were grouped into young adults and older adults as the two were considered to have different interests and be attracted to different types of learning support. The age of the distance learner participants ranged from 18 to 45. Seventy-five per cent of participants were between 18 and 30 years old and 25% were in the older age bracket with the oldest participants being 45 years old. The age range shows that the majority of participants were young adults. Satisfaction by age is shown in **Figure 5.2**.

**Figure 5.2 Perceptions by age**



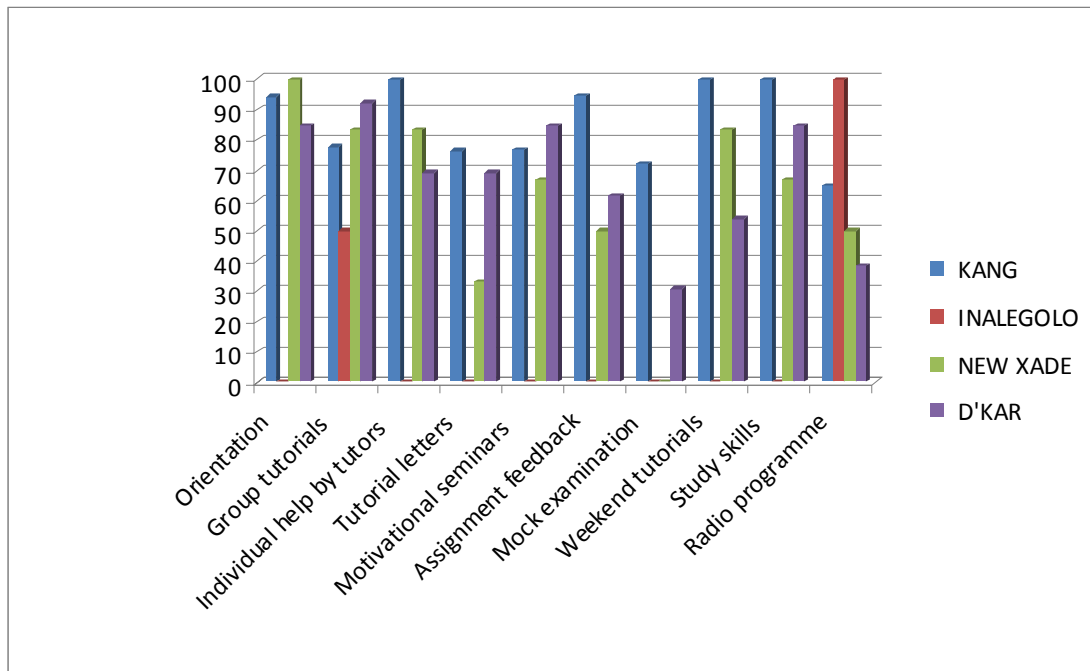
On average, 69% of the younger participants indicated that they were satisfied with the learning support whilst 66% participants in the older bracket shared their view. The average difference was small (3%). This means that overall the provision of learning support was perceived similarly by the two age groups. The striking exception is the view of learning support provision through radio. There were 75% positive responses from participants aged between 31 and 45 years old compared to 48% responses from the 18 to 30 age group. The difference of 27% means that radio programme support was not attractive or appealing

enough to meet the needs of the younger age group. Upon listening to the programme, I found that the sound tracks used music of the late '70s and early '80s. The radio support programmes were not branded with the latest music to which the youth would be attracted. This has implications for making learning support strategies more appropriate for all age groups. It is therefore, important to be conscious of the age differences and devise learning support strategies that appeal to all age groups in order to advance the learning process. I now present satisfaction in terms of where participants lived.

*Location*

The overall picture depicted in **Figure 5.3** is that participants at Kang were generally more satisfied with all ten types of learning support than participants at Inalegolo, D'Kar and New Xade. The issue of access to readily available support services explains the disparities in satisfaction at the four sites. Where support services were constantly rendered by part-time and ODL staff, satisfaction was more pronounced in all ten types of learning support. Where there was an empathetic and enthusiastic co-ordinator at D'Kar, satisfaction was better than at Inalegolo and New Xade where the co-ordinators were ineffective and apparently disinterested.

**Figure 5.3 Perceptions by location**





The perception being communicated by distance learners is that where there is availability of the human factor in the form of tutors, ODL staff and peers the quality of learning support is enhanced. The importance of ensuring the constant availability of tutors and advisors in distance learning at Kang and D'Kar compares well with Holmberg's theory (2003) of conversational learning. The human factor appears to be critical in advancing the learning process hence the perceived satisfaction in all types of support at Kang and D'Kar sites. The high satisfaction levels at Kang and D'Kar sites indicate that the distance learners' needs were better met than at Inalegolo and New Xade. The absence of effective facilitators at Inalegolo and New Xade raises questions of access and equity in the provision of learning support services. The implementation of the remote learner policy strategy suggested by Lelliot, (2002) was limited and as such did not address the disparities in the provision of learning support.

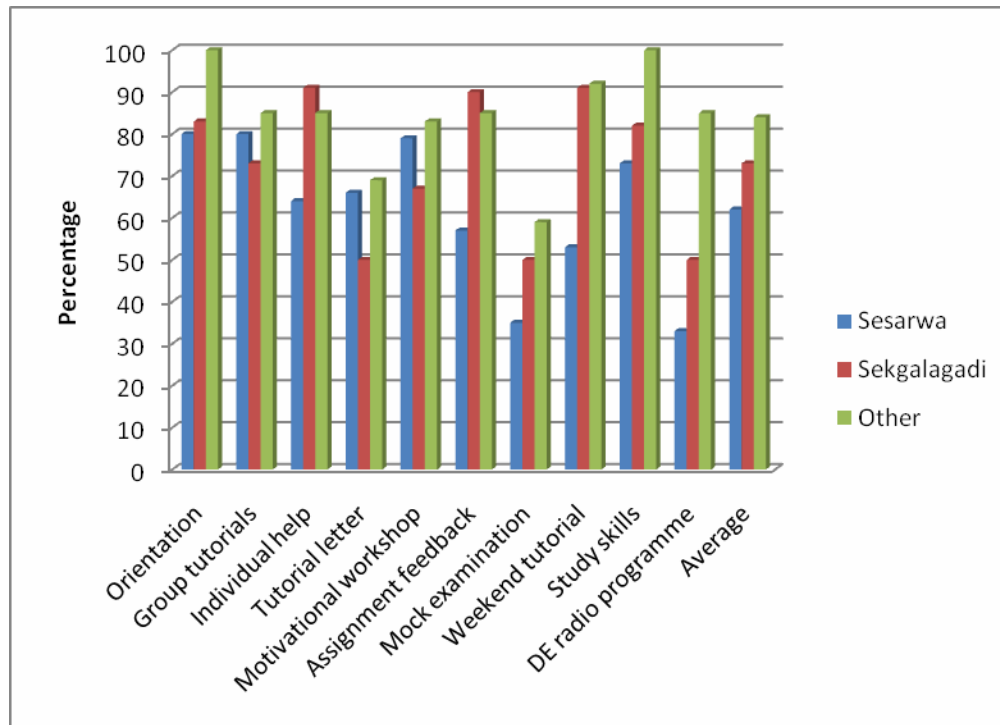
The availability of part-time tutors determined the satisfaction levels of distance learners at the four sites, hence all distance learner participants (100%) at Kang were satisfied with five types of support namely; course orientation session, individual help by tutors, assignment feedback, weekend tutorials and guidance with regard to developing study skills. At New Xade and Inalegolo sites, participants (100%) registered satisfaction with only one type of learning support each, namely orientation and radio programme respectively, whilst at D'Kar, they were insufficiently satisfied. However, in eight out of ten types of learning support, satisfaction at D'Kar ranged between 30% and 90%. At New Xade, satisfaction ranged between 50% and 81% in five out of ten types of support. Kang had the advantage of having tutors from the nearby senior secondary school and ODL regional staff who reside at Kang village where the regional centre is located. Part-time tutors at the learning centre at Kang conducted tutorials on a weekly basis. This was not the case at Inalegolo, D'Kar and New Xade sites where weekend tutorials were conducted thrice a year as was recommended by the consultancy on remote learner support policy strategy (Lelliot, 2002). This consultancy recommendation took into consideration the difficulty in accessing the satellite learning centres due to the sandy terrain and their spread across the Kalahari Desert. There were 25 satellite learning centres altogether, but only three had distance learners from the Basarwa community. Two 4 x 4 vehicles were purchased in 2003 in order to access and provide learning support to distance learners at the satellite learning centres.

The remote learner support strategy also recommended that weekend tutorial support be conducted thrice a year at the satellite learning centres. This frequency was regarded as inadequate by distance learners at Inalegolo, D’Kar and New Xade. I next present learners’ satisfaction according to their mother tongues.

### Language

The use of English as a medium of instruction influenced the satisfaction levels of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi learners. As can be seen in **Figure 5.4**, distance learners who spoke Sesarwa were least satisfied when compared to those who spoke Sekgalagadi and other languages<sup>8</sup>. The satisfaction level recorded by those who spoke Sesarwa in the ten types of learning support was 62%, for those who spoke Sekgalagadi - 73% and for those who spoke other languages - 84%. The distance learners who spoke other languages were also fluent in Sekgalagadi and their English was better than that of those who only spoke Sekgalagadi or Sesarwa.

**Figure 5.4 Perceptions by language most widely spoken**



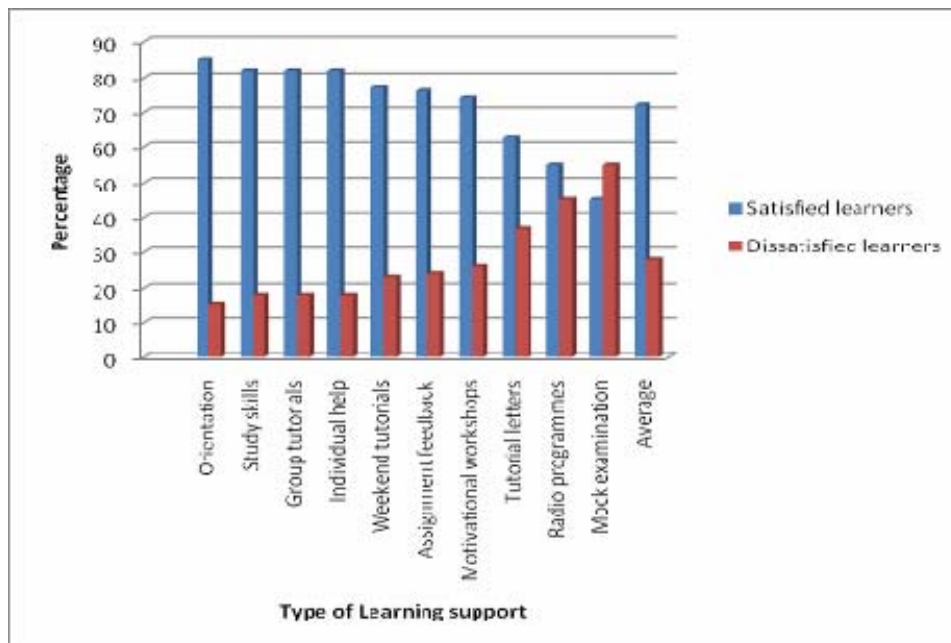
<sup>8</sup> Distance learners who indicated that they spoke other languages often were actually Bakgalagadi who were upgraders and preferred speaking Setswana because they had previously attended senior secondary schools in the eastern part of Botswana where Setswana speakers are a majority and as such had got used to speaking Setswana, the national language.

Those who spoke Sesarwa felt that the mock examination and radio programmes had the least impact. The reason for this is that mock examinations were only administered at a learning centre in Kang and all the Basarwa participants live at settlements that are far away from Kang. Lack of public transport between Kang and the settlements made it difficult for participants who spoke Sesarwa to commute to Kang to sit for their mock examination. As for radio, the reason is that some do not have one and even if they have, the reception in their areas is poor and their languages are not heard on the radio.

### 5.2.5 Learners' perceptions and experiences: modes of learning support

Learning support was offered using both face-to-face and mediated mode. The face-to-face support involved: orientation, group tutorials, study skills training, individual help from tutors, weekend tutorials, and motivational workshops. The mediated support included: feedback on assignment and mock examinations, tutorial letters and radio programmes. A questionnaire with Likert-type items (*very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied and very dissatisfied*) was used to collect data on how distance learners felt about the different types of learning support. **Figure 5.5** gives an overview of satisfied and dissatisfied learners.

**Figure 5.5** Learners' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with learning support



Data were collapsed into satisfied and dissatisfied in order to provide visual presentations for facilitating easy interpretation. A calculation of raw data gives an overall split of 72.1% for distance learners who were satisfied and 27.9% for those dissatisfied with learning support. Distance learners were satisfied with all the types of learning support except the mock examinations for reasons already explained in terms of travel, meals and accommodation (Daily News 15th June 2006; Kang Regional Centre report 27th January 2007)

#### *Face-to-face support*

Face-to-face support was generally the most sought after support. My initial expectation of learning support was underpinned by Wheeler 's (2002) proposition that distance learners who experience more remote transactional distance will tend to demand more social and practical support from their instructors and less academic support was nullified as distance learners in this study demanded more of academic support. Their reasons for enrolling as influenced by circumstances of their families who make up the communities which are in a state of transition in Botswana as explained in Chapter 2, probably explains their desperate need for academic support. One would have expected that with the harsh circumstances they found themselves in and the remoteness as suggested by Wheeler (2002) social and practical support would have been on high demand than academic support. Their expectations were more on tutors teaching them to pass their BGCSE. They displayed heavy dependence on tutors just like the adult learners in a South African study by Greyling et al (2002). Learners' positive perceptions of the different types of face-to-face support are indicated in **Table 5.1**, in a ranking order. Support through orientation was perceived the highest (84.6%) followed by group tutorials (82.5%), study skills and individual help from tutors (82.1%). Weekend tutorials (76.9%) and motivational workshops (74.4%) were perceived lower than the first four but still attracted a high percentage. The high percentages in the six types of support indicate that distance learners highly valued the interventions that were made through the face-to-face support. Verbatim quotes in this section corroborate the high percentages.

**Table 5.1 Level of satisfaction: face-to-face support**

Type of support	Percentage of distance learners who were satisfied
Orientation	84.6%
Group tutorials	82.5%
Study skills training	82.1%
Individual help from tutors	82.1%
Weekend tutorials	76.9%
Motivational workshops	74.4%

Orientation workshops provide a platform to induct new learners into distance learning in terms of guiding learners in time management, reading and general academic skills (Sonnekus et al, 2006). Orientation workshops provided learners with opportunities for academic and social integration. Kanuka and Jugdev (2006) consider academic and social integration by programme facilitators critical in enabling learners to adjust and work towards completing their courses. When orientation programmes are not conducted for new learners, the danger is that they are more likely to withdraw from their studies because of lack of a sense of institutional belongingness. The interaction with other learners and tutors during orientation does influence learners' commitment to the institution, which in turn influences completion rates (Kanuka and Jugdev, 2006). This was previously confirmed in earlier studies by LaPandula (2003) and Kember et al (2001).

Orientation workshops help learners to become effective distance learners so that they can progress successfully through their studies (Lyll and McNamara, 2000, Forrester et al., 2005). The participants were first-time distance learners and the orientation was also meant to assist them to tackle their new mode of learning. Orientation workshops are also critical for establishing rapport between ODL educators and learners. At BOCODOL orientation workshops are usually conducted over two days and are designed to encourage belongingness and to influence learning positively. Anele's view suggests success in this regard.

- Interviewer: Did you get any orientation where officers told you on how to study in distance learning, what to expect from them and them from you?*
- Anele: Yes. We had a workshop, they were a lot of us and they talked a lot, on how we can learn from other learners, books and assignments and*

*that we should have positive attitudes and the challenges we are facing us learners (P3:13 79:84).*

Anele acknowledges that during the orientation workshop there were many who attended and they were told how to learn from various sources. Challenges faced by distance learners were also discussed. Whilst Anele may not have directly expressed satisfaction about the orientation workshop, it appears he realised that he was not alone learning at a distance, and was aware of the advice that was shared by the ODL staff about learning from other learners, books and assignment. Anele had a positive experience by attending the orientation workshop. Similar to Anele's views on induction, two learners at New Xade in 2004 wrote the following responses on their evaluation form after attending an induction:

*I thought I don't have time to read, but the induction presentation helped me to divide time so that I can read and answer the questions. Came with the solution for studying in one class with my colleagues at least one to two hours in the evening because when I am at home I take the book and read for only 15 minutes then I sleep (Kang region Ghanzi tour report, 2004).*

*The induction presentation I like it. It helps us to familiarise with others. It helps to know what BOCODOL is and why we make studies through it. Also to know the role of the learner, how to overcome our challenges in our studies and knowing strategies in learning. It helps to know the importance of handing in assignments (Kang region Ghanzi tour report, 2004).*

The 2004 learners' responses after attending induction further emphasise the importance of induction in helping distance learners adjust to the new ways of learning. Both learners highlight the need for 'others' and to learn with them. This finding is different from the findings by Lyall and McNamara (2000) whose Chemistry students despite geographic isolation from the university did not require interaction with other learners or with their tutors except when initiated by them. The difference could be due to the fact that the Chemistry students were studying at higher level and were more likely to be well equipped with study skills for independent learning than the participants in my study who were at secondary school level. Nevertheless the participants of my study appreciated the strategies which were shared during induction on overcoming challenges of distance learning. The effect of orientation is that some distance learners are able to form stronger peer relationships and study together. The other type of face-to-face support that learners perceived positively is the group tutorial.



Group tutorials are occasions for learners to receive feedback about their constructions of meaning (Pastoll, 1992), they help learners get immediate feedback, share common problems both academic and social, provide opportunities for immediate two-way communication, encourages development of positive attitudes about learning at a distance, boosts confidence and morale to learn and difficult concepts are explained, (Modesto & Tau 2008). Unlike in the Asian studies (Venter, 2003; Dzakiria, 2005) where distance learners were passive participants during discussions as a result of culture, distance learners in this study were sometimes passive because of their previous educational experiences which made them expect to be taught like at public schools. Group tutorials are conducted by part-time tutors with each subject allocated one hour. Distance learners learn from each other through various ways including question and answer and discussion. Part-time tutors help learners find solutions to their academic problems the group tutorial sessions. The learner-learner and learner-tutor interactions advance the learning processes (Holmberg, 2003) and appeared to be valued by learners. One participant, Kagiso, shared her experience in a journal, when she wrote that:

*Group discussions also play a very good role in our studies. We come up with topics which gave us problems and try to discuss them in a group. This helps us because at the end of our discussions each one of us will be having more points which will assist him/her during the examination. And I like this team work because we are free to ask each other questions and present the difficult one to our tutor during the lesson (P6:19 39:43).*

Another participant, Martin, explained the importance of learning in a group by pointing out the following:

*Studying alone, you may not understand everything on your own. Still, you may run short of materials, not be serious about following study schedule if you are working alone. In a group, notes and other revision materials can be shared. Since we discovered that studying at distance is different from senior school. At senior school, the teachers organise everything and tell you what to learn (P 7: 18 50: 54).*

Martin prefers learning in a group because it is easier to stick to a study schedule and to share learning materials. Martin is aware of what it takes to learn at a distance without teachers and takes responsibility in terms of what to learn and how to learn. Another view on the value of tutorial support was shared by Felix, a participant, when he said:

*Tutorial assistance can make one to be able to research, interpret and analyse information. This can prepare one to be ready and dictate the final results of the candidate. (P 8:3 12:16)*

If distance learners apply the skills identified by Felix, they are more likely to use a deep-learning approach. The deep-learning approach is characterised by a search for understanding, application of critical analysis of new ideas and leads to high achievement (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Biggs, 1997; Alstete and Beutell, 2004; Havard et al., 2005). Distance learners need to apply deep-learning strategies if they are to achieve quality grades and Felix is aware of this when he says:

*'...can prepare one to be ready and dictate the final results of the candidate.'*

Group tutorial sessions provide a platform for distance learners and tutors to interact, share ideas and for solutions to challenges encountered in their studies to be sought. In her journal, Kagiso expressed her opinion on tutor support and said:

*The tutorials we get from our tutors are of high calibre because we share ideas on what we understand and when we get stuck, they help us until we capture the material clearly. Kgosi ya tsie e known key go tshwaraganelwa which literally means that a heavy load becomes lighter if we help one another which makes learning easier. (P8:5 18:21)*

The experience described by Kagiso is a positive one and her view is similar to that of Martin. She acknowledges and appreciates the facilitative role of the tutor and perceives it as critical in sharing ideas and overcoming learning challenges whenever learners are stuck. She has developed confidence in her tutors and appreciates the role they play in helping her and fellow students to tackle the challenges they face. Learners who have access to tutors and who engage with them like Kagiso did tended to enjoy learning because the conversation learning between the learners and the tutor leads to greater motivation and attainment of learning outcomes (Holmberg, 2003). This kind of interaction is vital and is supported by Anderson (2003) who argues that it has the highest perceived support value amongst learners.

Kagiso further emphasises the practice of sharing work by using a Setswana proverb. She seems to be drawing from her cultural values and practices that emphasise communal effort on traditional tasks that enhance community unity. She appreciates and works well with others, an attribute that is essential for co-operative learning. Furthermore Kagiso stated in her journal that:

*Our tutors are patient with us since we understand differently. When results are released and we have not done well, our tutors become disappointed at the efforts*

*they wasted. They do not give up but come up with alternative strategies which end up improving our performance and they become satisfied. (P8:4 21:25)*

The attribute of being patient and recognising that learners understand differently, means the tutors had empathy, hence learners were helped until they improved their performance. The data from interviews with distance learners on group tutorials were confirmed by tutors who were requested to record in their journals their impressions of the support programmes they had facilitated during the first term of 2007. Tutor impressions were based on the group face-to-face tutorial support they had given. Tutor impressions on contact sessions at Kang differed remarkably from the contact sessions conducted at Inalegolo, New Xade and D'Kar. Ms Tsholo and Ms Cats respectively wrote that:

*Learner participation in tutorial was excellent because our tutorial was based on a speaking exercise – each learner had to introduce themselves and tell the whole class about themselves i.e. by stating their names, where they come from, which subjects they registered in, which subjects they would be writing the exams and when, hobbies (P13:43 74:77).*

*Learner participation is very good. They ask questions and try to answer questions asked by the tutor. What delighted me was active participation and submitting the individual work which was given to them – topic: speech writing. The lesson was lively and exciting (P11:9 46:49).*

The impressions from Ms Tsholo and Ms Cats demonstrate a learner-centred approach to group tutorials which encourages learners to participate actively. In other words, the learners' personal experiences and backgrounds were used as the point of departure in a learning activity and allowed for active participation to develop freely. Learners volunteered to solve problems on the board. However, initially there were those who passed snide remarks about the volunteers. This is how the tutor, Mr Jele captured this experience in his journal:

*It was disappointing to learn later that when one learner was helping to explain a concept on the board, there were a few learners who started to scorn the other learner saying that if he thinks he is intelligent he would not be in BOCODOL but at UB by now. I made an attempt to counsel these learners and to indicate to them that peer tutoring is a vital mode of learning (P10:15 60:65).*

The perception held by some distance learners of associating intelligence with enrolling at a conventional academic institution was rather unfortunate. It means learners believed they were less intelligent because they had to join BOCODOL for an attempt at gaining university entrance. The other type of learning support that was ranked following group tutorial is the study skills training.

In the learner support programme, alerting students of the value of acquiring study skills was deemed essential and considered as a separate item. Study skills were viewed by 82.1% of respondents as being critical to successful learning. Study skills include time management, academic reading and tips for writing examinations, formation and the use of study groups. Study skills equip learners with the necessary reading techniques and organisational skills for tackling academic tasks successfully. During interviews and in their journals, participants indicated that study skills were explained to them and that they studied on their own. The excerpts from the interview and journal by Kozi and Xika serve to illustrate this point:

Kozi: *Study skills, explained. Yes.*

Xika: *Study on our own. We are given a lot of support of which it urges us to work hard and aim high, (7:31 84:87).*

Evidence from Kozi suggests that distance learners who were equipped with study skills and supported through encouragement were able to aim high. Other than study skills learners also valued individual help from tutors.

Individual help by tutors through one to one sessions discuss issues that pertain to an individual learner and as such provide the learner with feelings of being valued and enables the learner to express personal problems without being embarrassed as might happen in a group (Modesto & Tau 2008). The positive perceived importance of the tutors by learners in this study is similar to Thorpe's (1988) study in which 93% of the 500 students valued the role of the tutor in their studies. In other words, the human factor or the transactional presence of a tutor is critical in instilling learner confidence in studying. Individual help by tutors during the face-to-face tutorial sessions was perceived by distance learners to be essential to improving academic performance. This emerged from the journals by way of statements like these:

Dineo: *I have improved a lot; the teacher is very good; we ask a lot of questions. I started getting 60% then 70% to 85%, I think I am going to get A (P3:6 54:60).*

Tshepo: *The English tutor helped me a lot as I did not know much about a summary, as time went I improved. Even in Setswana I got 40%, then rose to 80%, an A, (P3:8 63:65).*

Martin: *Mathematics, the way he express it, simplify it for us to understand it. The lesson was interesting and enjoyable the way he normally does, challenging the class with Maths on the board. I always feel good in a Maths lesson though it used to give me stress and I hated Maths from*

*my previous school. I told people I will never do Maths in my life but I'm surprised, I'm getting to enjoy it, (P7:34 104:111).*

The role of tutors in academic performance is acknowledged by all three learners. Each of the three learners acknowledges an improved academic performance as a result of tutor support. The positive change in academic performance, interest and attitude, as it emerged from the three learners' journal entries implies that tutor support had a positive impact on academic performance. Students working in groups and individually tutored learned and achieved more than those who worked with only one other partner, (Schacter, 2000). Lizwe also acknowledged tutor support when he wrote the following in his journal:

*The tutor explains it and we did some examples on board. What we realised on Maths is it isn't that Maths is tough as we thought. The thing is we don't revise it and the moment the tutor left the class we close our books till we meet again on the next lesson. We don't give ourselves time at home to attempt the subject. Even if we are given the assignment we are likely to forget and realise when comes in class that we were given something to do at home (P7:68 256:261)*

What also emerges from Lizwe's journal is that tutor support contributes to a change of mindset. This happens when an individual comes to realise the possibilities of achieving what initially seemed impossible. When tutors mediate the learning process successfully, there are possibilities for learners to improve their academic performance. Learner experience of success as a result of tutor support makes them have a strong sense of connectedness with the tutor (Shin, 2003). The type of support ranked after individual help from tutors is weekend tutorials.

Weekend tutorial attendance unlike in Gaba and Dash's (2004) where it was low because of long distances that learners had to travel, in this study, it was due to poor communication by the Regional office staff. Learners did not get timely invitations for weekend tutorials. The problem was more of a managerial challenge rather than that of distance. However, weekend tutorials provided an opportunity for distance learners to meet tutors and other learners. This is how Felix described his experience with regard to weekend tutorials:

*The encouragement we receive from BOCODOL is during weekend courses because it gives us an opportunity to come together or to share experience and to understand what we do so that finally we produce satisfactory results. I have also learnt that reading and revision can help the learner on what to expect during the examination. This helps in preparing for exams to avoid confusion during examination. The audio cassettes clarify materials and explain just like a tutor. Their*

*teachings last forever; this makes one not to forget about what is being taught. They are precise in their information presentation, (P8:11 55:57).*

Distance learner participants took weekend tutorials seriously. Weekend tutorials brought participants together and they were able to share experiences. The weekend tutorials were perceived to be critical in enhancing academic performance. This is similar to the perceptions of Nigerian students who were pleased with weekend contact sessions and thought that the contact sessions were absolutely essential for their understanding of the course (Ukpo, 2006). At Kang distance learners took the initiative to organise weekend tutorials in addition to the weekly face to face tutorials. D'Kar learners also arranged weekend tutorials with the support of their co-ordinator. Amos had this to say about their initiative;

*Another important thing is that we have arranged weekend courses because we realised that we have very short time during the week, so we extended it to push on our syllabus so that we can finish it on time and be ready to prepare for our examination (P6:21 50:53).*

The initiative of organising weekend tutorials demonstrates that distance learners were focused on their studies and determined to attain their goals. They took responsibility for their own learning similar to adult learners in Greyling et al (2002) study in South Africa. They showed similar tendencies like their South African counterparts of depending too much on the tutor. They believed more in tutor support. A D'Kar weekend tutorial report (07/10/06) by a tutor states that:

*The lesson was more of a lecture as learners did not have much to ask. Topics discussed were: Doing Science and Science and Everyday life.*

One participant, Xika, expressed how interesting the weekend tutorials were in this way:

*Learning support is very interesting for example tutorial support, learning materials...Kaisase i kòo qāè e, BOCODOL dis xg'ae thuu hàaraa ka. Thuur ncàm-m. Kaisase i ko qāè e. (Very excellent effort by BOCODOL team. I loved it very well, People its helpful (P9:1 5:11).*

Xika's expression is full of excitement and gratitude and indicates that the weekend tutorials are helpful, but does not indicate in what way they were helpful.

Weekend tutorial support attracted a reasonable attendance as shown in figures given in **Tables 5.2** and **5.3**. In the two tables, **HSB** stands for Human and Social Biology and **Hours** for length of time spent on tutorial sessions



**Table 5.2 Weekly tutorial attendances at Kang during October and November 2005**

<i>Month</i>	<i>No. of learners</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>Maths</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>Setswana</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>HSB</i>	<i>Hours</i>
Oct	43	25	3	26	3	13	3	6	3
Nov	43	19	4	18	4	10	6	18	4

*Source: Kang BOCODOL Regional Centre 2005*

**Table 5.3 Weekend tutorial attendance during November 2006**

<i>Learning Centre</i>	<i>No. of learners</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>Maths</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>Setswana</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>HSB</i>	<i>Hours</i>
D'Kar	12	5	2	8	2	1	2	8	2
Inalegolo	10	7	2	10	2	3	2	8	2
New Xade	8	5	2	5	2	1	2	5	2

*Source: Kang BOCODOL Regional Centre 2005*

The weekly tutorial schedules at Kang provided more time than the weekend schedules at the other three centres. And learners in my study felt that time allocated for each subject was not enough. This differed from the findings by Ravhudzulo (2003) where learners who were teachers and upgrading felt that the length of contact sessions was accepted. The reason for the difference could be the fact that as teachers they were better in terms of study skills and time management than participants in my study. At Kang learning centre tutors were readily available whilst at the other three learning centres tutors had to be transported on scheduled weekends. Learners' perception of weekend tutorial meetings at Inalegolo, New Xade and D'Kar was similar to the Malaysian distance learners who were not happy with the infrequent meetings with tutors (Dzakiria, 2005). The similarity demonstrates that distance learners in both contexts were more dependent on tutors because of their previous learning experiences at public schools. The dependence on tutors of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi might also be due to a cultural influence in which they tend to learn from elders who still remain the custodians of culture and often share their knowledge, ideas and skills with the young (Tlhalefang and Oduaran, 2006). Despite the limited time for weekend face-to-face support, learners valued their weekend tutorial meetings but the challenge for some remained being that of grasping what was being shared in the weekend tutorial meetings with tutors.

Some learners did not benefit from weekend tutorial meetings because of poor understanding. The medium of instruction is likely to have contributed to learners' poor understanding. Sylvia and Thila's responses during the interview attest to the issue of poor understanding during weekend tutorials.

*Interviewer: Did you understand?*  
*Sylvia: Yes, I did understand.*  
*Interviewer: How about you?*  
*Thila: I did understand, but some other things I did not.*  
*Interviewer: Did you ask your tutors on the areas you missed?*  
*Thila: No.*  
*Interviewer: Why did you not ask?*  
*Thila: When they were present, we thought we understand but when they left we realised we did not understand when we were doing on our own, (P2:8 81:96).*

During the tutorial session, Thila was convinced that she understood but only to realise later that she had not. This was probably due to the medium of instruction. In addition to the medium of instruction the approach used in the tutorial also contributed to poor understanding. From observations while monitoring weekend tutorial sessions I found that some tutors did not involve learners and instead lectured. This is confirmed by a tutor's report after conducting a weekend tutorial:

*The lesson was more of a lecture as learners did not have much to ask (Tutor report, 7/10/06).*

An excerpt from an interview with Thembi is more or less similar to Thila's experience and shows how she gave up on her studies.

*Interviewer: Did you ask where you did not understand?*  
*Thembi: No*  
*Interviewer: Why?*  
*Thembi: Because I thought, it was a waste of time because I did not understand (P5:10 69:75).*

Failure to ask questions, as Thembi intimated, means that the learner was not involved in her studies. When learners fail to ask questions or do not know how to ask, the consequences are that they may contemplate withdrawal. The other face-to-face support valued by learners valued and meant to help learners persist in their studies was the motivational workshops.

There were 74.4% distance learners who indicated satisfaction in motivational seminars. What was covered during the seminars and the need to come together from time to time may have led to distance learners developing positive perceptions about motivational

seminars. Coming together made them feel part of a learning community. This is what several authors have intimated (Tinto, 1993, Kember, 2001; Ashby, 2004). Motivational seminars are conducted partly to guide distance learners in their learning and also to encourage distance learners to submit assignments and adopt good study habits in order to decrease the number of learners withdrawing before completing the course. Motivational seminars and other face-to-face session were perceived positively because of the presence of the human factor.

The presence of the human factor in distance learning transactions can promote or break the system. There were thus negative experiences that were experienced by participants during the delivery of the face-to-face support. For instance, some tutors and learning centre co-ordinators that were ineffective. The Learner Charter states that qualified and dedicated tutors would be provided at local study centres. The reality was that tutors from junior secondary schools who were not familiar with the BGCSE programme were recruited and learners complained that these tutors were not effective and one participant, Ayi at D'Kar had this to say:

*We are taught by junior teachers. They teach geography while there is no geography at junior school, so they keep on researching for the questions we ask them. After research he will not give the feedback, (P3:25 31:33)*

The experience shared by Ayi is that some tutors from junior secondary schools had no sense of empathy. This could be the result of inadequate tutor training. Tutor recruitment and training challenges were an issue that management could have addressed. Managerial flaws were also responsible for other challenges like poor communication.

Poor communication led to low attendance at weekend tutorials. Tutors who facilitated weekend tutorials at Inalegolo and New Xade were disappointed with the entire preparation for the event and cited poor communication between ODL staff and distance learners. One of the tutors wrote the following in his journal:

*The programme started a bit late, as we had to do a house-to-house (hut-to-hut) hunt for learners. A few who came really appreciated the visit and the content covered during the tutorials. The learners all claimed to have not received the invitation letters to the weekend course (P10:39 176:179).*

*The other thing one can point out are the trips to satellites e.g. Inalegolo, Bokspits etc. I have been to Takatokwane, Werda, Bokspits, and Inalegolo. The most common thing about these trips is that, learners always seem not to be prepared for*

*all these weekend courses because they have to be picked from their homes hence causing a delay in tutorial sessions (P11:12 112:117).*

The tutors had to look for learners in order to conduct weekend tutorials as a result of poor communication, a purely managerial issue. Learners need to know well in advance so that they can prepare for the tutorials. One other challenge related to poor communication was the issue of power play towards part-time staff by fulltime staff.

A power play incident by one of the ODL staff members was raised by one tutor in his journal. In his journal, Mr. Jele articulated power play issues by stating the following:

*What was a bit disturbing was the fact that there was a misunderstanding between tutors and the officer we were travelling with during our journey back to base. The cause of the misunderstanding was that the officer in question had other assignments, which were not official, which delayed us on the way. Anyway, I personally wasn't that much worried. This could be one of the reasons the officer in question has now sidelined us and we are now denied the opportunity to meet our learners whom we mark their assignments after all. Face-to-face tutorial has undoubtedly an advantage of making the learners personalise their learning as they come to know the tutor who always mark and comment on their work (P10:58 159:165.)*

It appears the ODL staff member took advantage of his position and misused it. Professional conduct requires one to respect other colleagues and consider their interests. Part-time tutors play a major role in learning support and taking care of their interests and needs is crucial for a continued and successful partnership. Misunderstandings between full-time staff and part-time staff are unhealthy and can affect the delivery of tutoring adversely. The underlying tone of the tutor's journal entries is of a committed and willing tutor who cherishes assisting learners from remote settlements. Whilst he states that he was not personally worried, what he articulates in terms of being sidelined and being denied the opportunity to meet learners in order to correct their assignments, is a clear concern that he was not happy at all. He rightly points out that it is best for learners, and to their advantage that he meet with them after he has marked their assignments. Other than the written feedback, any opportunity to meet learners and provide face-to-face feedback is likely to enhance learning. Taking care of part-time tutors is critically important for ensuring general high morale. The evidence of power play submitted by the tutor is further amplified when he states the following:

*My impression is that it is of paramount importance for the tutor to occasionally meet the learners especially from remote areas or marginalised groups like Basarwa.....(P10:37 173:186.)*

*Personal issues in my opinion should not be part toward choosing teachers at the expense of learners by saying I will only take so and so with me on trip. Please understand me very well, get me clear, I am not in anyway trying to despise their credentials. My argument is that we tutors do have records of performance of these learners of their assignments and as such may be better placed to know their weaknesses (P10:41 191:196).*

The sentiments expressed above demonstrate not only the dedication of tutors in rendering learning support to remote learners, but also the discomfort with the practice that the ODL staff member sidelined those who had marked the learner assignments. The policy on tutoring at BOCODOL is that only trained tutors at the community study centre should provide learning support services to learners at the learning satellite centres. However, it appears the ODL staff member had taken teachers who were not marking learners' assignments and these are likely to have been teachers who had not been trained in supporting distance learners. Other than the face-to-face support, learners had both positive and negative experiences of mediated support.

#### *Mediated support*

Mediated support like face-to-face support is meant to enhance learners' academic performance. Data from the questionnaire and interviews showed that learners were generally satisfied with the mediated support provided. The level of satisfaction in the three aspects of mediated support is indicated in **Table 5.4**. Assignment feedback was perceived to be very important and 75.68% of distance learners were satisfied. Tutorial letters attracted 63.16%; mock examination feedback 47.22% and radio programme 55.26%.

**Table 5.4 Level of satisfaction: mediated support**

Type of support	Satisfied participants
Assignment feedback	75.68%
Tutorial letters	63.16%
Radio programme	55,26%
Mock examination feedback	47.22%

These findings are similar to findings from South Africa, India, and Ghana that show that distance learners had positive impressions about helpful and encouraging assignment feedback from tutors (Venter, 2000, Gaba & Dash, 2004, Mensah, 2004). Tutor

constructive feedback or comments help learners realise their weaknesses and strengths, (Modesto & Tau 2008). Sixty six percent of students in Thorpe's (1988) study expected the tutor to analyse errors and deficiencies in their assignment and provide constructive feedback. Like in Venter's (2003) study, learners in this study when it came to assignment feedback, wanted academic guidance, feedback and reassurance that they were on the right track. The perception of distance learners in my study of the value of assignment as a form of assessment was similar to Chinese distance learners who considered progress assessment necessary and useful as it forced them to learn and to perform better in the final examination (Jian & Lyons, 2006). Distance learners in my study like the Chinese students indicated that they read tutor feedback and learnt from it as, Freddie's response shows:

*Interviewer: How do the assignments help?*

*Fredie: Help to test ourselves whether we are weak or strong.*

*Interviewer: If you compare marks you got in assignments and mock examination was there any improvement?*

*Fredie: Yes, because I completed my assignment where I met difficulties the tutor helped me (P1:13 130:143).*

Mr. Jele reveals the importance of completing and submitting assignments in order to get feedback from which they can learn when he writes:

*Six assignments were marked and all the learners got 75% and above. The reason for these high marks was in part due to the practical demonstration of the concept which has proved to be difficult over the years for most learners in assignment 1. The answers that were given were outstanding because technical terms were used appropriately with understanding (P10:17 73:78).*

Mr. Jele's observation shows that using a practical demonstration in a tutorial session is likely to enable learners to understand an abstract concept or solve an abstract problem in assignments successfully. His reasoning is based on the quality of answers that differed from learners' previous attempts. Mr Jele's assertion is similar to findings by Venter (2000), where students actually preferred doing practical work as opposed to theory. During interviews, distance learner participants described how feedback from tutors helped them improve their assignments. The responses from Dineo provide insight into teaching and learning through assignments.

*Interviewer: In your assignments that have been marked by your English tutor you got comments, what kinds of comments were written in your assignments?*

*Dineo: Comments were encouraging.*

*Interviewer: What kind of comments did you get?*



- Dineo: All encouragement were good, I remember getting 17% in Mathematics and the man never said you are going to fail but encouraged me to press on up until now. (P1:10 107:117).*
- Interviewer: What did you do after getting the assignment?*
- Dineo: I did the paper again and I got 37%.Comments, I kept on improving (P1:11 119:122).*

Dineo spoke freely about her experience. She was not bothered by the low marks but was rather full of appreciation for the support she had received. For the assignment Dineo got 33% and the feedback from her tutor was:

*You did a very good job of submitting your work on time Dineo. You did not do well in this unit because you did not understand most of what the questions wanted. The summary part was supposed to follow from the comprehension not from your personal knowledge. Anyway, all is not lost, you can still meet me and we discuss your weakness. Looking forward to another piece of your assignment, (Tutor comments 17th May 2006).*

The feedback is written in a conversational style, it addresses the learner by name. It starts on a positive note. All this makes the learner feel that the tutor cares. This is what he wrote as feedback for the regional centre staff to communicate to tutors:

*There are generally good comments by some tutors. They acknowledge the strengths and the areas that need attention by learners. Examples are learners: 1385; 8260; 9215; 2902; 9306B; 8466. Comments in the margin – those comments by tutor-marker against the learner’s work are very helpful and should be encouraged e.g. Learner Fran. 2562 U (Internal Memorandum, 28th January 2005).*

This kind of feedback on tutor performance can make tutors feel valued and it encourages them to help distance learners. Another participant Lorato wrote about the importance of assignments and revealed a similar experience, when she stated that:

*Assignments help us a lot; one reads and understands after that one would answer the questions. Therefore, this helps when the marks are low to be able to work harder by asking for tutorial assistance. One can also form study groups to be assisted to understand better since ‘setshwarwa ke ntsa pedi sega se thata. (the job becomes easier if there is more than one person). Assignments enable us to remember materials we studied before and also help us to remember during final examination preparations. On the other hand, they simplify notes and are easy to comprehend (P8:10 46:53).*

What is striking about Lorato’ response is that, like Dineo, she believes that if the marks attained are low then one has to work harder. One would expect a distance learner to be discouraged, but for these two learners, it was not the case. Lorato also uses a Setswana proverb like Kagiso, to emphasise the need to work as a team, citing the advantage of making the tasks easier. Use of Setswana proverbs, is meant to emphasise a point.

However, this code switching is also a result of not having an English equivalency. This cultural influence of a non-competitive spirit exhibited by Dineo and Lorato, needs to be exploited in order to enhance the delivery of learning support to distance learners from marginalised communities. Dineo also believes that assignments help to prepare for examination. In other words, when she goes over an assignment she remembers beyond the material learnt, what the assignment covered and believes assignments assist in understanding content since it simplifies the notes.

Despite the value of assignments feedback, there were participants who did not complete all the set assignments. Pau did not submit all the English assignments because she had to study other subjects in order to catch up on areas she felt behind in. She submitted one assignment for English language instead of six explaining:

*Because of time, I wanted to cover up the material that I did not, to prepare for the coming examination. (P1:3 124:128)*

It appears Pau was working under pressure. The reasons for working under pressure could be associated with procrastination or other commitments may have taken up her time for study. Conscious of the need to prepare for the examination she had to compromise by not doing assignments for the English language course. She was, however, successful in managing her study challenge. She achieved a D grade in English and passed six other subjects, achieving a B grade in the History and a C grade in the other four subjects. She was admitted for an Associate degree programme at Linkokwing University of Creative Technology the following year. BOCODOL, through its learner charter commits itself by saying:

*Learner assignments will be marked and returned within the shortest time possible and will include detailed feedback and helpful comments for each learner.*  
(BOCODOL Learner Charter, 2001)

This commitment was not adhered to when it came to Inalegolo, D'Kar and New Xade because of postal service challenges. However, at Kang, assignments were returned within the stipulated 14 days turnaround time. Assignment submission was high at Kang and low at the other three sites as shown in the data given in **Table 5.5**. The volume of assignments at Kang demonstrates the ideal scenario whilst at the other sites it sends a message that not all was well (see *Addendum 12*). The disparity is largely due to the principle of flexibility and self-pacing practised at BOCODOL. Learners are therefore not compelled by any deadlines

to submit assignments. The issue of access to tutors and quick turnaround time at Kang is responsible for the high volume of assignment submission than at other learning centres.

**Table 5.5 Assignment submission by 23rd May 2007**

Learning centre	No. of learners	Total assignment submitted
Kang	21	196
D'Kar	27	39
Inalegolo	10	31
New Xade	16	4

*Source: Kang BOCODOL Regional Centre 2007*

The Learner Charter states that learner assignment will be marked and returned within the shortest time possible but the experience of learners was that assignment feedback delayed and at times assignments were never returned. This is a case of mismatch between policy and practice. Assignment feedback was viewed to be critical and there were concerns raised over the delay of assignment feedback. The learning co-ordinator for D'Kar also raised the concern in her January 2007 report when she stated that:

*I am disappointed because no assignments came back. We would like you to help find assignments and send them back (Learning Satellite Co-ordinator's monthly report, January 2007)*

The concern over the delayed return of assignments by the co-ordinator confirms what Xika raised. She was indeed disappointed, as she was not enabled to support the D'Kar distance learners. She was concerned because some learners were no longer willing to continue unless they had received their assignments. This is how she recorded learner concerns in her report:

*I talked to students, they wanted to start again, during holidays the discipline was gone. Some first want the results of the assignments before they can continue, (Learning Satellite Co-ordinator's monthly report, January 2007).*

The issue of assignment turnaround time made the work of the co-ordinator difficult. Distance learners were not prepared to continue their participation in study sessions without assignment feedback. The issue of assignment feedback delays for remote learners was also picked up by the internal auditor from BOCODOL headquarters when he visited the Kang regional centre in 2007, and this is how he captured the challenge in the report:

*We have observed that in many instances the turnaround time for assignments is longer than the stipulated period. In some of the cases we examined assignments (for remote learners) were submitted by the learner on the 01st Feb 06 and the assignments were returned back to the learner on the 25th September 06, taking seven (7) months. The Regional Manager must see to it that staff makes efforts to ensure that assignments are returned back to learners within the stipulated turnaround time. This will not only give feedback to learners, but will also give them motivation and time to address areas they did not perform well (Kang Region Audit report, 2007).*

The observations and recommendations of the internal auditor are critical for best practice. The report highlights the importance of assignment turnaround time in enhancing academic performance and completion rates. Other than concerns of assignment turnaround time, interviews revealed yet other challenge that is low assignment submission and poor percentage score. An interview with Thembi and Thila revealed the magnitude of the challenges remote distance learners faced.

*Interviewer: Did you do other assignments?  
Thembi: Yes, I had submitted them for marking.  
Interviewer: How was your performance?  
Thembi: I got 38% and the other one 20%.  
Interviewer: What were your tutor's comments?  
Thembi: Need a lot of improvement and be serious with my studies.  
(P2:10 117:127)*

The low percentage achieved by Thembi indicates the need for more academic support. The comments feedback provided by tutor that the learner should be serious does not help the learner to identify where he or she went wrong. Thembi needed assignment feedback that was more helpful by directing her on how best she could have attempted the assignment. Another poor assignment submission was revealed by Thila as follows:

*Interviewer: How many assignments did you submit?  
Thila: I only submitted Mathematics assignments.  
Interviewer: Were they marked?  
Thila: Yes.  
Interviewer: How much did you score?  
Thila: 4%  
Interviewer: What was the problem?  
Thila: I did not understand. (P2:12 129:139)*

Given the low assignment submission and the poor percentage score by Thembi and Thila, there is clear indication that remote distance learners needed more support than they were being provided with. Mr. Jele in his journal as he empathised with the learners at Inalegolo and New Xade where he had participated in delivering learning support as a tutor further elaborates on the need for support.

*I have a feeling that learners from these remote areas need the most support from tutors and staff because there are no public libraries, no newspapers, no radios and very few if any educated people who can help these learners. It looks like the only support at their disposal is marked assignments and study material. To them this portion on the assignment cover where the tutor-marker writes means of contact, it does not make sense because most of them do not have the means to contact the tutor (P10:40 181:187).*

The observation by Mr Jele is that remote distance learners only benefit from marked assignments and study materials. However as already indicated above, some of the assignment feedback hardly adds value. As correctly noted by Mr Jele, remote learners are unable to contact tutors for follow up on assignment feedback because of lack of means to do so. Failure to get useful feedback and to make follow up on feedback received does not help learners improve the quality of their assignments. Learners end up providing assignment responses without applying any cognitive skills. For example tutor minutes (Tutor meeting 2002: 24) indicates that tutors said the following about learners' assignment responses:

*The answers are directly copied from the workbooks (units), therefore, this clearly show that the students are not creative in thinking.*

The direct copying of answers may be due to assignment tasks being poorly developed and encouraging learners to copy. It may also be due to inadequate guidance on how to answer assignment questions. Whilst this may have been a challenge tutors could have solved, learners were not happy with assignments that were not returned by tutors. Distance learners were also not happy with tutors who did not return their assignments and this is what Xika had to say:

*Business dim xгаа-xgaasekg'ao ba thuu táá tcgāya assignment di k\_abia máá ta a. Domkar qāè-tcao úú tama gaas koe. (The Business studies teacher did not give me back my assignment, that's why I am not that happy). Xгаа-xgaakg'aoa ne kòo káà a káíkg'aise. Gataga méé i ko wèé beke ka hàà. Wèéan gar kòo kaisase ncàm! (Shortage of tutors and that they must come weekly (P9:21 14:22).*

The main concern for Xika was common at Inalegolo, D'Kar, and New Xade. The issue of delayed feedback and turnaround time for assignments at D'Kar, New Xade, and Inalegolo was a major concern. It did not enable learners to pace themselves effectively. Delayed assignment feedback is one aspect which management could have addressed in order to adhere to the assignment turnaround time policy.

The issue of not meeting the assignment turnaround time and misplacements of assignments violated learners' rights to prompt feedback and support as per the learner charter. The learner charter and the guidance and counselling policy stipulates the assignment turnaround time of 14 days but for satellite sites the maximum time allowed is 25 days because of the postal delivery challenges. The issue of providing assignment feedback timeously is critical for best practice. Assignment turnaround time enhances academic performance and completion rates. This is also emphasised by a number of authors (Cookson, 1989; Gibson, 1990; Wright, 1991; Sweet, 1993). Holmberg (2003) stresses that, in order to advance the learning process, it is necessary to have both frequent assignment submission and short turnaround times for feedback. However, BOCODOL assignment submission frequency is up to the learners. The effect of this open learning principle is that the flow of assignment submission was low as learners were not obliged to submit assignment at a particular time as no detailed schedule exist. Challenges experienced in assignment feedback were also experienced when it came to mock examination feedback.

Mock examination as indicated previously attracted a 47.2% satisfaction from distance learners who were participants in this study. Learners living far away from community study centres like those at Inalegolo, New Xade and D'Kar were not able to take their mock examination at their local centres despite that there were entitled to such support as promised in the Learner Charter. This means learners at the remote settlements were denied full support that was given to other learners who lived closer to centres designated community study centres. The failure to provide mock examination support through commission or omission raises questions of negligence and ethics on the part of the regional office staff. The common grounds for negligence include failure to provide adequate supervision and being responsible for inadequate provision of support (Squelch & Bray, 1998). Mock examination is written by distance learners as part of their preparation for the end of course examination. The support through mock examinations complemented the other types of learning. Those who wrote the mock examination and got timely feedback were better prepared and achieved better results in final examination. However, some learners reported that mock examination feedback was delayed and there were instances where some learners indicated that they got the feedback after writing their final examination and as such, the feedback had not been



helpful. The issue of missing assignments and delayed feedback indicates poor handling of assignments and is one of the issues that reflects on ineffective administrative support that even affected learners emotionally when it came to registering for examinations.

Inefficient administrative support affected distance learners like Kagiso. She was unhappy when ODL staff members were not helpful and narrated her experience in her journal by stating that:

*BOCODOL officials do help us although there are those who would try to let us down by not providing effective service. There was a time and a certain Tuesday when people were preparing for holidays when I went there to pay for examinations. I left the money and ID with one of the officials since I had to attend a patient at home and there were many people. I arranged that I will return before the end of working hours. On my return, there was no one in the office although there was still time. When I came again, the official told me that already, she had completed the job for the day and gave me my money and ID back. I was disappointed and learnt that there are individuals who can deny one her rights. A similar incident also occurred recently when one learner who had been sent by the other was returned because they did not have a learner number to register for exams. Since the Lord never keeps anyone at bay, I helped the learner until we got the number although the office where our learner numbers are kept was available. This is a sign of taking our quest lightly and it will kill our spirits, it will demoralise us (P8: 6 27:38)*

Kagiso admits that ODL staff tries to assist them, however, she takes exception to some ODL staff members who are not considerate and helpful. She presents her experience maturely by first acknowledging the positive aspects, articulating the negative aspect in a calm manner. She confirms being denied her right but does not show anger or bitterness as one would expect. When a similar incident occurs to another distance learner, she assists the learner until she succeeds. She has attributes of kindness, sympathy, and love for humankind and does not want to see others suffer. When asked about why she did not report the officer who had failed her, she responded by saying she did not want to see the officer fired from her job. Besides these unfortunate incidents, tutorial letters were another form of mediated support.

Tutorial letters as previously stated were perceived to be useful by 63.1% of distance learners who were participants in this study. This is because some learners had no postal addresses as they lived in settlements where there were no postal services. However those at Kang like Thila had this to say about tutorial letter support during an interview:

- Interviewer* Did you receive any tutorial letters?  
*Thila:* Yes.  
*Interviewer:* What was it about?  
*Thila:* About weekend courses.  
*Interviewer:* Were there any tutorial letters that were encouraging, specifically written to encourage you to stay in the programme?  
*Thila:* Yes; I received one; most I heard from other learners, (1:19 174:182).

Thila's experience is that she received tutorial letters about weekend courses. She appears to be unaware of any other use they might have other than conveying administrative information. Tutorial letters were not as effective as the other types of learning support due to postal challenges already mentioned. However, tutorial letters have the potential of adding value and enhancing academic performance if they are fully exploited. Tutorial letters are also used to correct mistakes in the learning material and to provide advice on how best an assignment could have been answered. Tutorial letters remind learners of important academic events like examination dates, open and prize-giving day ceremonies promote feedback on academic queries and pass on important announcements like the introduction of a course and invitations for competitions. One such invitation was on Independence National Essay Competition, in which five learners participated as part of the Independence Day celebrations. One of the learners emerged in first position in an English essay competition that involved students from conventional senior secondary schools. Whilst the success was an isolated event, it made news headlines in the local media both through radio broadcasts and newspapers. The learner's confidence in English was boosted. She got publicity, prize money worth P1 000 (US Dollar 330) and a computer for Kang regional centre. She was quoted in the Sunday Tribune, (2 – 7 September, 2006: 5). saying:

*I felt a great sense of achievement as it was my first time to win any prize whatsoever.*

She went on to complete her BGCSE in 2006 and in 2007 enrolled for a degree programme with the University of South Africa through Bai Sago University College. The role of tutorial letters is critical in providing support just like radio. Learning support provided through the radio programme can be very useful however, due to poor reception and late broadcasts learners at the remote settlements did not derive the value expected. The distance learner participants who were satisfied with distance

education radio programmes comprised 55.3% of the sample. The distance education programmes are broadcast every Monday after the 21:15 hours news bulletin. These were ranked ninth in terms of participants' satisfaction and the lower rating is due to poor radio reception in the remote areas. Participants were also of the opinion that the broadcasts came too late in the evening. This view of radio programmes being broadcast late was also reported by Lelliot (2002). Despite the poor reception useful information is passed on during the broadcasts as Felix explains:

*The education we receive from radio broadcasts has helped us a lot. I am glad because this reminds and encourages us to take BOCODOL education as that of first class. This radio informs us on the examination dates and times (P8:7 41:42).*

Felix acknowledges the usefulness of the distance education radio programme especially for the reminders, motivation and information on examinations. The human voice over the radio also gives rise to learners like Felix feeling positive about radio support. When the voice over the radio welcomes all enrollees and directly addresses them as BOCODOL learners, they feel recognised. Being identified over the radio makes them feel that they belong to BOCODOL no matter where they live. The status of being associated with BOCODOL makes enrollees proud as it differentiates them from the rest who are not distance learners. The advantage of using the radio in distance learning is that it reaches many people at the same time. Unfortunately the poor reception results in distance learners in those remote areas not being able to enjoy the radio support service fully. Some learners like Thembi in the remote settlements did not even possess a radio and as such could not listen to the radio programmes and this is what she said:

*I have only cassettes for studying but I don't have the radio, so it makes difficult for me to study (P2:9 98:115).*

A number of families at the settlements as indicated in Chapter 3 are poor and would not afford a radio when the basic need, food was a priority. Despite the challenges, learners' perceptions and experiences of the various modes of learning support were generally more positive than negative. There were, however, crosscutting curriculum issues that affected the effectiveness of learning support provision to remote distance learners from marginalised communities.

### 5.2.6 Learning support: cross-cutting curriculum issues

The three cross-cutting curriculum issues emerged from my study of official documents, journals and interviews: the language of instruction, the range of subjects offered and the learning materials.

#### *The language of instruction*

The language of instruction is different from the language spoken by distance learner participants in this study as indicated in their biographical data (section 5.2.4). The RNPE recommends the development of a language policy to accommodate other languages spoken in Botswana including those of marginalised communities in order to promote the teaching of mother tongue at early phases of education. However, the policy implementation has not taken off yet in addressing the issues of mother tongue. The distance learner participants' languages are as yet to be written. They therefore had no privilege of learning through their own language. English is used as a medium of instruction in all subjects except in teaching the Setswana language. Distance learners studying BGCSE are expected to have an adequate command of the English language, (BOCODOL, 2001; Hughes, 2004). A good grasp of English language can facilitate understanding. However for some remote distance learners the medium of instruction is a barrier to understanding the printed learning materials. Due to poor understanding of the medium of instruction some learners like Thembi indicated during the interview that they had stopped studying.

*Interviewer: Do you study in the morning, during the day or afternoon?*

*Thembi: I do not study and do not write.*

*Interviewer: Why don't you study?*

*Thembi: Due to lack of understanding.*

*Interviewer: When do you study?*

*Thembi: I don't study at all. (P2:9 98:115).*

Understanding printed learning materials can assist learners to comprehend what they study. Without adequate understanding learners like Thembi are more likely to fail to complete assignments and are more likely to become inactive. The reasons for lack of understanding of learning materials was probably due to inadequate study skills. A study in India by Biswas (2001) shows that distance learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have inadequate learning skills for coping with their studies. Dropping out could be due to management failing to put in place mechanisms for detecting learners without adequate learning skills and providing programmes that could support such

learners. In a study reported by Creed et al (2005), poor management at regional level was responsible for a 69% dropout rate in a distance education programme in Pakistan. Language appears to be another issue responsible for lack of understanding of the learning materials by distance learners from a predominantly oral tradition with limited reading culture and restricted access to libraries or reading materials. The typical prose-intensive style of print in distance learning materials makes heavy demands on learners who are often unpractised readers and writers in both their mother tongue and official language of instruction (Creed et al, 2005). BOCODOL learning materials are developed for selected subjects offered at a distance by part-time writers.

#### *Range of subjects offered*

The subjects offered to BOCODOL distance learners are based on the same curriculum offered in public conventional schools. The range of subjects offered in the curriculum however does not include the natural sciences namely chemistry, physics and biology nor information and communication technology or subjects that have a direct impact on their livelihoods as is the case in public conventional schools. The current subjects distance learners study includes human and social biology, Setswana, and history. These are subjects that are perceived to have low status compared to the pure sciences and this could have serious consequences for their future employment and training (Collins et al., 2000). Despite the unavailability of learning materials in natural science subjects learners at Kang took some science subjects privately. The journal entry below by one participant shows that learners were prepared to pay tutors to help them with physics and chemistry privately.

*For the Double Science students they have come up with a very good idea of contributing 3 US Dollar (P20) each so that they can hire a tutor from Matsha. This really shows some improvement on our learners. There will be hiring two tutors for Chemistry and Physics (6:20 45:48).*

The initiative of engaging private tutors for chemistry and physics demonstrates commitment in their studies despite that the natural science subjects are not currently being offered. Learning materials in all the subjects offered were available.

#### *The learning materials*

The Learner Charter promises learners high quality and up-to-date materials, however the reality at the time of this study was that learning materials had not been reviewed

since their publication in 2001. The learning materials were written by part-time writers who are teachers from conventional schools and live in or around Gaborone city. Learning materials are expected to be user friendly with support being embedded in them. Such support is meant to assist distance learners through their studies with fewer challenges. When learning materials are poorly designed distance learners are disadvantaged even more.

Inadequate support in the learning materials exacerbates the challenges faced by remote distance learners. The support challenges are further complicated by existence of errors in the learning materials. In order to advance learning, distance learners should be issued with error-free learning materials. Errors that have not been corrected in the learning materials that are the only source of reading for learners in remote settlements, contribute to poor understanding. When I joined the college the issue of errors in the learning materials was identified in 2002 and discussed at a tutor conference (Minutes for specific subject group meeting, 2002). An attempt to identify and document such errors was done with the help of tutors and submitted to the authorities responsible for learning material development and distribution. Another issue raised by tutors in the minutes is that some sections or topics are shallow. For example, the specific subject minutes (BOCODOL, 2002: 22) for the human and social biology (HSB) group recorded that the HSB material is not free of factual and technical errors. The document gives this information about HSB Unit 2:

*The information about photosynthesis is shallow e.g., factors, which affect photosynthesis, should have been included. The starch test on the leaf, this could help those who left school a long time ago. The experimental information is vital for students.*

When information is considered by subject experts to be shallow it means learners need extra learning materials if they are to perform well in the examination. Learners who have no access to libraries like those at Inalegolo, New Xade, and D'Kar are disadvantaged and may not easily satisfy the examination requirements in terms of high level thinking skills. The issue of errors in the learning materials is not new. A customer satisfaction survey conducted by Sebopelo and Ntuma (2005) in all BOCODOL regional centres also highlights tutors' concern on the issue of errors in the learning materials when it says:



*Fifty-seven percent of respondents say that the materials have a lot of typing errors, 64% of respondents agree that there is a lot of wrong information in the material and 75% say that the material does not provide detailed content.*

The findings of the customer survey by Sebopelo and Ntuma (2005), confirms the challenge in learning material provision. Learning materials with errors compromise quality and mislead learners, because learners tend to believe that what is in print is correct and they learn from printed material without question particularly instructional learning materials that substitute a teacher. This explains the low academic performance attained by some distance learners. The failure to attend to the errors was also a major concern raised by tutors in their journals for example the following journal entry:

*Ever since the College started, various tutors and other stakeholders have pointed out the corrections needed in the learner study materials. One wonders why up to now the materials have not been revised. No one knows the impact on the learners of study materials riddled with errors, both workbooks and assignments. (P10:52 259:262)*

*Some learners in remote areas, the only materials they interact with are their study books. As a result, the information in these books should be accurate and up to date, (P10:53 165:168).*

The concern raised by the tutor above cannot be overemphasized. Learners like Amos as indicated previously in this section, get frustrated and find it easy to withdraw when learning materials are not user friendly. The findings of my study is a complete opposite of the findings by Ukpo (2006) on Nigerian students who perceived course learning materials to be clearly written and felt the modules were well written and easy to follow.

My examination of learning materials revealed a lack of presence of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi issues in the English and Setswana study materials. I discussed this issue with two programme development co-ordinators. They confirmed that the learning materials had little or no aspects that the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi learners could relate to and that some sections and activities in the learning materials were not user-friendly and, as such, did not build on distance learners' existing knowledge. By way of example, English Language Study Unit 1 has activities that do not give the distance learner from marginalised communities the opportunity to interact meaningfully with the learning materials. The activity on page 24, presupposes that the learner will have access to a library. Moreover, on page 31, the learner is asked to *'go into a shop that sells magazines and newspapers.'* This is

activity could not be done as distance learners from all the four sites live in areas where there are no such shops. The activity on page 37 is a passage entitled ‘*Gospel Singer Thrills Audience*’. The passage is about an event that took place at Boipuso Hall in Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana, which distance learners at Inalegolo, New Xade and some at D’Kar and Kang have never been to Gaborone. On page 51, distance learners are asked to write about a busy market place, a sports stadium and a busy bus station early morning and on page 55, they are asked to write about an extravagant wedding and a dangerous journey on a motor cycle. None of these are known to remote distance learners and therefore present difficulties and hinder learning.

The Setswana learning materials are as out of tune as the English ones as they also focus more on the Setswana culture. The materials are not inclusive and are rather foreign to Basarwa and Bakgalagadi. Topics like *Bogosi*, *Lenyalo*, *meila ya Setswana*, are mainly about the main Setswana communities, Bakwena, Bakgatla, Bangwato and others. For Setswana literature, the books have settings in urban and mining areas. For instance, ‘*botshelo teemane*’ the setting is in Jwaneng Township and this is unfamiliar and foreign to many distance learners. Some tasks in Setswana involve translation from Setswana to English. This presents difficulties as their Setswana is already not that good. A distance learner from D’Kar would first translate the Setswana into his mother tongue and then to English and in the process fail to get equivalent terms and the whole translation loses meaning thus impacting negatively on learning.

### **5.2.7 Learners’ perceptions and experiences: academic achievement**

The delivery of learning support influenced the academic achievement of distance learners. The achievement comprised the following, active academic participation, progression, retention and completion (Prebble et al., 2005). The academic outcome of distance learners was examined in relation to their achievement in examinations, completion of BGCSE and the achievement of goals that relate to their progressing into higher education, getting employment or promotion at work (see *Addendum 13 and 14*). **Table 5.6** explains the distribution of examination grading using letters. Letter ‘U’ means learner achievement was

not graded because it was not satisfactory. **Table 5.7 and 5.8** depict the performances over three years at Kang site and at the satellite learning centres. There were 180 examination entries at Kang. The quality grades (over 50%) achieved were 60 in total. There were 125 examination entries from satellite learning centres. The quality grades achieved by candidates from satellite centres were 35 and this represents 29.11%. The difference in performance was 4.22%. On examining B (over 60%) or better grades, Kang site candidates achieved 2.77% whilst candidates from satellite centres achieved 5.6%. In terms of quality, grades candidates from satellite centred performed better by 3.83%. This difference may suggest that academic performance was not a result of learning support delivered through the regional office structures. Learners at satellite learning centres may have found private assistance or otherwise have just been better students.

**Table 5.6 Distribution of exit exam scores with respect to BGCSE**

Grade	A* 85% and above	A 75% to 84%	B 60% to 74%	C 50% to 59%	D 45% to 49%	E 40% to 44%	F 30% to 39%	G 20% to 29%	U 0% to 19%
Qualitative value	Exceptionally Excellent	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Pass	Weak Pass	Very weak	Very week	Ungraded

Source: BOCODOL Academic Registry 2006

**Table 5.7 Academic achievement at Kang site 2003 - 2006**

Subject	No. of Exam Candidates	A* 85% and above	A 75% to 84%	B 60% to 74%	C 50% to 59%	D 45% to 49%	E 40% to 44%	F 30% to 39%	G 20% to 29%	U 0% to 19%
English	76	-	-	1	17	33	23	2	-	-
Setswana	21	-	-	4	8	6	3	-	-	-
Maths	59	-	-	-	20	4	12	15	5	3
HSB	24	-	-	-	10	3	5	4	1	1
Totals	180	0	0	5	55	46	43	21	6	4

Source: Kang BOCODOL Regional Centre 2006

**Table 5.8 Academic achievements at satellite learning centres 2003 - 2006**

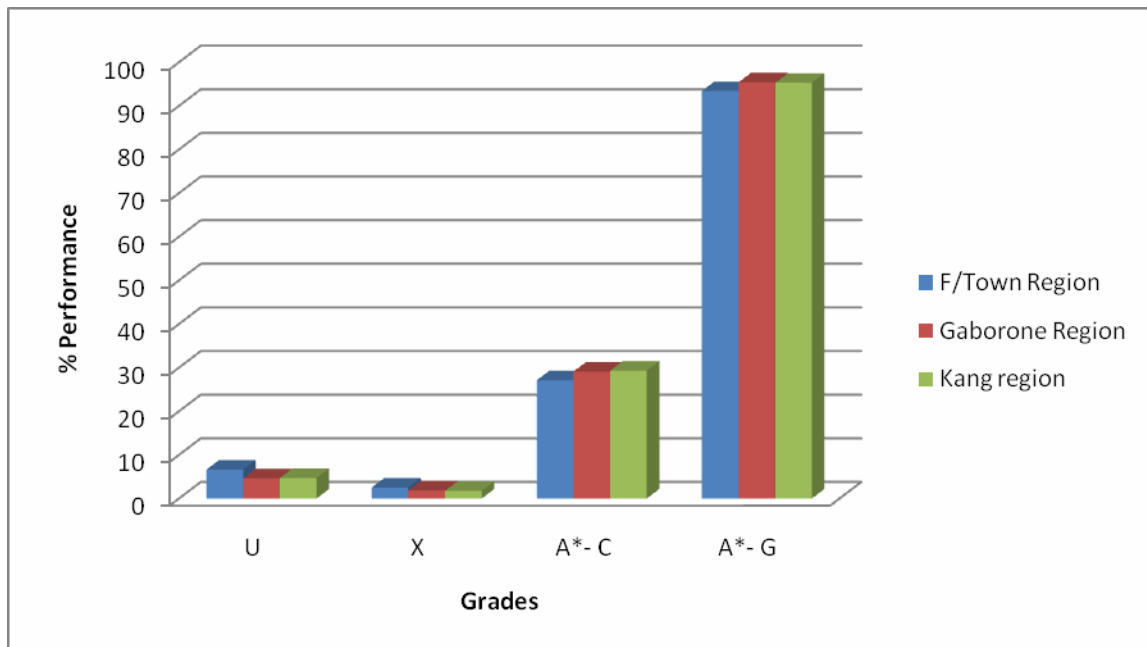
	No. of Exam Candidates	A* 85% and above	A 75% to 84%	B 60% to 74%	C 50% to 59%	D 45% to 49%	E 40% to 44%	F 30% to 39%	G 20% to 29%	U 0% to 19%
English	43	-	-	1	6	21	13	2	-	-
Setswana	24	-	-	2	6	8	5	2	1	-
Maths	36	-	-	2	10	4	4	6	6	4
HSB	22	1	-	1	6	2	9	2	1	-
Totals	125	1	0	6	28	35	31	12	8	4

*Source: Kang BOCODOL Regional Centre 2006*

The role of learning support on the academic achievement of distance learners from marginalised communities was generally positive when the entire Kang region is compared to two other BOCODOL regional centres located urban areas namely, Francistown and Gaborone. **Figures 5.6, 5.7, and 5.8** depict learner academic achievements. X in **Figures 5.6, 5.7 and 5.8** refers to candidates who did not appear for examination.

Generally the academic performance of learners from Kang was satisfactory and similar to that achieved by learners from urban areas. This is despite their geographical remoteness and historically disadvantaged background as indicated in Chapter 3 of this study. In 2005, learners from the Kang regional centre out-performed learners from Francistown regional centre and achieved the same level of performance like learners from Gaborone in terms of A\* to G grades. In terms of quality grades A\* to C learners from Kang slightly achieved a better performance than learners from the two urban areas. There were less U and X recorded in Kang than at Gaborone and Francistown.

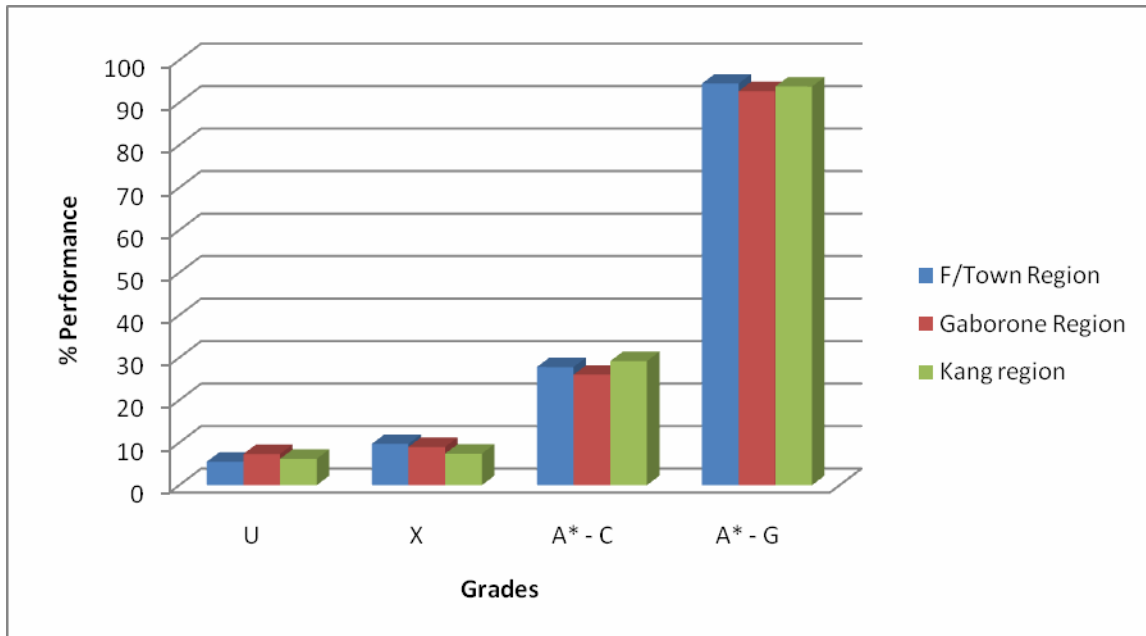
**Figure 5.6 2005 Kang region examination achievement compared to urban centres**



*Source: BOCODOL Academic Registry 2006*

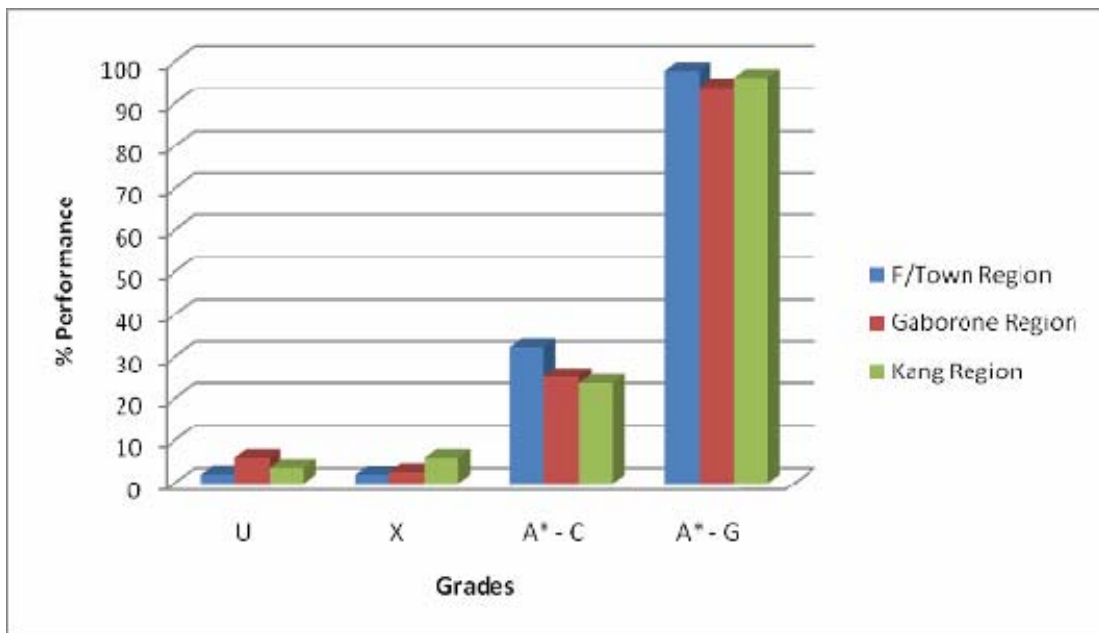
In 2006 learners from Kang regional centre still performed comparatively well. They outperformed learners from Gaborone regional centre and matched performance achieved by learners from Francistown regional centre in terms of A\* to G grades. In terms of quality grades A\* to C learners from Kang still achieved a better performance than learners from the two urban areas. And again there were less U and X recorded in Kang than at Gaborone and Francistown. In 2007 learners from Kang regional centre achieved academic performance similar to those in urban areas in terms of A\* to G grades. In terms of quality grades A\* to C learners from Kang achieved a lower performance than those from urban areas and also recorded a higher number of learners who did not turn up for examination. However, the overall achieved was satisfactory given their geographical remoteness and distances from the regional centre. Some learners who achieved quality grades were able to realise their goals for enrolling for the BGCSE programme delivered through the distance learning mode. Twenty-one of the 40 participants in this study were traced to find out where they were after completing their BGCSE. **Table 5.9** depicts 14 learners who progressed to pursue tertiary level programmes and 7 who went on to be employed. Thus they fulfilled their goals of further education and getting employment as stated in section 5.2.1 of this chapter.

**Figure 5.7 2006 Kang region examination achievement compared to urban centres**



Source: BOCODOL Academic Registry 2007

**Figure 5.8 2007 Kang region examination achievement compared to urban centres**



Source: BOCODOL Academic Registry 2008



**Table 5.9 Learner progression after BGCSE**

# of learners	Post-BGCSE	Tertiary Level Programme
3	University of Botswana	Degree
5	Linkokwing University of Creative Technology	Associate Degree
1	Gaborone Institute of Business Studies	Diploma
7	Employed by district councils	Not applicable
1	Institute of Health Sciences	Diploma
1	Gabane Brigade (Technical Training)	Certificate
1	Gaborone Academy of Education	Diploma
2	Bai Sago University College (UNISA Agent)	Degree

Source: BOCODOL Kang Regional Centre 2008

The provision of face-to-face and mediated support contributed in aiding remote distance learners from marginalised communities to achieve acceptable tertiary level entry requirements under unenviable circumstances. The learners who completed their secondary school programme had goals that went beyond attaining BGCSE as was indicated in section 5.2.1 learners' reasons for enrolling. Their achievement compares to Schloer's et al (1994) study in which Canadian students who completed their secondary school programme tended to have post secondary goals whilst those that dropped out tended to have secondary education goals. Some remote learners managed to persist in their distance learning initiatives because of strategies such as open day activities and prize-giving ceremonies that were annually organized to motivate them and recognize their academic efforts.

Open day and prize-giving events provided opportunities for inclusion, connection, collaboration and shared goals and presented some form of extrinsic motivation to distance learners and positively influenced retention and eagerness to complete BGCSE. The 2005 open and prize-giving report states the purpose of the open and prize-giving day, that is:

*To create an opportunity for learners from various remote locations in the western part of the country to experience a sense of belonging to the college as this strengthens their identity needs, that serve a critical role in their academic life and encourages them to be able to persist studying with the college. The sense of belongingness is also critical when it comes to retention challenges that we face (Kang Report 27th August 2005).*

*To cultivate fun and joy in studying through the DE mode. We believe learning should not be a painful venture but should be an activity that is punctuated with fun and joy in order to reduce stress, anxiety and fatigue of continuous study for example after two weeks intensive mock exam writing, an event of this kind serve as a therapy that the body and brains need (Kang Report 27th August 2005)*

Evidence from interviews and journals indicate that the aims of the prize-giving days were achieved. One participant, Lorato, wrote her experiences and how she judged the value of the open and prize giving ceremony as a source of motivation:

*I congratulate BOCODOL on Prize-Giving because this motivates learners to put more effort in their studies. The prizes and certificates we receive encourage every learner to have an opportunity to be awarded a prize. The learner feels proud when called repeatedly during the awarding of prizes. This encourages parents to pay school fees with the hope that we will finally get good jobs. Prize Giving is a challenge for those lagging behind to aim higher since “phokoje yoo kwa morago dintsa di a bo di mmone” (it is embarrassing to be left behind). This gives a chance for one to build a good name for herself (P8:12 59:66).*

Lorato also acknowledges that not all distance learners get awards and stresses the role of the ceremony, in contributing to introspection, whereby those distance learners who do not receive awards, are challenged to improve. Open day activities and prize giving awards encouraged Lorato to work hard and to feel really cared for and appreciated as she felt that she had changed when she said:

*I have matured and changed my educational status as a result of BOCODOL. I am confident that after completion of my courses, I will find a good job. BOCODOL has improved my social being because I never dreamt of a time when I would be in possession of a BGCSE certificate. This is a sign of progress in my life. I encourage the youth to enrol with BOCODOL in order to have a better future and not just relax since mokoduwe go tsoswa o o itekang (Those who struggle for perfection will receive assistance), (P8: 1 2:8).*

Lorato is a mother of two and had been one of the recipients of the prize-giving awards and had utilised all ten types of learning support offered by BOCODOL. She had written and passed four out of six subjects at BGCSE level at the time of reporting this in her journal. She first enrolled in 2003 and finished her BGCSE in 2007 when she wrote her last two BGCSE subjects. She could have finished within the four years recommended by the BOCODOL enrolment policy (2001) but could not because of administrative inefficiency discussed later in this chapter. The excerpt from Lorato’s journal demonstrates the role of learning support when an individual is receptive to it and has set herself achievable goals. Lorato confirms that her educational status has changed and that she has matured, and has

made progress in her life. She was confident of getting her BGCSE certificate. She eventually got her BGCSE and, after her results were published, she was employed as an HIV/AIDS Co-ordinator under the Global Fund. Prize-giving awards motivated some distance learners and as such complemented the various modes of learning support. In the next section I briefly discuss the findings under three themes that emerged from the findings presented in this chapter.

### 5.3 Discussion of findings

The findings are discussed using three themes namely; *transition*, *transactional presence and tension*. The theme: *transition* emerged from learners' perceptions and experiences as revealed in their reasons for enrolling for BGCSE through the distance learning mode, their conceptualisation of learning support and expectations. *Transition* relates to the state that distance learners and their marginalised communities find themselves in as they negotiate their survival in the dynamic and changing world. The theme: *transactional presence* emerged from learners' perceptions of face-to-face support and mediated support in which helpful DE facilitators were perceived positively as a key to better academic performance and learners were satisfied. Absence of DE facilitators or presence of unhelpful DE facilitators was perceived negatively as a source for poor academic performance and learners were dissatisfied. *Transactional presence* occurred when distance learners felt the connectedness with the ODL institution and staff, learning centre coordinators, tutors, peer learners and significant others (Shin, 2003) during the course of their learning at a distance. The theme *tension* emerged from a mismatch between policy claims (as espoused in the RNPE, Vision 2016, BOCODOL Act 1998, the Enrolment policy, the Guidance and Counselling policy, the Learner Charter) and practice. Practice did not address the issues of access and equity as claimed in the policy documents. This was exhibited in some learners' perceived inadequate learning support and in some managerial flaws with regard to administrative support especially assignments handling, communication and inadequacy in the area of part-time staff recruitment and training. *Tension* in terms of policy and practice, was exhibited when as the former encouraged educational expansion even to the hard to reach remote areas whilst learning support practice was not able to address policy claims because of the limited human, financial, and physical resources. Despite the challenges that include their state of transition, distance learner participants were highly motivated to attain a qualification for betterment of their predicament.

### 5.3.1 Transition

The reasons for learners from marginalised communities enrolling for programmes offered through the distance education mode as stated in section 5.2.1, their conceptualisation of learning support (section 5.2.2) and their expectations (section 5.2.3) can be explained within the context in which learners and their communities find themselves in. The need to improve their quality of life and overcome their predicament drove them to find alternative ways of moving from the traditional way of life to a modern way of life. The *transition* to a modern way of life stemmed from external factors which included the process of marginalisation over the years as was described in Chapter 3 of this study. The state of transition compelled learners from marginalised communities to enrol in a distance education programme in order to fit into the fast and changing world they found themselves in. The Basarwa communities are changing from a traditional nomadic hunter-gatherer and egalitarian community to an unfamiliar way of life, farming. Those who were relocated now keep a few cattle and goats given by government. This is part of the agro-based economy, which the Bakgalagadi and other communities in Botswana have traditionally been engaged in. The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities are fully aware of their state of transition towards the industrialised economy that Botswana is aspiring to. The 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE 1994:5) complemented by Vision 2016. states that:

*The goals of the Revised National Education Policy are to prepare Batswana for the transition from a traditional agro-based economy to the industrial economy that the country aspires to.*

However, for marginalised communities and in particular the Basarwa who have for centuries survived as nomadic hunter-gatherers, the transition towards an industrial economy presents a huge challenge. The country's Vision 2016 pillar on education puts pressure on marginalised communities as they lag behind the rest of the Botswana society in terms of basic education. The Vision states that by 2016, Batswana<sup>9</sup> would be an educated and informed nation. It encourages all citizens of Botswana to participate in education and promises that Botswana's wealth of different languages and cultural traditions will be recognised, supported, and strengthened within the education system and no citizens will be denied the right to education based on their mother tongue. It also states that

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<sup>9</sup> Batswana refers to all citizens of Botswana. All ethnic groups who belong to Botswana, are nationals and are called Batswana.

Botswana will have entered the information age on equal footing with other nations and society will be free and democratic and have full access to information on the operations of government, private sector and other organisations (Tau, 2006). It is in the light of this context that BGCSE is a critical qualification for learners to attain in order to gain entry into institutions for tertiary education and training in order to participate in a fast and changing world. Distance learning support is meant to assist learners in attaining their targeted qualification with fewer challenges. The challenges that face distance learners can be minimised by ensuring that there is transactional presence of the human factor in distance learning that is, the constant availability of ODL facilitators and other learners within the learning support framework. Learners who perceived a transactional presence of the human factor were satisfied in both face-to face and mediated support.

### **5.3.2 Transactional presence**

*Transactional presence* refers to the degree to which distance learners sense the availability and connectedness with an ODL institution and staff, learning centre coordinators, tutors, peer learners and significant others (Shin, 2003). The transactional presence in the various types of learning support led distance learners to have positive perceptions and experiences. The ODL facilitators play a key role in mobilising resources for learning support, both human and physical. The availability of such resources has the potential of enabling learning transactions that satisfy learners' academic needs.

Personal support from tutors helps learners in managing their emotional matters so that they focus on learning. Personal support is one of the elements of learner support along with academic support and administrative support. The three components of learner support overlap and as such, tutors usually find themselves called upon to perform all of them in order to facilitate successful learning (Simpson 2001; Thorpe, 2002; Moore, 2003; Tait, 2004). This was the case when some learners in a tutorial session made snide remarks and associated intelligence with learning at a conventional institution. Such perceptions encourage learners to be passive learners and this undermines the learner-centred approach, which is employed in tutoring in order to make them independent learners. However, the professional conduct of the tutor was commendable as he went beyond his academic role of academic advising and did some personal counselling and there was no repeat of the incident thereafter.

Personal support through guidance has the potential to inculcate in learners respect for each other, and a team spirit. This was the case at the Kang learning centre where a *transactional presence* of peers through a learner management committee fostered a sense of learning communities. The sense of learning communities meant that learners were able to learn and support each other with the aim of being successful in examinations. The opportunity of coming together also helped reduce feelings of isolation that were experienced at Inalegolo and New Xade. The interactions during face-to-face support meant they could share social and learning experiences as a community of learners. Learner management committees empowered distance learners and inculcated a sense of responsibility. It provided them with a platform to voice issues that affected their learning. It also encouraged learners to interact amongst themselves and in the process; some formed subject specific study groups and motivated each other. The sense of a learning community experienced by learners in this study was similar to Hong Kong learners whose perception was strong in respect of peers and teaching staff (Kember et al., 2001). The sense of a learning community was also encouraged through the open days and prize-giving ceremonies.

The annual open days and prize-giving ceremonies enhanced distance learners' sense of belonging to the institution. Feelings of belonging encourage persistence and are more likely to contribute towards completion of programmes. The support by significant others during open days and prize-giving ceremonies as acknowledged in this study motivated distance learners. The presence of significant others in these annual events helped to make learners realise that their communities ascribed great importance to their educational engagements. Whilst the human factor presence was valued by learners, there were instances where it contributed to learners' negative perceptions and experiences as was revealed by participants in interviews and journals.

The short comings of ODL facilitators in the provision of support were responsible for learners' negative perceptions and experiences for example, handling of assignments and incidents of inefficiency during examination registration. The poor handling of assignments led to delayed assignment feedback and it meant that learners could not learn from the assignment feedback at the time they were still motivated. Inefficiency is a managerial



matter. It was due to poor monitoring and supervision of full-time and part time staff. Managerial flaws relating to the recruitment and training of part-time staff contributed to learners' dissatisfaction as tutors recruited could not deliver face-to-face support and mediated support they expected. When learners' expectations are not met they are more likely to feel frustrated and helpless as there are no other academic support systems in remote rural areas. The other managerial flaw relates to poor communication and work ethic. Poor communication led to poor attendance at weekend tutorials. This meant that learners were not informed and could not take advantage and attend in large numbers. Poor work ethic on the other hand led to incidents of power play on part-time staff by full time staff. This went undetected due to inadequate control measures within the regional operational system. Power play did not only frustrate part-time staff during their return journey from a weekend tutorial, it also meant that they could not participate in further weekend tutorials despite the fact that they marked learners' assignments. Power play therefore denied learners to meet tutors who evaluated their assignments. Learners were denied the opportunity for face-to-face feedback with those who marked their assignments. The managerial flaws were further complicated by tension between policy claims and practice.

### **5.3.3 Tension**

Four tensions emerged from the findings and these are:

- Tension between tradition and modernity
- Tension between the right to education and national capacity to deliver -in remote and sparsely populated areas
- Tension between ODL policy pronouncements and practice
- Tension between national curriculum and distance learners' aspirations.

Tension between tradition and modernity arises from the fact that the whole world is changing and all nations need to be on board so that no community is left behind. A knowledge driven society is emerging as a result of the advent of technological advancement. The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi communities as part of the global village are faced with the challenge of catching up. The Botswana Government's 2016 National Vision and its 1994 Revised National Policy on Education guide the fast tracking of all communities in Botswana to become part of an industrialised knowledge society. The

vision pillar of education is that by 2016 Batswana must be an informed and educated nation. However, the attraction of living in the old ways still prevails in the communities. But the current legal framework prohibits old traditions to be practised without permission and some individuals within the communities end up on the wrong side of the law when they practise their traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle. Acquiring an education that equips one with knowledge and skills to join the labour market has become crucial for adjusting to a modern lifestyle. Lack of education amongst the remote Basarwa and Bakgalagadi means one cannot become part of the modern society. The dilemma renders one to risk clashing with the law as one is left with no alternative to subsist but to hunt and gather in a terrain that no longer belongs to the community but to a modern government.

Tension between the right to education and the national capacity to deliver arises from the fact that education is a right as indicated in Chapter 3, section 3.2. Through its Constitution, the Government of Botswana regards the right to education as an inalienable right. It has thus come up with policies to guide the provision of education in the country. The RNPE (1994) has made an undertaking to provide education to all Botswana. The policy implementation in terms of expanding access to education through the distance education mode was mandated to BOCODOL through an Act of Parliament, No. 20 of 1998. The policy raised the nation's expectations that they would benefit as it promises that BOCODOL would reach all parts of the country. However, under financing of distance education has led to tension in terms of policy implementation. Policy issues as stated in the RNPE, such as use of mother-tongue in early phases of schooling, access and equity remain a major concern. The provision of learning support services to remote distance learners is inadequate and leads to learner frustrations as expectations are not met. This is one reason for learners withdrawing from studies. When learners de-register, the public's misconceptions about distance learning are confirmed.

Tension between ODL policy pronouncements and practice is mainly at micro level. The Learner Charter (2000) and the Guidance and Counselling Policy documents (2001) commits BOCODOL to provide learning support services to all distance learners but the provision of such services has not been equitable. Remote distance learners have

remained without access to community study centres and tutors whilst learners who are not remote have enjoyed full learning support services as espoused in the policy documents. This shortcoming on the part of BOCODOL is responsible for the mismatch between learners' expectations, perceptions and actual experiences. Provision of adequate and up to date information during pre-enrolment counselling and orientation workshops as indicated in the Learner Charter (2000) could have addressed the misconceptions about learning support and mismatch between expectations and experiences. The consequences of inadequate information led some learners to be demoralised as their expectations were not met. The expectation of being taught is rooted in learners' past educational experience in conventional settings where quality education is measured through the quality of teaching. The failure to adhere to best practice as espoused through the learner charter, the tutor-marker guide, as well as the guidance and counselling policy led to some learners' dissatisfaction.

Tension between national curriculum and distance learners' aspirations arises from the failure of the current curriculum to address the needs of all communities equitably. Firstly, learners from marginalised communities cannot make connections with the curriculum as examples used are not from their environment. Secondly the range of subjects offered limit their aspirations as it does not enable them to attain careers in pure science related subjects nor in information and communication technology. The curriculum therefore excludes distance learners from participating in subjects that could enable them to be part of an information rich society of which the country's Vision 2016 advocates. The curriculum offered tends to perpetuate the exclusion of learners from marginalised communities in terms of remaining outside the mainstream knowledge and information society that Botswana is striving to become. The curriculum therefore limits the opportunities for distance learners in competing for well-paid employment to low-paid jobs such as tuck-shop assistants, cleaners or herd boys.

The other curriculum issue in which there is tension is the medium of instruction. The RNPE recommends the development of a language policy and provides for the teaching of mother tongue at early phases of education, but the policy implementation has not taken off yet in addressing the issues of mother tongue. The distance learner participants' languages are yet to be codified. The distance learners from marginalised

communities did not have the privilege of learning in their own language. What this means is that being educated in an unfamiliar language was restrictive and led to poor comprehension of concepts presented in an unfamiliar language.

Failure to understand concepts in printed learning materials resulted in learners disengaging. Low understanding resulted in some learners' motivation decreasing to levels in which they failed to complete assignment and to study. Non-completion of assignments meant learners were unable to gauge their performance and led to frustration. When one enrolls for a programme, the expectation is to engage with and grasp the content of in the learning materials. Where there is greater interaction between learners and tutors as happened at Kang, learners overcome the challenges of posed by the learning material. Where there is less or no interaction between learners and tutors, learning materials tend to be more structured because of the limited dialogue. Both Moore (1990) and Holmberg (2003) encourage interaction between learners and tutors in order to avert the challenges in the learning materials. The learning materials were written targeting second language speakers and not learners from marginalised communities who hardly speak English as was revealed in their biographical data in section 5.2.4. There was therefore a mismatch between the medium of instruction as used in the learning materials and the proficiency of learners in the English language. These mismatches in terms of language and learning materials is what Evans (2006) terms instructional dissonance, that is, the ignorance or denial of barriers and distortions that negatively affect the learning event in particular for the learner. Instructional communication, whether verbal or written, must be meaningful before content can be mastered. The findings of my study are summarised in the next section.

#### **5.4 Summary: main findings**

The three key findings that emerge from this study are that:

- learners' intrinsic motivation to succeed was exceptionally high.
- policy and managerial flaws frustrated the provision of equitable learning support.
- positive perceptions and experiences were exhibited where distance learners had access to personalised academic and affective support.

The value of education for marginalised communities in *transition* lies in the possibilities of breaking the cycle of poverty encountered over several decades as a result of political and

socio-economic disruptions by more powerful communities. Distance learners from marginalised communities enrol for secondary education programme offered through the distance education mode in the hope of obtaining a BGCSE certificate in order to enhance their opportunities for further education and training and for increased opportunities for paid employment outside their remote settlements.

Distance learners in this study were disadvantaged in many respects. They had to defy the odds by working hard on challenges that include geographical distance, psychological distance, a curriculum with little content from their environment and a medium of instruction that is either their third or fourth language. These challenges were a result of *tension* between policy and practice. Expanding educational access to the hard to reach in remote areas, without the necessary human, financial and physical resources is a major source of tension between policy and practice. Policy raised expectations that could not be met. The result has been dissatisfaction with DE learning experience that manifested in negative perceptions and experiences by 27.9% of distance learner participants who were not able to access the expected learning support services. Despite the many challenges, 72.1% distance learner participants indicated positive perceptions and experiences of learning support. This suggests that in particular personalised academic support was highly valued by participants. Evidence from various sources also demonstrates that learning support positively influenced the academic performance of distance learners from marginalised communities who were able to access such support. Distance learners who were able to sense the availability and connectedness with the ODL institution, ODL staff, and part-time staff and significant others perceived and experienced a *transactional presence* that inspired them to persist in their studies. This study confirms Holmberg's (2003) theory of conversational learning and its applicability in a less developed context. Personalised learning support anchored in empathy remains a key driving force in sustaining distance learners' motivation to learn. This study has further given distance learners from marginalised communities a voice in the sense that previously they had been inaudible and the challenges that affected their learning had remained speculative. It has, therefore, provided supportive empirical evidence for policy and practice to meet the needs of distance learners from marginalised communities studying in a less developed context. It has added to the existing DE literature by documenting evidence of distance learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The main findings of this study fall into three themes: *transition*, *tension* and *transactional presence*. These are the themes that have emerged from distance learners' perceptions and experiences pertaining to learning support. Interpreted within Holmberg's (2003) theory of conversational learning, the positive outcomes emerging from the *transactional presence* are anchored empathy, a key element of personalised learning support. Learners' perceived value of the BGCSE programme is within the institution's control. High levels of learner's intrinsic motivation to succeed despite policy and managerial flaws were unexpected. In the next chapter, I highlight the significance and implications of this study. I provide recommendations directed at addressing issues of policy and practice that emanated from the findings relating to *transition* and *tension*. I also suggest topics for further research in the area of learning support, curriculum and policy.



## Chapter 6 Significance and implications of the study

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### 6.1 Introduction

Understanding the context of remote distance learners in marginalised communities has helped me reflect on the effectiveness of learning support provision and the relevance of a distance education programme for such learners. This study, explored the perceptions and experiences of remote distance learners and the findings cast light on the policies that frame the provision of learning support offered by Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) and help unravel the often-unquestioned institutional assumptions that construct, entrench, and perpetuate the marginalisation of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi (Nthomang, 2002). I first present an overview of this study and then discuss the significance and implications for policy and practice. I conclude this chapter by making recommendations for a learning support network strategy and for further research.

### 6.2 Overview of the study

In this study I investigated the provision of learning support in an underdeveloped context with the view to gaining an in-depth understanding of how distance learners from marginalised communities perceived and experienced learning support. Findings have been categorised under three key themes, *transition* from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and agro based economy to an industrial economy spearheaded by the country's Vision 2016, *tension* between policy and practice that affects the delivery of learning support negatively and the *transactional presence* of tutors, Open and Distance Learning (ODL) staff and significant others, that promotes meaningful interaction which enhances learning and the achievement of learner goals. This study spans the period from 2003 to 2007 and is presented in six chapters.

Chapter 1 contextualised the study within the distance education domain. During my tenure as a regional manager for BOCODOL - an open and distance learning institution, I was perturbed by the generally low completion rates and poor academic achievement of learners despite apparent adequate learning support. This puzzle helped me formulate a critical research question: *How do distance learners from marginalised communities perceive and experience learning support?* In the first chapter, I also explained the uniqueness of this study and the key terms as applied to it. I briefly outlined the research design and

methodology used in my systematic investigation. In explaining the methodology, I also indicated steps taken to ensure ethical dealings with the research participants as well as how I ensured the trustworthiness of this study. I also indicated the research constraints and steps taken to minimise them. I concluded the chapter by providing a structural outline of this study.

Chapter 2 offered a rich description of the participants and their geographic, socio-economic, and cultural context. The purpose was to ensure that the reader appreciates the unique circumstances in which the research participants live and endeavour to complete their Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) qualification via the distance mode in remote areas of western Botswana. In Chapter 3, I first examined the provision of education to marginalised communities with reference to education as a human right and the concept of open and distance learning. I then reviewed literature on the theoretical frameworks underpinning distance learning. Given the cultural sensitivity and background of my participants, I found *the conversational learning theory* by Holmberg (2003) appropriate for my study. I explained and acknowledged the value of other theories (Gorsky, Caspi and Trumper's *dialogue theory-2005* and Moore's *transactional theory 1990*).

I also reviewed literature on learner support in order to situate learning support in its operational framework. I highlighted three fundamental aspects of learner support namely- learning support/academic support, personal support and administrative support. I explained that it is not easy to separate these three functions of learner support when it comes to supporting distance learners. I distinguished each of the three aspects of learner support in terms of conceptual definitions and operational function before reviewing literature on factors influencing success in distance learning. I highlighted the surface, deep and strategic learning approaches and contrasted them with similar approaches, field dependence, and field independence. I did this bearing in mind the profile of distance learners described in Chapter 2. I drew on the value of these approaches and made assumptions on how distance learners are likely to approach their learning in an underdeveloped context. Transferability to similar contexts may be possible based on the thick descriptions provided. The review also included empirical literature related to learning support in developed and developing contexts. I

drew inferences from comparable studies in the available literature to articulate the research problem and used these to refine the data collection tools and later in Chapters 5 and 6, to enrich the discussion. I concluded this chapter by demonstrating how the silence in the literature – particularly related to learning support in developing contexts - was addressed by my study, which documents the perceptions and experiences of distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana.

Chapter 4 elaborated on the research design and methodology. Firstly, I explained the major paradigms in research that is; the positivist and interpretivist paradigms, before justifying my choice of the latter in order to gain an in-depth understanding of learning support provision using distance learners' perceptions and experiences. I used quantitative data collection methods where appropriate as a way of complementing my qualitative methods. I justified the choice of my data collection methods and demonstrated how they were appropriate given the nature and purpose of my study. I explained ethical considerations and the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness of this study as well as how I minimised the constraints I anticipated. The research design and process described in Chapter 4 permitted a rigorous process of collecting data, the outcome which is analysed and presented in Chapter 5. The analysis uncovered learners' reasons for enrolling, their expectations and conceptualisation of learning support. The primary focus fell on their perceptions and experiences of learning at a distance and was grouped into three themes - *transition, transactional presence and tension*. The themes relate to the perception that obtaining a BGCSE programme is critically important for the successful *transition* from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to being integrated into the mainstream Botswana society. The *transactional presence* of ODL staff, part-time staff and significant others resulted in both positive and negative perceptions and experiences of learning at a distance. The *tension* between policy and practice affected the provision of equitable learning support. The key findings of this study are that:

- Learners' intrinsic motivation to succeed was exceptionally high.
- policy and managerial flaws frustrated the provision of equitable learning support.
- positive perceptions and experiences were exhibited where distance learners had access to personalised academic and affective support.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the significance of the findings and their implications for policy and practice. I conclude by making recommendations and identifying areas for further

research in order to enhance distance education learning support theory and practice thereby validating this study.

### **6.3 Significance of the study**

This study contributes to the literature base of distance learning and highlights how when policy is not aligned with practice, learners may be disadvantaged even more than their remoteness merits. The literature on learner support (in which learning support is a subset) in southern Africa and elsewhere in developing contexts tends to be descriptive and does not give insight into how distance education providers address the perceptions and experiences of distance learners from marginalised communities (ADEA, 2002; DEASA), 2006; Nonyongo and Ngengebule, 2008). This study has provided an intimate perspective on learning support as experienced by marginalised communities in a southern African region. The findings are pertinent for ODL policy makers, managers, and practitioners who ought to address the tensions that exist because policies are not accommodative enough of the needs and context of marginalised communities. The tension arising between policy and practice results in challenges that hinder effective learning support in less developed contexts. Distance learners in this study faced challenges similar to previous studies such as isolation, poor reading culture, poor scholastic backgrounds and bad educational experiences (Mogwe, 1992; Boko, 2002; Polelo, 2003; Mensah, 2004; Wheeler, 2004; Dzakiria, 2005) Distance learners in this study however did not have recourse to libraries, internet, or educated people in their areas. They live and study in communities that are trapped between the hunter-gatherer traditional lifestyle and the modern industrial based economy - a transition they are negotiating with uncertainty and many challenges.

This study also highlights the importance attached to education by communities in transition. Distance learners' perception of the BGCSE programme is that it is critically important for their successful *transition* from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle through an agro based economy to an industrial one as envisaged in the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education and supported by country's Vision 2016. The attainment of a BGCSE certificate promises increased opportunities for further education and training and for seeking paid employment outside their remote settlements in mines and urban centres. This may be a false promise yet their chances of returning to their nomadic lifestyles are very remote. The way forward for them is to seek

equitable integration. This may only be attained when they have the necessary education and skills that can earn them the respect from mainstream society and to compete for opportunities at the same level. The BGCSE programme is currently the only vehicle through which to negotiate the transition and due to unavailability of alternative ways of attaining BGCSE, the distance-learning mode is also the only option available. The Basarwa and Bakgalagadi learners face many challenges unrelated to their motivation or remote location, most, which pertain to policy implementation and management. Although their expectations of learning support were not fully accommodated in terms of policy implementation they were still satisfied. They could not benchmark, as there was nothing comparable. Nevertheless, they still performed well beyond what their circumstances and they still valued the presence ODL facilitators despite the fact that it was not equitably distributed.

This study highlights the importance of equitable distribution of transactional presence if distance learners from marginalised communities are to attain their educational goals and compete fairly with the rest of the society for opportunities for further education and training. The *transactional presence* of ODL staff, part-time staff and significant others is critically important for distance learners to attain their goals for successful transition and eventual integration into the mainstream society. Holmberg (2003) and Shin (2003) explain the effects of transactional presence of the providing institution, tutors, and peers in terms of motivating learners and facilitating academic achievement. Transactional presence is indispensable in the provision of effective learning support and is even more critical for distance learners disadvantaged by context and inadequate policy implementation due to unintentional tensions.

The *tension* between policy and practice affects the provision of learning support negatively. The perceptions and experiences of distance learners who could not negotiate their learning on their own due to policy and practice colliding have been negative. The open access policy led to the enrolment of learners whose abilities were not sufficient to learn from the learning materials without constant learning support. The capacity of learning support structures that were put in place did not adequately match the demand. It led to disproportionate delivery of learning support, with learning support meant for very remote learners being compromised due to financial and human constraints. This managerial challenge was a result of poor strategic planning. Policies in place do not respond adequately to the needs and aspirations of distance learners from marginalised communities, for example, learning support policy make claims to

provide all with guidance and counselling, up to date information but in practice, this has not been the case. On issues of curriculum, the claim is that it provides all to progress to the envisaged industrial based economy but the content has little to do with the context of marginalised communities in assisting them to build on their existing knowledge systems. In other words, the learning materials neglect the experiences and knowledge systems of marginalised communities. The right to equitable learning support for remote distance learners is therefore compromised. The challenges of tension between policy and practice call changes.

#### **6.4 Implications for policy and practice**

This study has immediate implications for ODL policy and practice. There is a need for a revision of policy formulation and implementation with regard to the provision of learning support service that meets the needs and aspirations of distance learners from marginalised communities. A review of the remote learner strategy shows an anomaly in policy decisions and implementation. The Remote Learner Strategy Consultancy Report (Lelliot, 2002) as stated in Chapter 1 section 1.3 has not been transformed into a College policy document. The current strategy has the unintended consequence of perpetuating academic failure and social exclusion of marginalised communities. A revised curriculum strategy ought to address the needs and aspirations of marginalised communities.

The current curriculum relegates marginalized communities to the bottom of the Botswana social class because it is not diverse enough to offer broader study options for career development. The BGCSE offering is based on the National Curriculum Syllabus (BOCODOL Act No. 20 of 1998) but does not provide for pure sciences and practical vocational subjects for distance learners and BOCODOL has not yet developed learning materials which address the aspirations of learners who desire to study pure sciences and practical vocational subjects. Distance learners from marginalised communities cannot engage private tutors for subjects not offered through distance as is the case for students living in villages and towns, and can thus not pursue careers within the pure sciences like engineering and medicine. At national level a diverse and balanced curriculum which addresses the needs of marginalised communities in Botswana as well as the national needs would encourage equitable integration rather than the current curriculum that promotes the assimilation of marginalised communities into the dominant Tswana ethnic group. Dewey (1944: 99) quoted by Perry (2009) argues that there should be a diverse offering of curriculum and instructional approaches to ensure that all learners can reach



their maximum individual potential and that social classes should not be restricted to particular types of education. The current curriculum frustrates distance learners who complete the BGCSE only to discover that their educational choices are restricted. The pre-enrolment counseling and orientation programmes need to highlight these limitations when recruiting new enrollees. Furthermore, these learners are disadvantaged when it comes to government sponsorship. The government grant and loan scheme provides incentives to candidates who specialize in pure science and technology related programmes at tertiary level (Tau, 2005). Those who take pure science and technology programmes like medicine, radiography and ICT engineering are awarded grants. They are fully sponsored by government whilst those who take humanities are granted loans which they need to pay back, at times keeping them in debt for many years. The current curriculum offering if allowed to continue as is, has the potential to perpetuate social exclusion and injustice which may eventually lead to tensions between ethnic groups. Perry (2009) explains education by borrowing a perspective from the emancipatory, transformative and critical theorists and argues that education is as democratic in as much as it leads to the liberation of oppressed classes and transformation of oppressive social structures. Democratic education empowers individuals to free themselves from oppressive circumstances (Perry, 2009). All role-players in the Botswana distance learning area need to appraise seriously their current service provision in order to ensure that they do not exclude or short-change any citizen thereby defeating the government's Vision 2016 goals.

In order to expand equitable access to education BOCODOL has a decentralised learner support system. In 2003, the Kang regional office was the first to involve elected learner representatives in management committees (BOCODOL Annual Report, 2004/5.) The involvement of learners draws on Freireian thinking (Perry 2009) which argues that the path to liberation comes through a critical awareness of one's reality and that learners can become active subjects of their own destiny when they are in control of their learning. Through the learner management committees, learners have gradually become more responsible for their learning. The BOCODOL decentralised learner support system has a number of policy documents that guide ODL practitioners. However the formulation of some of these policies does not show any prolonged and broad consultations in terms of involving the representatives of marginalised communities. The consultancy for the remote learner strategy (Lelliot, 2002) was carried out from the 21<sup>st</sup> October to 1<sup>st</sup> November 2002. The limitation of the report is that it does not indicate any constraints met nor did it include the political and cultural representatives

of marginalised groups in the consultation process. In a democracy, like Botswana, individuals are citizens rather than subjects and thus it is implicit that individuals or their representatives have a right to participate on issues that affect them directly or indirectly. The list of those who were consulted on page 26 of the remote learner consultancy report is dominated by the names of primary school teachers and officers from the dominant Tswana ethnic group, BOCODOL staff, seven learners at D'Kar, one at Etsha and five at Motokwe. The consultation on the remote learner strategy left out key informants who could have contributed by highlighting the uniqueness of their lifestyles and academic needs. A policy strategy that is more likely to address the needs of the targeted population group should include a thorough environmental scanning to identify strengths and key areas for improvement and aim to create affective experiences that alleviate isolation. It is critical to now develop clear policy guidelines on how to support distance learners in less developed contexts.

The findings of this study also implicitly point to inadequate training of learning centre coordinators as well as tutors. Training of ODL part-time staff and the execution of regular performance appraisals are central to the provision of quality learning support services. If tutors recruited from junior secondary schools had been adequately trained in the tenets of ODL and adequately supported by ODL staff, their competencies would have been on par with their counterparts recruited from senior secondary schools. Informed and knowledgeable tutors who have good teaching skills increase the quality of learning support and ensure that learners have confidence in those appointed to guide them.

It is imperative that a training policy or tutor manual should be developed with clear guidelines that promote pedagogical dialogue with distance learners in order to improve academic performance. Furthermore, financial and appropriate human resources should be mobilised to enhance learning support initiatives. In other words, the challenges faced by distance learners from marginalised communities require a more political and economic commitment from various national and local authorities including the District Council, local political and traditional representatives. These stakeholders should to be made aware of the potential role of the distance education mode towards contributing to social development and empowerment of marginalised communities. An improved value of ODL awareness could lead to a political acceptance by national and local

government, NGOs, and the private sector. This stakeholder support would see prioritisation of ODL issues and financial support for the development of educational facilities and resources in underdeveloped contexts. Infrastructural development for information and communication technology (ICT) and libraries could contribute towards the promotion of a reading culture as well as advancing a knowledge society.

The existing policy documents (the Enrolment Policy, the Guidance and Counseling Policy, the Learner Charter and the Remote Learner Strategy Consultancy Report) that guide the delivery of learner support at BOCODOL do not currently recognise the uniqueness of marginalised communities because the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) - from which the college policies are derived - regards all citizens of Botswana as equal. The pitiable socio-economic status of the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi requires a redress if social justice is to prevail. This therefore calls for policy changes and practical strategies targeting the improvement of education delivery to the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi. At a theoretical and practical level, a conversational learning theoretical framework which embraces empathy should be adopted to strengthen and inform the delivery of distance learning to marginalised communities in underdeveloped contexts. Besides the development of a policy strategy, managerial inadequacies in the delivery of learning support need to be addressed, hence the call for a practical strategy.

In order to develop appropriate strategies, which enhance best practice in the delivery of learning support in underdeveloped contexts the following is recommended:

- DE providers with distance learners from marginalised communities should ensure that a thorough needs assessment of learners is undertaken in order to produce learner profiles and thus identify learner needs and expectations. These are helpful in the design and development of appropriate learning materials and culturally sensitive learning support services.
- ODL policy makers and managers charged with managing distance learners from marginalised communities should be adequately trained through benchmarking with similar institutions in countries like India, Kenya, and Nigeria, where education provision for marginalised nomadic populations is attempting to address their needs and aspirations.

- Criteria for selecting learning centre co-ordinators should be refined and empathy should be a critical attribute to use in the selection. Roles and responsibilities of learning centre coordinators should be clearly defined and all recruited coordinators should be adequately inducted, mentored, monitored, and remunerated reasonably and timely, in order to sustain their morale and to enable them to be effective helpers in rendering learning, administrative, and personal support.
- The contents of the BGCSE curriculum should reflect aspects of the socio-cultural and geographic contexts of marginalised communities in order for distance learners from marginalised communities to relate easily to the new knowledge. Such an inclusion would enhance the learning process, as learners would be able to connect with learning materials that have relevance to their contexts. This is more likely to promote positive academic performance.
- Learning support should be comprehensive and be embedded in the learning materials. In other words, language and study skills support should be made an integral part of the learning materials. Such a step will help support learners to progress with fewer challenges in the study units.
- Internal and external quality audit checks currently undertaken at the regional centre should be extended to community study and learning satellite centres in order to promote accountability at all levels. This will encourage distance learners to be involved in the quality assurance processes and will give them confidence that systems are working towards improving their learning events. It will also encourage ODL practitioners to effectively support distance learners, as they will be aware that the process of appraising their effectiveness extends right up to distance learners. Such a practice would lead to best practice as processes and procedures are adhered to. The delivery of learning support services would address the needs and expectations of distance learners.
- A communication and academic literacy support programme targeting distance learners whose mother tongue is not English should be developed and delivered preferably through face-to-face contact. Such language support in the medium of instruction is critical for coping with independent study.
- Empowerment strategies through initiatives such as creating communities of learning through the establishment of learner management structures should be

promoted at all learning centres. This has the advantage of fostering cohesion (Perry, 2009) and as such instils solidarity and increased sense of belongingness. These aspects are important for retention and motivating learners to complete their programmes. Such initiatives are likely to encourage distance learners to take responsibility for their learning and to engage DE providers on policy aspects. To illustrate, the promises in the learner charter and the learners' handbook would be challenged and this would lead to improved support.

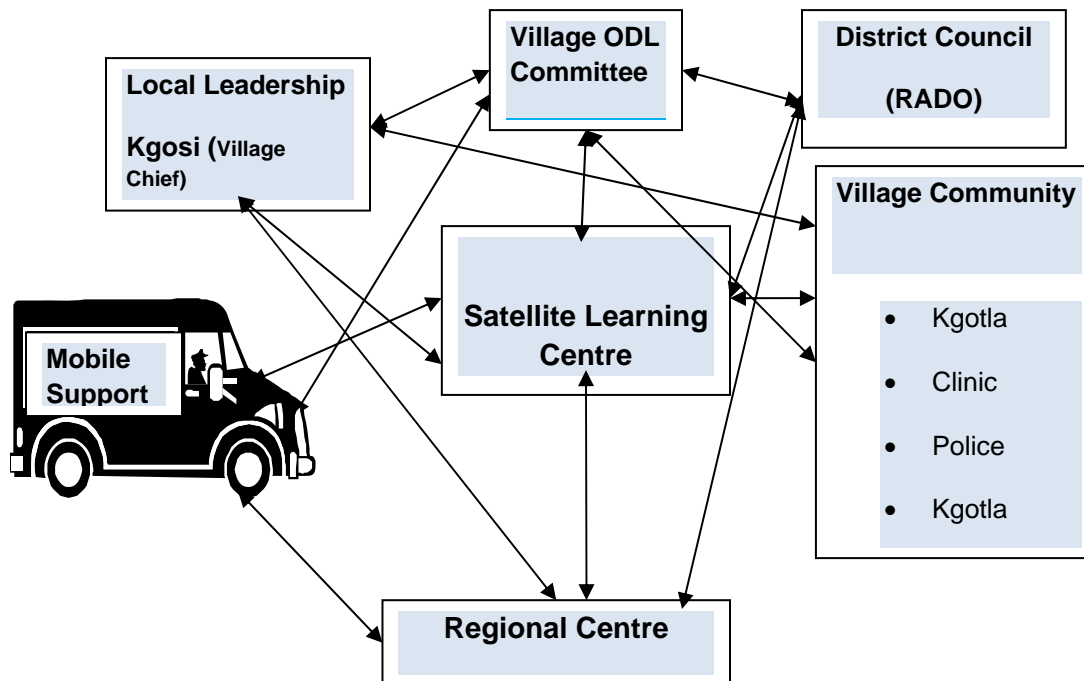
- ODL advocacy involving traditional leadership and sponsorship of distance learners from marginalised communities should be promoted through community engagement and meetings. This would help distance learners to be supported by their communities and family members. Participation of family members and local traditional representatives in ODL special events like open days and prize-giving ceremonies can also help in the retention of learners and marketing of ODL products and services. Relevant messages can be communicated to families and sponsors to market ODL and to counter any misconceptions about distance education and feelings of social exclusion.
- Political mobilisation, networking and advocacy should be carried out targeting key stakeholders like representatives of marginalised communities through the various media, in order to plea for infrastructural development that support the provision of enhanced quality learning support services through appropriate media and technology. I therefore recommend a learning support network strategy.

### *Learning Support Network Strategy*

The learning support network strategy I recommend is presented in **Figure 6.1**. The strategy is meant to enhance ODL and learning support within a remote rural context. The strategy should take on board key stakeholders in remote settlements such as the traditional leadership in this case the Kgosi (Chief) and the political leadership represented by a local Councillor. The leadership in the person of the chief and councillor is strategic in spearheading development at the settlement. As head of the village the Kgosi is recognised by government and respected for his traditional control of the village and his community. He has a critical voice when it comes to issues of welfare

for his community and service delivery is likely to be made when he appeals to the relevant authorities. The Councillor, on the other hand, is the elected head of a political ward in which the settlement (village) belongs and has the political power. This person can propose and present motions on developmental matters and the needs of his or her village at District Council meetings.

**Figure 6.1 Learning support network strategy**



For leadership to take up ODL concerns, BOCODOL ought to advocate for and educate the village leadership on the value of education and the advantages of using ODL in remote rural context. The advantages of ICTs in distance learning if well articulated, by the leadership at village level could be scaled up by the relevant authorities. The leadership in remote rural settlements of a democratic country like Botswana have voting power and definite influence over the community on who to vote for, so Government tends to listen to their concerns and makes attempts at addressing them. The leadership in remote rural areas - if well mobilised - can convince private companies to demonstrate their social responsibility by enabling their communities to enjoy digital connectivity. It is through this leadership that the community should be engaged and



encouraged to elect a Village ODL Committee with the mandate of promoting distance learning by using advocacy, mobilising financial resources for the vulnerable members of their community, lobbying for ICT infrastructural development and improved radio broadcasting services, library and other academic support facilities in their settlement in order to enhance the experience of learning at a distance.

The Village Community shares norms and values that they transmit from one generation to the next. As a community the people have aspirations and needs that they endeavour to address mainly through the Kgotla system headed by the Kgosi. During a Kgotla meeting every member of the community has the right to speak and to make suggestions that can be adopted by the community. It is therefore crucial for BOCODOL to take advantage of the Kgotla meetings engage the remote rural communities through public education and in the process also promote ODL. When remote rural communities appreciate the role of ODL and the advantages it provides, they are more likely to promote and participate in ODL. They are also more likely to put pressure on their political leaders and demand that government put in place the critical infrastructures for ICTs, road and transport networks so that they are connected to major service centres. Actually, BOCODOL should engage the Botswana Telecommunications corporation and other stakeholders and explore possible appropriate ICTs for example; Wifi technology, given that studies by Hasson et al., (2003) that indicate Wifi as one technology that can open up new possibilities for rural connectivity in developing countries.

The uptake of ODL in remote rural areas can be facilitated by the communities constituting a Village ODL Committee. This committee can advance ODL advocacy mobile resources from various sources and support the mentoring and tutoring of distance learners from their community. An ODL committee constituted through the Kgotla chaired by the Kgosi is more likely to deliver on its mandate as it is supported by the community in its activities. As community representatives, the Committee is more likely to be consulted by government and to be used by ODL providers as part of consultation in the development of learning materials that are culturally sensitive and accommodate the values, needs and aspirations of these remote distance learners.

The District Council is a local government structure created by national government to deliver social services such as health and education to communities including those in far rural contexts. For remote rural areas the government of Botswana has employed Rural Development Officers (RADO) who take care of the basic needs of communities that have been relocated like the Basarwa and Bakgalagadi. RADO are therefore key stakeholders for ODL initiatives in remote rural areas.

The ODL provider through the Regional Centre should provide a mobile support vehicle for its remote service as was previously suggested by Lelliot (2002). Investment in such a mobile support vehicle could enable the provision of library support and media services critical for remote distance learners. In order to ensure best practice in the area of supporting distance learners from marginalised communities in similar remote contexts, I suggest areas for further research in the next section.

## **6.5 Recommendations for further research**

Potential areas for further research by ODL practitioners include curriculum and policy issues. In the area of learning support, I suggest the following questions to guide future research:

- Do learner profiles and characteristics in distance education matter? A perspective for sustainable learner support strategies in less developed contexts.
- Can traditional counselling and guidance strategies used by marginalised communities be infused in tutoring distance learners? A personal and counselling perspective.
- Language support programmes for distance learners not proficient in the language of instruction for general improvement of academic skills: What models and what strategies would apply to marginalised distance learners?

Learning support can be more successful if the curriculum offering has relevancy to the targeted audience.

Curriculum issues are critical for development and can be politically sensitive. When the curriculum is not sensitive to the expectations and needs of marginalised communities, learning support efforts may not lead to improved academic performance. I therefore

suggest the following questions for further research in order to improve curriculum content and delivery in underdeveloped contexts:

- Whose curriculum? Whose agenda? Open and distance learning reality at the crossroads in attaining the national vision in underdeveloped context.
- Why a negotiated curriculum and assessment for marginalised communities? Implication for policy and strategy.
- Why design and develop self-directed learning materials for distance learners from marginalised communities? Issues that matter in enhancing success and throughput through ODL.
- How do remote distance learners and their communities engage in knowledge construction? Perspectives from historically nomadic communities.
- Do indigenous ways of knowing really matter? Lessons for delivering national curriculum through ODL to marginalised communities.

The deployment of an appropriate curriculum that addresses the needs and expectations of marginalised communities in a highly contested educational environment may not be successful if policy guidelines are unavailable. I therefore suggest the following research topics in the area of ODL policy:

- A policy for standards in the delivery of learning support: perspectives of deeply marginalised distance learners and tutors.
- Institutional obligations and learner rights: Policy perspectives for enhanced learner support for distance learners from marginalised communities.
- Institutionalising specialised learner support services for marginalised distance learners in an inclusive education approach: A reality or rhetoric.
- A dedicated policy for delivering education to indigenous and First People: Policy debate for democratic education and social justice.

In the light of the stated implications and recommendations, this study provides a foundation for future comparative research on learning support. ADEA (2002) has observed the absence of comparative research on learner support and indicates that there is little on the impact of learner support strategies. This study therefore contributes to literature in the sense that it has partly addressed the concerns raised by ADEA (2002) and the limitations on the available literature on learner support that Moore and Thompson (1997) and

Robinson (2004) have alluded to. Whilst these authors (ibid) agree that research and publication on learner support has practical value, Robinson (2004) at a global level further claims that most of the empirical studies on learner support lack theory and that some studies are unsubstantiated or lack validity when transferred to other contexts. This study has addressed the claim made by Robinson (2004) as it used Holmberg's (2003) theoretical framework and is also underpinned by empirical studies from both developed and developing contexts and a thick description of the distance learners' context was made in Chapter 2 of this study, in order to provide for trustworthiness and transferability to similar contexts. The perceived positive and negative perceptions and experiences of distance learners in this study provide fundamental lessons and contributions for best practice in the provision of learning support services generally.

The findings of this study are particularly important for distance education providers. A programme is regarded successful when it has had a positive influence on the lives of the targeted audience (McMillan and Schumacher, 1993). The learning support programme as provided by BOCODOL Kang region was perceived positively by 72.1% of distance learners who were participants of this study. The positive perceptions and experiences were attributable to the transactional presence of tutors and significant others. The personalised and affective support by enthusiastic and empathetic tutors and co-ordinators was highly valued by distance learners. Learners' intrinsic motivation to attain their educational goals was also a critical reason for academic success in the light of the policy and managerial flaws that frustrated the provision of quality learning support. The academic achievement of distance learners from marginalised communities exceeded my expectations as it matched that of distance learners in urban centres. I therefore, claim that when the quality of learning support is perceived and experienced to fit the purpose, needs, expectations and aspirations of the target audience, motivation to achieve goals set is increased and learners take responsibility for their learning and academic performance which eventually results in improved throughput.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has concluded the study on how distance learners from marginalised communities perceive and experience learning support. It summarised the six chapters and provided the significance and implications for policy and practice. I also made



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**ADDENDUM 1 Sample of learners' achievement 2003 -2005**

**NB: Meaning of letter grading used for BGCSE achievement**

Letter	Percentage Range	Qualitative Value
A*	85% and above	Outstanding/Exceptionally excellent
A	75% - 84%	Excellent
B	60% - 74%	Very Good
C	50% - 59%	Good
D	45% - 49%	Pass
E	40% - 44%	Weak pass
F	30% - 39%	Very weak
G	20% - 29%	Unsatisfactory
U	0% - 19%	Ungraded
X	-----	The candidate did not write the exam

Source: BOCODOL Academic Registry 2006



Sample of 2003 BGCSE Final examination results (Kang Learning Centre)

Learner	ENG (0561)	MATHS (0563)	HSB (0573)	SETS (0562)
<b>NB: Names deleted to provide anonymity</b>	D	-	-	-
	C	-	-	-
	D	-	-	-
	E	F	-	-
	D	-	-	-
	D	-	C	-
	E	C	-	-
	E	-	-	-
	E	U	E	C
	E	-	F	-
	-	G	C	-
	D	E	-	-
	C	C	-	B
	E	F	-	B
	C	C	-	-
	C	G	E	D
	C	C	-	-
	E	C	E	-
	D	F	-	E
	D	F	C	-
E	F	-	-	

Source: BOCODOL Kang Regional Office 2004





### 2004 BGCSE mock examination results

Learner No	Eng.	Maths	Sets	HSB
6428	C	F		C
15417	D	G		B
3600		U	B	C
6579	E	U		C
1040	C	D		E
6600	E	U	E	F
15399	D			D
6703	D	U	D	F
0235	F	U	F	G
1042	F	G		C
14107	B	G		C
6375	D		C	U
6495	C	U		C
0203	C			F
6423	F		G	G
6449		U	E	D
11367	D		C	G

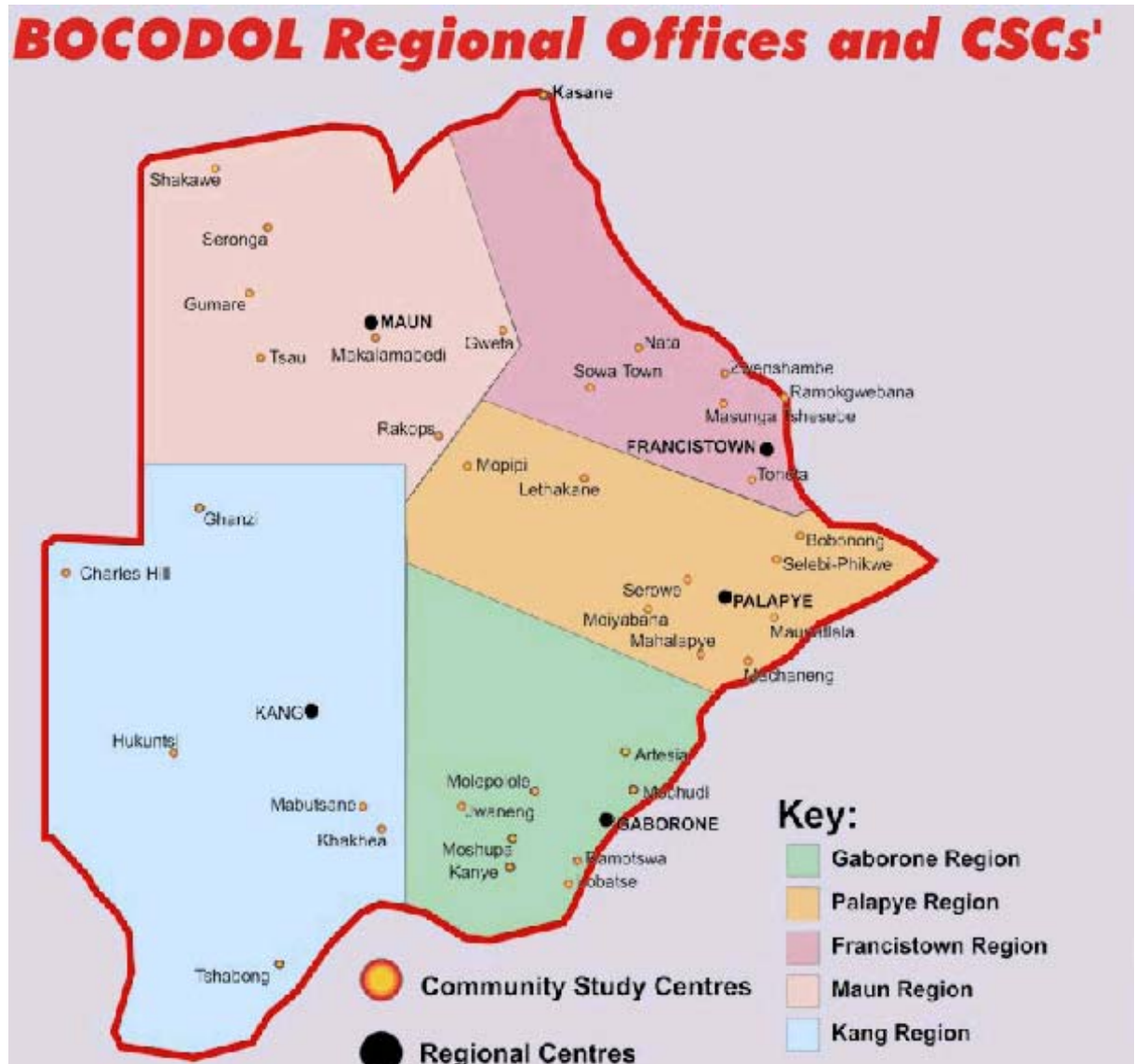
Source: BOCODOL Kang Regional Office 2004

### 2005 BGCSE mock examination results

Candidate Number	Eng.	Maths	Sets	HSB
0001	D	U		G
0002	C	E		D
0003	E	D	C	
0004	F	G	E	F
0005	F	G		F
0006	C			
0008	C	E		
0009	E	U	E	
0010	D			
0011	B		D	D
0012	D	G		
0013	G		E	
0014	D	G		
0016	B	F		
0018	C	F		
0019	F	U	F	
0020	B			B
0021	C	F		
0022	C			
0023	E	E		
0024	F	G		
0026		U		F
0028	D	U		E
0029		U		F

Source: BOCODOL Kang Regional Office 2005

ADDENDUM 2 BOCODOL regional offices





**ADDENDUM 3 Letter of permission to register for PhD**

Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning



BOCODOL  
Private Bag BO 187  
Beuteng  
Gaborone  
BOTSWANA

Tel: +267 3181470  
Fax: +267 3181473

Reference No: DOL/PF

Date: 20/01/05

Mr Godson Gatsha  
Kang Regional Office  
P/Bag 006  
Kang

Dear Sir,

**PHD in Education Policy**

I acknowledge with thanks receipt of your letter dated 14<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

Permission is granted to you to pursue PHD with the University of Pretoria. The College will support you with study leave in accordance with the College's training policy.

Whilst I have no doubt that the qualification will lead to your professional maturity and by extension enhance quality of BOCODOL's operations, the College for now can not support you financially because of the limitations imposed by the Board approved qualification requirements. But such a qualification once achieved will accord you obvious competitive advantage.

The issue of sabbatical leave will be revisited in due course, but it is relatively unproblematic.

I wish you good luck with your studies.

Yours Sincerely

  
D. J. Tadi  
Director

**c.c.: Human Resources Manager**

*Regional Offices:*

<b>Regional Manager</b> P/Bag BO 349 Gaborone Tel: 3080027 Fax: 3330018	<b>BOCODOL</b> P O Box 45 Poleye Tel: 4924024 Fax: 4900343	<b>BOCODOL</b> P/Dep F117 Francistown Tel: 2414280 Fax: 2414586	<b>BOCODOL</b> P O Box 429 Molepolole Tel: 4965821 Fax: 4800681	<b>Regional Manager</b> P/Bag 002 Kang Tel: 6517248 Fax: 6517236
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**ADDENDUM 4 Letter of permission from host institution to carry out research**

Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning



BOCODOL  
Private Bag BO 187  
Bontleng  
Gaborone  
BOTSWANA

Tel: +267 3181470  
Fax: +267 3181089

Reference No: BOC/PF 179 I (102)

Date: 26/09/06

**Mr Godson Gatsha**  
**Kang Regional Office**  
**BOCODOL**  
**Private Bag 006**  
**KANG**

Dear Sir

**Permission to Carry out Research**

Your letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 refers.

You are permitted to carry out research at the identified BOCODOL sites. You will however be expected to share your findings with the College on completion of your studies.

Wishing you the best of luck with your studies.

Yours faithfully

  
D.R. Pau  
Director

**Regional Offices:**

<b>Regional Manager*</b> Private Bag 001 048 Bontleng Tel: 3030017 Fax: 3030018	<b>BOCODOL</b> Private Bag 006 Bontleng Tel: 4824024 Fax: 4802043	<b>BOCODOL</b> Private Bag 032 Francistown Tel: 2418388 Fax: 2414586	<b>BOCODOL</b> Private Bag 014 Molema Tel: 6805421 Fax: 6806041	<b>Regional Manager*</b> Private Bag 006 Kang Tel: 6517248 Fax: 6217248
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*bridging the education gap*



**ADDENDUM 5 Ethical clearance certificate**

  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

**CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE**

**DEGREE AND PROJECT**

**CLEARANCE NUMBER :**

EM/06/11/03

PhD Education Management and Policy Studies  
Learning support: perceptions and experiences of distance learners  
from marginalised communities in Botswana

**INVESTIGATOR(S)**

Godson Gatsha - 25357272

**DEPARTMENT**

Education Management and Policy Studies

**DATE CONSIDERED**

01 December 2006

**DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE**

APPROVED

Please note:

*For Masters applications, ethical clearance is valid for 2 years*

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

**ACTING CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS  
COMMITTEE**

Dr SE Bester



**DATE**

1 December 2006

**CC**

Mrs Jeannie Beukes  
Dr Rinelle Evans

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

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

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.

**ADDENDUM 6      Consent letter for participants**

**Learning support: perceptions and experiences of remote distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana**

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in a research project aimed at assessing learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and confidential. You will not be asked to reveal any information that will allow your identity to be established, unless you are willing to be contacted for individual follow up interviews. Should you declare yourself willing to participate in an individual interview, confidentiality will be guaranteed and you may decide to withdraw at any stage should you wish not to continue with an interview.

Your role in the research process will involve responding to a questionnaire and to follow-up interview questions. You may also be asked to keep a journal for a certain period in which you will record your feelings, impressions and experiences about learning support interventions made by the College.

The results of this study will be used to generate new ideas on learning support and to improve the delivery of learning support. The study will also contribute towards my PhD qualification.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign this letter as a declaration of your consent, i.e. that you participate in this project willingly and that you understand that you may withdraw from the research project at any time. Participation in this phase of the project does not obligate you to participate in follow up individual interviews or journal keeping, however, should you decide to participate in follow-up interviews or journal keeping your participation is still voluntary and you may withdraw at anytime. Under no circumstances will the identity of journal or interview participants be made known to the College authorities or any other person who has power over you.

Participant's signature.....Date.....

Researcher's signature.....Date.....

Yours sincerely

Godson Gatsha

**PhD Candidate**

Cell: +267 72163697 e-mail: [godsongatsha@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:godsongatsha@yahoo.co.uk)





**ADDENDUM 7 Questionnaire**

Questionnaire for Distance Learners

<b>FOR OFFICE USE</b>				
Learner's number	V1	<table border="1" style="display: inline-table; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px;"></td> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px;"></td> </tr> </table> 1-2		

I am trying to establish learners' perceptions and experiences of learning support

Please provide your responses to all questions in both Section A and B below.

<b>SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA</b>							
<b>Instruction - Section A:</b>							
Please read each question carefully and mark your response with a cross (x) in the box below.							
1	Are you male or female?	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">F</td> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">1</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">M</td> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">2</td> </tr> </table>	F	1	M	2	V3
F	1						
M	2						
			<input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>				
2	How old will you be on 31 March 2007?		V4				
			<input style="width: 30px; height: 20px;" type="text"/>				
3	Where do you live?		V5				
	* Kang	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">1</td> </tr> </table>	1				
1							
	* New Xade	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">2</td> </tr> </table>	2				
2							
	* D'Kar	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">3</td> </tr> </table>	3				
3							
	* Inalegolo	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">4</td> </tr> </table>	4				
4							
4	What language do you speak to your parent or at home?		V6				
	* Setswana	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px; height: 20px; text-align: center;">1</td> </tr> </table>	1				
1							



* Sesarwa	2
* Sekgalagadi	3
* Afrikaans	4
* English	5
* Other (specify):	6

5	How far do you have to travel to the centre?	km	V7	<input type="text"/>
---	--	----	----	----------------------

**SECTION B: Perceptions and experiences in various modes of support**

1 How satisfied were you with the different types of learning support? Put a cross (x) in the appropriate box in the left hand column

	very satisfied	satisfied	dissatisfied	very dissatisfied		
* Orientation / induction workshop	1	2	3	4	V8	<input type="text"/>
* Group tutorials by tutor(s)	1	2	3	4	V9	<input type="text"/>
* Individual help by tutor(s)	1	2	3	4	V10	<input type="text"/>
* Tutorial letters					V11	<input type="text"/>
* Motivational workshops / seminars	1	2	3	4	V12	<input type="text"/>
* Assignment feedback / comments	1	2	3	4	V13	<input type="text"/>
* Mock examination	1	2	3	4	V14	<input type="text"/>
* Weekend tutorials	1	2	3	4	V15	<input type="text"/>



* Study skills	1	2	3	4	V16	
* Distance Education radio programme	1	2	3	4	V17	

Answer the questions below by writing a few sentences in the space provided

2	What is your understanding of learning support?	V18	
		v19	
		V20	
<hr/> <hr/>			
3	What would help you perform well in your studies?	V21	
		V22	
		V23	
<hr/> <hr/>			

4	Why did you enroll for BGCSE?	V24	
		V25	
		V26	
<hr/> <hr/>			
5	What do you do for a living?	V27	
		V28	
		V29	
<hr/> <hr/>			

**THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING**



## **ADDENDUM 8      Interview guide**

1. Why are you studying through distance learning?
2. What are the challenges you find in distance learning?
3. What is your opinion of the quality of learning support you get?
4. How has learning support helped you in your performance e.g. in assignments, mock examinations, final examinations?
5. What help did you expect from your distance education provider?
6. Would you like to talk about any other learning support you experienced?



**ADDENDUM 9 Study leave letter**

Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning



**BOCODOL**  
Private Bag BO 187  
Bontleng  
Gaborone  
BOTSWANA  
Bontleng

Tel: +267 3181470  
Fax: +267 3181473

*Reference No.:* DOL/PP 179 I(113)

*Date:* 12<sup>th</sup> February 2007

Mr. Godson Gatsha  
Kang Regional Office  
Kang

Dear Mr. Gatsha,

**EXTENDED STUDY LEAVE**

Your letter dated 9<sup>th</sup> November 2006 passed to me by Deputy Director – Learner Support on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2007 refers.

You are granted an extended study leave equivalent to three months from March 1<sup>st</sup> to May 31<sup>st</sup> 2007 in order that you can finish field work for your PhD studies.

Good luck.

Yours Sincerely

  
D.R. Tshepo (EdD)  
Director

Commonwealth of Learning Award of Excellence Winner - 2006

**Regional Offices -**

Regional Manager Private Bag 389 Bontleng Tel: 3003017 Fax: 3550018	BOCODOL Private Bag 985 Palapye Tel: 6934024 Fax: 4960143	BOCODOL Private Bag 132 Francistown Tel: 2418382 Fax: 2474094	BOCODOL Private Bag 8994 Maseru Tel: 6805021 Fax: 4800541	Regional Manager Private Bag 994 Kang Tel: 4517268 Fax: 451724
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**bridging the educational gap**

**ADDENDUM 10      Learner Charter**



**BOCODOL LEARNER CHARTER**

**We at BOCODOL will provide the following services to our learners:**

- ❑ **Information**  
Adequate and up-to-date information on all programmes will be made available at all community study centres, regional offices and headquarters. This information will be available by post, telephone, and e-mail and through arrangements with partner organisations. This information will cover any aspect that is of relevance to our learners including information on life skills, careers and HIV/AIDS.
- ❑ **Enrolment**  
Easier enrolment procedures at local study centres to address local needs and facilitate follow-up communication with regional centres.
- ❑ **Counselling**  
Guidance and counselling will be provided by various means including face-to-face, telephone, post, radio and e-mail at the local study centres and regional offices. An appropriate referral service will be established at Headquarters and instituted with relevant organisations.
- ❑ **Materials and media**  
High quality, interactive and up-to-date materials and media will be provided for each programme and delivered to the learners within the shortest time possible
- ❑ **Face-to-face**  
Regular face-to-face contact with qualified and dedicated tutors will be provided at local study centres sited at strategic central places for easy access. This will include regional weekend and vacation courses where appropriate and suitable alternative methods of support for remote areas.
- ❑ **Assignments**  
Learner assignments will be marked and returned within the shortest time possible and will include detailed feedback and helpful comments for each learner.
- ❑ **Examinations**  
Adequate and up-to-date information on registration centres, examination centres, timetables and results will be available at study centres. Mock examinations will be set and administered at community study centres to help learners prepare for final examinations.



## **ADDENDUM 11      Sample of journal entries**

**Thursday 01/02/2007**

### **Monday**

Mathematics lesson, I really enjoyed MATHS like never before. I like my tutor for MATHS so much. I do believe MATHS is a difficult subject and it needs someone like Mr. .... who is active, a bit joker, so that we can not get bored. I like the way he teach mathematics, the way he express it, simplify it for us to understand it. The lesson was interesting and enjoyable the way he normally does challenging the class with MATHS on the board. I always feel good in a MATHS lesson though it used to give me stress and I hated MATHS from my previous school. I told people I will never do MATHS in my life but I'm surprised, I'm getting to enjoy it.

### **Tuesday**

English lesson, my tutor for English is Ms ----. I do appreciate her; she is friendly, kind and willing to share information with us. She is always punctual and willing to assist us whenever possible. She even encourage us to practice English in class to develop our communication skills. Asks us where we got problem in English in order for her to know where we need help. The lesson was interesting and enjoyable and it gave me hope since I told myself English is a tough subject in my life. The tutor is always coming prepared for her lesson and make sure to find our problems concerning the subject and address them or find a way of solving it.

### **Thursday**

HSB, the lesson was as usual; people came prepared and were participating, asking questions for them to understand. Even though the tutor was late, we started discussing some of the questions from the past papers. It showed me that people really know what they were there for, eager to learn. When the tutor came, everything was automatic. The lesson was fine, no noise, people were serious with what they came for.

### **Weekend course**

We had a weekend course and the lessons were good and rewarding. Both teachers came on time and prepared to share what they got for us. We did not encounter any problems; everything was organized though not everyone attended the courses.



**ADDENDUM 12 Sample of assignment submission figures**

**September 2005: BGCSE Assignment Submission**

Subject	ENGLISH	MATHS	SETSWANA	HSB
Assignments submitted	62	99	44	79

**May 2006: BGCSE Assignment Submission**

Subject	ENGLISH	MATHS	SETSWANA	HSB
Assignments submitted	36	85	22	26

**June 2006: BGCSE Assignment Submission**

Subject	ENGLISH	MATHS	SETSWANA	HSB
Assignments submitted	70	107	21	37

**January to December 2006: BGCSE Assignment Submission**

Subject	ENGLISH	MATHS	SETSWANA	HSB
Assignments submitted	290	446	234	234



**ADDENDUM 13      Consent letters of former learners**

Xukuri Dako  
P.O. Box 500  
Ghanzi  
Botswana  
27<sup>th</sup> July 2009

To whom it may concern

I, Xukuri Dako have given Mr. Godson Gaesha permission to use my profile as part of evidence for his PhD Thesis. I have known him when he was Regional Manager for BOCODOL Kang Regional Centre which enrolled us at D'Kar and provided learner support services. He appointed Ms Coby of the Nharo Language Project as the Coordinator of the learning satellite at D'Kar where I enrolled to upgrade my BGCSE which I successfully completed as a result of our coordinator who did her best to ensure tutors came for weekend tutorials and provide feedback on our assignments.

In 2007 I traveled to Kang for regional learner representative council meeting and I was elected President of the Regional Learner representative council and had the privilege to encourage other learners to take distance education seriously at that meeting after being elected and later during the Regional Open and Prize-Giving Day where the Minister of Agriculture and MP for my area was a guest speaker. I vividly recall praising BOCODOL for reaching us in the remote settlements and calling upon BOCODOL to improve learner support services, particularly face-to-face tutorials conducted by tutors from senior secondary schools, who teach BGCSE rather than tutors from Junior Secondary Schools who teach junior certificate subjects.

I am grateful for the privilege and opportunity I had to upgrade, otherwise there were no other options if BOCODOL had not reached us at D'Kar. I completed BGCSE with BOCODOL and I am at Gaborone Institute of Professional Studies (GIPS) pursuing a Diploma Business Management and I am the current President of the Student Representative Council (SRC) at GIPS.

Learning at BOCODOL was challenging but I also found it enjoyable. I learnt to be independent and responsible. I made lots of friends. My tutors and regional distance education advisors were encouraging and they really empowered us. What really motivated me was the support from the regional office in terms of study materials, tutorials and weekend courses. I don't regret the option of joining the BOCODOL to upgrade my BGCSE.

My other BOCODOL colleagues are also studying at other institutions of higher learning for example a close friend of mine from New Xade settlement, is at University of Botswana, after graduating at BOCODOL. I am grateful to BOCODOL for providing us with opportunities for upgrading otherwise we would not be pursuing further studies. For further information I can be contacted at my email: [dxukuri@yahoo.com](mailto:dxukuri@yahoo.com)

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

Xukuri Dako



Justice Molefe  
P O Box 183  
Digawana  
Botswana  
29 July 2009

**TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

This letter serves a purpose of Justice Oteng Molefe granting Mr Godson Gatsha to use my profile as part of evidence for his PhD Thesis. He enrolled us as DE learners whilst I was an inmate at Tshane State Prison. We attended our tutorials over weekends at Kang Learning Centre after he negotiated with Tshane State Prison authorities and we were able to have all the necessary support services offered. I, in particular enrolled as a BGCSE beginner and had sat for the first 4 subjects 2005 and the other 4 subjects in 2008 and I then enrolled for Diploma in Business Management while serving my sentence at Kang BOCODOL Regional Centre. Though things were a bit difficult in prison (in particular Law on the do's and don't's) Mr Gatsha negotiated his way with authorities in order to reach us to render academic counselling whenever we could not get to Kang Learning Centre. I was able to participate in Open and Prize-Giving days in 2005 where I directed the proceedings as the Master of Ceremony, and I received an award for being the 2005 best BGCSE student in English after I had submitted all the 6 assignments and attained the highest average score. This highly motivated me as I went on to get a 'B' grade in both English and Human and Social Biology and the rest got 'Cs'. I also directed the theatre group and traditional Sesarwa dancing troupe which entertained guests during the Open and Prize-Giving days in 2005 and 2007. The same dancing troupe was organised by Mr Gatsha to entertain guests during the official opening of BOCODOL Headquarters in 2005 and I performed to the best of my ability in both theatre and traditional dance. All this made me feel part and parcel of BOCODOL.

I did finish my sentence and still came to him in Gaborone where he is currently stationed and asked for his advice on personal and academic fields. Academically he advised me to further my studies with either University of Botswana or Limpopo University of which I am currently doing my second year for an Associate Degree in Multi-Media and Software engineering. To me Mr Gatsha is a role model, father figure and friend. For clarity and further information my contacts are as follows:

e-mail : [jmolefe@yahoo.com](mailto:jmolefe@yahoo.com)

cell no. : 74394959

Thank you.

Yours faithfully

  
**JUSTICE OTENG MOLEFE**



**ADDENDUM 14 Photographs of learners and tutors**



Xukuri Dako a former learner at BOCODOL D'Kar Learning satellite centre now at  
Gaborone Institute of Professional Studies (GIPS) 2009





Justice Molefe a former learner a Kang Learning Centre now at Limkokwing



Regional Manager with learner at Inalegolo





Handicraft done by the Basarwa at D'Kar



Handicraft done by the Basarwa at D'Kar



The Basarwa children at Kuru Dance Festival, 2006



Learners at D'Kar during a weekend tutorial May 2007



Award winners at during the 2006 Prize-giving ceremony





A tutorial session in progress at Kang learning centre



D'Kar learners group photo during a weekend tutorial May 2007



Prizes for learners for 2007 Award prize-giving ceremony



Tutor training in session at Kang, January 2007



Learners at D'Kar with Director: Learner Support March 2007



Community leaders during a Kang Regional an Open Day September 2006





BOCODOL Kang entertaining guests 2005

## **ADDENDUM 15     A reflection on the research journey**

I first undertook this journey in January 2005 after two years of working amongst the deeply marginalised communities as a Regional Manager for the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL). I was influenced by a practical need rather than a theoretical need. However, the issue of theory of learning support for distance learners from marginalised communities was triggered during the interview for my PhD Education Policy studies admission. The then Dean of Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria asked me a question I considered by then to be tricky, that is: *What is your intellectual puzzle for your intended study?* I vividly recall fumbling trying to give an answer on a question I did not understand. I wondered why he asked me such a challenging question when I had clearly told him that I was from the Kalahari Desert of Botswana, as if that was meant to admit me to PhD studies without subjecting me to an interview because I thought I was from a disadvantaged context. However, the interview helped me to reframe my motivation of undertaking the PhD study and to realise the importance of theoretical frameworks in the generation of knowledge and underpinning educational practice.

Combining work, family, study and other social commitments was a great challenge in my PhD academic journey. Apparently, my experience as a distance learner stretches from 1985 when I first registered for a BA degree with the University of South Africa (UNISA), which I followed with a Higher Education Diploma and a BEd still with UNISA. My other qualifications, MEd and Diploma in Accounting and Business studies were undertaken through part-time study with the University of Botswana. I thus fully understand what distance learners in this study went through and experienced. Undertaking my PhD studies in the same context with the research participants for this study was an interesting venture. I also felt marginalised like the distance learners in this study. I compared my circumstances to my PhD class of which most of them were full-time students and were fully sponsored. I was self-sponsored and was delighted when the university offered me funds for my research after I had successfully defended my research proposal. However out there alone and 950 km from the University, with little resources to aid my PhD studies, feelings of being marginalised became more of a reality than an illusion. The unreliable internet was a nightmare as it was often down week after week. I accessed very supportive e-mails from my supervisor, several of them, at Gaborone, 450 km away from where I was stationed. If it were not for the support, empathy and compassion of a dedicated mentor and teacher, Rinelle Evans, who even visited me whilst working as regional manager in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana, the probability is that I would have been part of the statistics that

dropped out of the 2005 PhD class. It was never easy given the challenges of poor telephone communication and electricity cuts or load shedding. Rinelle's visit, though brief, highly motivated me and enabled my family to realise that the journey I had started was a very serious one, for *'umulungu'* would not just visit if what I was in was not such a serious and important business. Her visit revived the support that my family had temporarily withdrawn on the basis that I was no longer giving them quality time each time I visited them in Gaborone and concentrated on my search for journal articles at internet shops. I am grateful for Rinelle's support throughout this journey. I have been able to make a contribution by documenting the perceptions and experiences of distance learners from marginalised communities whose perspectives on learning support had never been known before. I have also been able to employ Holmberg's theory (2003) and I thus can confirm that the principles of learning at a distance as he postulated are indeed valid. The principles are applicable even in an underdeveloped context as long as the necessary steps are taken to promote dialogue through learning conversations. I personally saw the principles and felt them when Rinelle engaged me during the course of my great journey. My PhD training has indeed changed me. I am now able to appreciate the multiple realities that exist out there. It has helped me publish in journals even before completing and it also enabled me to undertake an international consultancy with Commonwealth Secretariat on Flexible Education for nomads and marginalised communities successfully and with confidence. It also motivated me to present at several international conferences and realise my potential as I contributed in the distance education discourse.

Towards the end of the journey a reflection on the thesis topic and the data that had been collected necessitated a change of topic to what it is now, Learning Support: perceptions and experiences of remote distance learners from marginalised communities in Botswana.