ANDRAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ENHANCING LEARNER SUPPORT PROVISION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL): A case of the Zimbabwe Open University

BY

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the extent to which knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics of adult learners could be used to enhance the design of effective learner support provision (LSP) in Open and Distance Learning (ODL), with the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as a case of analysis. The study used an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm that sought to build a holistic picture of lived experiences of the participants with the phenomenon of LSP in ODL. The researcher purposively selected ten participants comprising six returning 4th year undergraduate learners, two full time academic lecturers and two administrative members of staff drawn from Regional Campus 1 of the ZOU to provide data to the study. In addition, two focus groups, one drawn from Regional Campus 2 and the other one from Regional Campus 3 of the same University were purposively and conveniently selected to complement the sample. A triangulation of data generation techniques that comprised observation, unstructured in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis was used to solicit data from the participants. In the findings, learners expected the ZOU service providers to acknowledge and consider the adult learners’ demographic characteristics as well as their vast experiences as a basis for informing and enhancing the effective provision of LSS. The study, therefore, concluded that unless adult education ODL institutions acknowledge who adult learners are, what they want and what their needs are, LSP in ODL will continue to experience deficiencies that militate against achievement of learners’ educational goals. To this end, the study recommended that ODL institutions, the ZOU in particular, should be guided by a learner support framework (LSF) that places the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics of learners as central and as a starting point towards enhancing LSP.
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Finally, I give glory to the Almighty God. Thank you Jesus for your endless love for me.
DEDICATION

To my mother Jenet Therersa Chadamoyo. Mom, I wish you could once again open your eyes and see me.
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RC2  Regional Campus 2
RC3  Regional Campus 3
SRC  Student Representative Council
TDT  Transactional Distance Theory
UCD  University College Dublin
UK   United Kingdom
UNAM University of Namibia
UNISA University of South Africa
US   United States of America
UUM  University Utara Malaysia
ZOU  Zimbabwe Open University
1. Background to the Problem

The area of learner support provision (LSP) has received growing attention across the globe for the past decade (Ogidan, 2010) due to many Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions failing to provide appropriate and adequate learner support services (LSS) to the adult population studying in ODL contexts (Makina, 2008; Mbukusa, 2009; Baloyi, 2014). To this end, many adult learners are facing challenges in completing their education programmes as evidenced by a manifestation of symptoms that include high attrition rates and low learner motivation, resulting in the decline of student enrolments in many ODL institutions. The ZOU, the sampled ODL institution for this study, has not been spared.

The context of ODL is such that adult learners should be able to access educational resources and services whilst separated from the institution in time or space or both (COL, 2000; UNISA, 2008; Chandrawati, 2015) thus, fostering independent learning through provision of learner support LSS (Tait, 2000), mediated by various information communication technologies (ICT) and interactive dialogue (Holmberg, 2007; Moore, 2007). Given this unique situation, however, exacerbated by changes in demographic variables of most adult populations (Wallace, 2007) and the countries’ constraints in economic development (Cercone, 2008), many ODL institutions in both developed and developing countries, the ZOU included, are overwhelmed with challenges (Baloyi,
2014) and are struggling to provide adequate and appropriate LSS that best meet the needs of these adult learners (Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006).

The ZOU was inaugurated as a full-fledged ODL institution in 1999 through an Act of parliament (Kurasha, 2003; ZOU Act Chapter 25-20, 2010). The mandate and main goal of the ZOU was to empower adult learners through access to and provision of distance university education because these adults had been disadvantaged and denied access for many years dating back to colonial days (Kurasha, 2003; Mafa and Tarusikirwa, 2013). Spurred by the ‘Education for All’ (EFA) policy promulgated by the Zimbabwean government soon after independence in 1980, the ZOU grew over the years to become one of the largest state universities in the country with enrolment figures reaching as high as 20000 students between 2005-2007 (Bishau and Samkange, 2015). However, since 2007, the ZOU has not been spared from the effects of the country’s economic meltdown engendered then by the hyperinflation that eroded the value of the Zimbabwean dollar. These economic pressures impacted on the institution and the general populace, resulting in the University experiencing dwindling teaching and learning materials production. This consequently led most adult learners to find it difficult to raise fees and yet others finding independent learning frustrating and difficult (Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006).

In addition to such challenges, the ZOU has been experiencing a manifestation of symptoms indicative of a downward trend in growth. Amongst these symptoms are a
high attrition rate, low student retention rate, low student motivation, resulting in the
decline of enrolment figures reaching their lowest ebb of about 10000 learners on
average between 2012 and 2013 (Bishau and Samkange, 2015). Confirming this trend in
the decline of enrolments, Bishau and Samkange (2015:94), while investigating on
causes of low learner enrolment in the ZOU, comment that: “There has been a decline in
enrolments over the past five years.” The same trend was experienced in other countries.
Butcher and Rose-Adams (2015) cite Universities UK (2013) which also exposes a steep
drop in enrolments in Wales and England, with that of Wales falling below 24% over
the period 2007-2011 and that of England declining by 40% between 2010-2011 and
2012-2013 respectively.

To this end and out of all the intervention strategies that can be arrayed to reverse such
downward trend in growth, literature supports that the provision of adequate and
effective LSS to adult learners situated in the context of ODL, is found critical and
paramount (McLoughlin, 2002; Tait, 2002; Usun, 2004). In fact, Tait and Mills (2003:1)
regard LSP as “a theme of core importance to ODL.” To further justify its importance,
Holmberg, Shelly and White (2005:100) cite Simpson (2002) who argues that LS is “a
cost-effective way of retaining learners as well as an essential humanising element of any
distance learning system.”

In broader terms, LS is a term used in ODL to describe a full range of activities
developed to help learners meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge
requisite to course and career success (Brindley and Paul, 2004). Usun (2004) posits that the term ‘learner support’ simply means all the resources that the learners can access and all the activities that learners can undertake in order to carry out a learning process. As such, Tait (2000) and Usun (2004) describe LSP as all those elements that include administrative, academic, as well as guidance and counselling services that take cognisance of the learner’s cohort of characteristics (Tait, 2000). For this reason, the ZOU, since its inception in 1999, has adopted a number of distance education models and frameworks that attempt to explain how LSS should be provided in ODL contexts. Two such models found relevant by this study are presented in Holmberg’s (1983) theory of didactic conversation and Moore’s (1990) theory of transactional distance, both of which conceptualise DE as mediation of interactive activities between the learner and the institution. During the same period when distance education contexts were evolving, more dynamic LS models also came into play. The following paragraph gives a description of such kinds of LS models drawn from literature.

Brindley’s (1995) model focuses on the development of a LS system that is more responsive to the learner’s needs, contributing to the learner’s persistence and success. Tait’s (2000) model identifies three primary functions for LSS in ODL, which take cognisance of the cognitive, affective and systemic factors, all of which work together to create an environment where the learners feel at home, where they feel valued, and which they find manageable. Simpson (2002) moves away from the systems approach, instead, providing a typology of LSS categorised by activity rather than by specific personnel or department. Thorpe’s (2003) model addresses the need to consider all elements capable
of responding to a lone learner or group of learners before, during and after the learning process.

Whilst these models are generic LSS, the ZOU has also adopted information from the typical, operational ODL institutions. Typical examples of ODL institutions from which the ZOU borrows some parallels are the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Open University United Kingdom (OUUK), among others. The central LS feature characterising these institutions is the provision of interactive activities that mediate between the learner and the university alongside the contact with a personal tutor who provides face-to-face academic guidance and counselling (Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2003). This is very relevant to the current LS structure at the ZOU. ZOU employs a student advisor whose role is to provide face-to-face academic guidance and counselling, in addition to that given by the programme coordinators and by other administrative staff (Chadamoyo, 2014). Furthermore, the OUUK and UNISA provide LS tutorial services through the Regional Campuses that are supported by a network of District Learning Centres (DLC’s) situated away from the Regional Campuses (Tait, 2002). The reason is to take education close to the learners who in turn will also have a feeling of being close to their university. The ZOU takes a leaf out of the practices of the two universities and from other similar institutions; hence, it has established a Regional Campus in each of the ten provinces of Zimbabwe (plus the Virtual Region) with each Regional Campus also supported by a network of DLC’s.
Despite ODL institutions applying and implementing many of these ODL theories and LS frameworks or models for the past decade, learner and institutional related problems have persisted unabated (Berger and Lyons, 2005; Ali and Leeds, 2009; Burholder, 2012). This is manifested through symptoms of low learner motivation, low learner retention, high learner attrition, and decreasing enrolments, issues of which the current institutions of ODL, the ZOU included, are experiencing. What this shows is that the current LSS are somehow failing to address issues affecting both learners and institutions in ODL. This means that they have deficiencies and inadequacies with serious implications on adult education (specifically on how adults learn) in ODL. Whilst these symptoms could have ignited the process of enquiry in this study, they were not the focus of the investigation. It was the researcher’s contention, as Smith (2002) comments that the solution to problems does not lie in their symptoms but in the people’s ideologies and philosophies. Indeed, this study supports this stance and holds the view that the causes (of any problems) lie in the mental and physical world of those that experience them, hence, investigating adult learner views and institutional experiences of LSP in ODL, was found appropriate. Meanwhile, the deficiencies of the current provision of LSS that fail to match adult learner needs in some ODL institutions across the globe have been widely documented by many authors in literature and such examples are cited in the following paragraphs.

Perraton and Lentell (2004) express the view that since the beginning of ODL that dates back to colonial days for many African countries, the provision of LS has still not been adequately addressed. Worse still, as argued by Levy and Beaulieu (2003), none of the
current LS models offer evidence of any empirical study on the perceptions and experiences of LS for distance adult learners from marginalised communities in underdeveloped contexts. Bridges (2008), reporting findings on LSS based on the Beans Project Outcomes under the auspices of the American Council on Education, also observes that adult learners did not feel engaged with the university, and often expressed frustration about having to visit different offices across campus to attend to their needs, and that negatively influenced their decisions to withdraw.

Furthermore, a number of studies, addressing issues pertaining to LSP in ODL, particularly in some African countries, were carried out. In Uganda, findings on a study by Bbuye (2006) showed that support for distance learners was not sufficient in universities, and although it involved tutoring and study centre activities, interactive teaching and learning was absent. Dzimbo (2001), investigating LS systems at Makerere University also in Uganda, found out that LSP was not yet developed since distance learners at this university were supported primarily through face-to-face sessions and print–based materials.

In South Africa, SAIDE (2003), reporting about UNISA, stated that there was inadequate learner support which was exacerbated by the lack of a coordinated regional network of learning centres. A bigger alarm that might even cause some panic was sounded by Ipaye (2007) of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), who exclaimed that even in developed countries, where learner support facilities are relatively more available and
accessible; the attrition rate still remains high. In recent years, Mbukusa (2009) of the University of Namibia (UNAM) investigating aspects of LSP to distance learners situated in some rural parts of Namibia, identified a number of LS barriers that militate against effective provision of LSS. To this effect, Mbukusa (2009) identified lack of, or inadequate provision of LSS as the main barrier that is likely to affect adult learners’ academic progress.

In Zimbabwe, some research on LS were carried out, among them those of Kangai, Rupande and Rugonye (2011), Mapolisa (2012) as well as Chadamoyo and Dumbu (2014), all of them pointing to some loopholes characterising the current practices in LSP in ODL that stifle efforts by learners and institutions to achieve academic and institutional success respectively. In the same vein, a survey by Chadamoyo and Ngwarai (2012) found out that learners studying with ZOU were delighted by a number of LSS provided by the university. Among these services were the use of various supplementary reading and teaching resources such as the course modules, the computer disks, the internet services and access to web sites. However, these developments had their own challenges related to cost, availability, accessibility, affordability and connectivity to electricity and internet networking that tended to widen the distance between the adult learners and the attainment of educational goals (Chabaya, Chadamoyo and Chiome, 2011).
Thus, given the dilemmas and controversies characterising the field of LSP in ODL, it is the contention of the present study that there is need to extend and improve the current LS practices and frameworks so that they embrace and integrate a number of factors that explain how adults learn and that respond to their divergent needs to which adult educators must respond (Hansman, 2001). What comes close to this line of thinking is a LSF presented by Tait (2000). Tait (2000) presents a framework for the planning and management of LS which includes an examination of who learners are, what their needs are, how their needs can be met, how services will be managed, how much the services will cost, and how the effectiveness of the support services will be evaluated. The present study intends to extend Tait’s (2000) model but seeks to follow a line of thought that focuses more on acknowledging adult learner needs and characteristics as important elements in enhancing the provision of LSS in ODL. Analysing adult learner needs and characteristics and finding out how these should influence the way LSS should be provided and consequently how adults learn, are embraced in what Knowles (1980) refers to as ‘andragogy’ which means ‘the art and science of helping adults learn.’

Informed by andragogical philosophy, Brindley, Walti and Zawacki -Richter (2008) argue that ODL institutions should be able to create conditions for adult teaching and learning that acknowledge the use of interactive methodologies which respond to learners’ needs and characteristics within various institutional contexts. Drawing from this premise, a number of andragogical implications are outlined in the paragraph below.
In Knowles’ (1980) opinion, the best andragogical experiences are cooperative, and guided interactions between the tutor and the learner with many available LS resources provided. Jung (2009) opines that instructors should play a facilitator role and promote various interactive activities that focus more on adult learners’ needs, experiences and ideas and less on the context itself. For this reason, the institutions’ roles would be to provide LSS that are responsive to adult learner needs and experiences. Henschke (2009) adds that an andragogical learning situation should be alive with meetings of small groups, planning committees, learning-teaching teams, consultation groups, project task forces, and all these sharing responsibility for helping one another learn and plan their own learning.

Given these convictions, the study argued that it was only by considering learners’ needs and their perceptions about how they learn (andragogy), as a point of departure, that an effective LSF could be enhanced. Furthermore, by analysing the debates and arguments embroiled in literature on LSP in ODL, the study investigated andragogical principles and implications considered useful towards informing the enhancement of a more holistic and a more comprehensive LSF for adult learners in ODL, more so for those found in less developed ODL environments that the ZOU lends itself.

By proposing this holistic and in-depth approach to LSP in ODL institutions, the study did not claim to provide a panacea to all LS related problems affecting the adult learners and ODL institutions. Instead, it argued that any plan for LSP, that acknowledges the
principles of andragogy as a starting point, is likely to enhance the development of a more effective LS system that heightens the attainment of learners’ academic and career success. These are the issues and educational goals that many ODL institutions across the globe, are struggling to accomplish (Burholder, 2012).

1.2 Statement of the Problem
The provision of effective LSS has been considered as a critical component in the teaching and learning of adult learners in ODL. Apparently, the current provision of LSS has failed to address issues affecting both learners and ODL institutions as evidenced by escalating symptoms of low learner motivation, low retention, high attrition and decreasing enrolments, which are problems characterising most ODL institutions across the globe, the ZOU included. The present study, therefore, focused on how best ODL institutions could design and develop more effective LSF that are likely to enhance the provision of LSS by considering andragogical needs and characteristics as a starting point. Previous research on LSP found in literature appears to have focused more on the production of teaching and learning materials leaving out the provision of the LSS not fully explored. Thus, based on learners’ and staff perceptions about LS lived experiences, the study aimed to investigate how the knowledge of andragogical principles and implications could enhance the provision of LSS in ODL institutions with the ZOU as a case study.

1.3 Purpose of the Study
The purpose of the study was to seek a basic understanding of the needs and characteristics of adult learners so as to get insights into the design of a more effective LSP in ODL. Knowledge about who the adult learners are and their experiences in LSP,
would act as a guide towards the development and enhancement of a more informed LSF that is likely to satisfy adult learner needs and enhance the achievement of their educational goals.

1.4 Research Questions
The main problem that this study sought to address was: *How can the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics enhance the provision of LSS in ODL?*

1.4.1 Sub-questions
The main research problem (stated in 1.4 above) was supported by the following sub-problems.

1. How do learners describe their own demographic characteristics as factors affecting LSP in ODL?

2. How are learners experiencing learner support services currently provided in ODL?

3. How do learners describe what they want regarding learner support provision in ODL?

4. How do learners describe andragogical strategies they consider most appropriate for academic success in ODL?

5. To what extent can an ODL institution provide a learner support framework that meets adult learner needs and characteristics in ODL?
1.5 Significance of the Study

The study is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, the researcher believes that the voices of ODL learners need to be heard in order to offer insights on the needs of adult learners to both policy makers and distance education providers. Adult learners may benefit in the sense that they will be given opportunities to say what they think constitute LSS that are likely to maximise their teaching and learning. Matching learners’ needs and the learner support provided ensures learners’ satisfaction that enhances retention and academic success.

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

On the whole, discussions on some different adult educational philosophies that permeate through this study might help the readers to reflect upon their own educational philosophies on LSP in light of what they believe should be done in ODL and what they are actually doing.
1.6 Delimitation of the Study
The study focused on how best LSS could be provided to distance education learners studying in ODL contexts. Informed by andragogical philosophy, the study drew information based on learners’ perceptions on LSS provided at three conveniently selected Regional Campuses of the ZOU, code named Regional Campuses 1, 2 and 3, respectively. The three campuses were preferred because of their geographical locations. Regional Campus 1 (RC1), at which the researcher works as a Senior Student Advisor is centrally positioned between Regional Campus 2 (RC2) and Regional Campus 3 (RC3) and this position would facilitate travelling arrangements during data generation. The study used an interpretivist paradigm whereby a qualitative case study method guided the generation and analysis of data leading to the results of the study.

Participants were fourth year undergraduate ZOU learners as well as staff drawn from the three identified Regional Campuses and across faculties. To provide maximum variation of learners’ characteristics, the study also used two focus groups drawn from Regional Campuses 2 and 3, respectively. Having spent at least three years with the university, returning fourth year undergraduate learners were assumed to be information-rich as well as having wide experiences of how LSS were provided at the ZOU. A purposive cohort of two full time ZOU tutors or programme coordinators and two administrative staff situated at RC1 acted as ZOU senior management representatives in reflecting upon the nature of LSS provided at the ZOU.
1.7 Limitations of the Study
The culture of adult learners sometimes became complex to the extent that it was not clear whether or not the forms of data generation used were able to capture every nuance of the situation. Moreover, some participants were still apprehensive when they were requested to have their voices tape recorded. To minimise this risk, the researcher employed a variety of qualitative triangulation methods to ensure that a wide description of participants’ experiences of LSP in ODL was captured.

Another threat to this study was compromised authenticity and genuineness of the data generated. Participants, in particular members of staff of the ZOU, could not have been at liberty to disclose all the information about LSP as requested. This was because they felt uncomfortable with being involved in a study that questioned their ability and capacity to provide LS to learners of the very institution they were employed to serve. To restore confidence of the participants, the researcher reassured the participants that the information they were disclosing was confidential and meant for research purposes only and that their anonymity was protected.

The researcher’s presence, coupled with personal bias during data gathering in qualitative research is often unavoidable. That was the case in this study. To minimise personal bias, the researcher diarised or recorded his thoughts, feelings and emotions when developing field notes. Awareness of his behaviour and actions was meant to guard against bias during interpretation of the generated data. Chan, Fung and Chien (2013) talk of ‘bracketing’ meaning the researcher must ‘bracket’ his/her own preconceptions as he/she enters into the participant’s life world and uses the self as an experiencing interpreter.
Finally, this study suffered from a common criticism of a case study method which Gao (2012) refers to as having a dependency on a case exploration that makes it difficult to reach a generalising conclusion. In this case, the researcher circumvented this problem by having an analytic generalisation (Yin, 2011) based on data drawn from a qualitative small sample from which an in-depth, rich, contextual understanding of the phenomenon was obtained.

1.8 Ethical and Legal Considerations
Glesne (1999) states that ethical considerations are inseparable from the researcher’s everyday interactions with participants and with data generation processes. To this effect, the researcher strove to put measures that met certain ethical and legal considerations. But before enforcing those measures, he took suggestions from Remenyi (2008) that in considering ethical issues, the researcher should take account of the context in which he would be working, the aim of the research and how sensitive the topic would be. In other words, the researcher considered whether the research questions asked were traumatising or not, or making participants uncomfortable or fearful of the consequences, humiliating or painful. In line with these considerations, the researcher put the following measures in place:

First, before conducting the research, the researcher sought permission from the authorities of the ZOU (see Appendices A1 page 321 and A2 page 322) for using learners and staff as participants, and for investigating issues concerned with institutional matters.
Second, this was followed by seeking informed written consent from the participants by explaining clearly the objectives of the research and how they were going to benefit (or taking risks) from participating in the research.

Third, the researcher sought voluntary participation of the participants as well as reassuring them that their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were protected from the public by concealing their identities (through use of pseudo names) as well as informing them about how the data were going to be used and stored.

Finally, the researcher informed participants that they were also free to exercise their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research process without being affected in any way. However, for a detailed discussion of the research methodology and design, the reader is referred to Chapter 3 of this thesis.

1.9 Definition of Special Terms

1 Learner: In this study, the term learner or adult learner is used to refer to all learners (16/18 years and above) who have started carrying social responsibilities in society, for example, voting, marriage, working, and are now engaged in formal education through ODL (Moore and Kearsley, 2005). Moreover, as Brindley, et al., (2008) explain, it is also worth noting that the term ‘learner’ (instead of student) is becoming more commonly used in the distance education literature probably because it implies a more active instrumental role in the learning process than the word student.
2 Learner Support Services: These are defined as all those activities and resources that have been developed by institutions in ODL for the learners in order that they achieve their educational objectives (Tait, 1995; Thorpe, 2000). Brindley (2004) describes LSS as all those elements that range from academic services, for example, tutoring and teaching, through guidance and counselling services to those that are administrative, for example, registration and material distribution.

3 Learner Support Provision: In the context of this study, learner support provision is a comprehensive term that embraces the implementation of an effective learner support framework that involves a complete access and usage by adult learners of the various services, information and communication technologies that facilitate interaction (between educators and learners in the context of ODL) and one that enhances the development of learning skills, knowledge, and attitudes (based on learners’ characteristics and needs) leading to the achievement of learners’ satisfaction, as well as their academic and career success.

4 Open and Distance Education (ODE) and Open and Distance Learning (ODL): In this study, the two terms are used interchangeably, however, with each term used where it best clarifies an issue. ODE refers to a form of education mediated by some form of interactive processes but with the learner and service providers separated from each other by time or space or by both (Bates, 1995; Keegan, 1980). ODL refers to distance learning.
with many factors that restrict adults from accessing university education removed (COL, 2003). Such is the context of the ZOU.

5 Adult Education: A philosophy that explains adult education as activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults (Knowles, 1980; Merriam and Brockett, 2007)

6 Andragogical implications: Having gone through the conceptual definitions of the title of this study, probably the question the reader may ask is “What are andragogical implications?” Maclean and Mohr (1999) answer this question very vividly by stating that implications are what you do with your findings. This means, in this study, the meanings the researcher constructs from his data (findings) with regard the issue of helping adults learn (andragogy), would give readers insights (implications) about how LSS should be provided in a particular way in ODL. For the same reason, the statements that the researcher makes (based on the data generated) about how LS should be provided then become the implications for future LSP in ODL institutions.

7 The Zimbabwe Open University: This is the institution purposively sampled as a case study.

1.10 Organisation of the Thesis
The study is divided into five chapters.
Chapter one is the introduction to the thesis and gives a background to the problem, identifying the statement of the problem followed by research questions, purpose of study, significance of the study, delimitation and limitations of study, and finally ethical and legal considerations conclude the chapter.

Chapter two reviews literature related to the study. The chapter also highlights conceptual and theoretical frameworks; empirical studies carried out and identifies gaps that the study intends to address.

Chapter three discusses the research methodology used and it entails explanations and justification of the research paradigm, method, sample and sampling procedures, data generation instruments, as well as data presentation and analysis and interpretation.

Chapter four presents data that are analysed, interpreted and discussed.

Chapter five concludes the thesis by summarising findings as well as stating conclusions and recommendations derived from data discussions.

1.11 Chapter Summary
The chapter highlighted the background to the problem which culminated into the statement of the problem. This was followed by a brief discussion on the purpose of the
study, the research questions, significance of the study, as well as on ethical and legal considerations. The chapter ended by outlining the definition of key terms. The next chapter focuses on the review of related literature in as far as it relates to the conceptual framework, theoretical framework, selected empirical studies, as well as gaps identified.
CHAPTER II REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction
The previous chapter focused on the background to the problem and the subsequent elaboration of the statement of the problem. This chapter explores the conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning the study. It also reviews empirical studies in LSP carried out across the globe with particular emphasis on those carried out in Sub-Saharan Africa. Along the way, it identifies gaps or shortcomings in literature on LSP that need to be addressed or that require further research.

2.2 Conceptual Framework of the Study

2.2.1. Defining the ODL context
The study is based on the ODL context of which the interrelationships between the institution/tutors, the learner and the mediated LS systems become the focus and, hence warrant re-examination and analysis. Because of the complexity involved in the use of terminology related to ODL vocabulary, several authors who dominated the “traditional distance education field” among them, Holmberg (1989), Moore (1991), Daniel (1996), Garrison (2003), Johnson (2003), Peters (2010), and Birochi and Pozzebon (2011), deliberately researched into the subject and attempted to define terms embraced in ODL. For example, terms such as ‘distance education,’ ‘distance teaching,’ ‘distance learning,’ ‘open and distance education,’ ‘open and distance learning,’ have been variously used but attempts to define these have defied a simple and single definition. Some institutions such as the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), the California
Distance Learning Project (CDLP), the Southern African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE), and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) have also attempted to define the same terms but only did so in as far as these terms were aligned and suited to their contexts.

Drawing from the foregoing sentiments, there appears that there are several approaches to defining terminology in ODL (King, Young, Richmond and Schradel, 2001). In some contexts, the terms ‘distance education’ and ‘distance learning’ are used interchangeably. The same goes for ‘open and distance education’ and open and distance learning’. In other contexts, the terms are not synonymous to each other (Garrison, 2000). For these reasons, it warrants that the study re-examines these terms and sees to what extent the institution under study meets or matches the elements embraced in the definitions. Furthermore, due to advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) during the past decade, some of these definitions have since shifted from their original meanings to current definitions that take cognisance of new delivery modes engendered by these modern ICT. Below is the re-examination and analysis of the evolution of such definitions.

2.2.1 (a) Distance Education (DE)
Garrison (2003) views DE as simply education. Garrison (2003), however, distinguishes DE from other educational systems in that the bulk of the communications between the teacher and the learner are mediated. Compared with what is currently happening at the
institution under study, this definition, though sounding generic, does not reflect details in terms of the specific roles of the teacher (tutor), the learner and the institution. An expression of such details would probably give a clearer picture of what is happening in DE.

Holmberg (1989:24), being more descriptive than Garrison (2003), notes that:

*Distance education includes the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous immediate supervision of tutors present with their learners in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which nevertheless benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation.*

In view of this definition, Garrison (2003) and Holmberg (1989) agree on the notion of physical separation between the learner and the tutor or institution. However, Holmberg goes further to give details of the roles of the tutor or the institution when he brings in issues of planning and provision of guidance. Issues of planning and provision of guidance are buttressed by Johnson (2003:1) who adds that “*unlike independent or self-directed study, distance education usually implies the presence of an institution that plans curriculum and provides resources and services for its learners.*” The ZOU is indeed a true distant education institution because notions of planning and provision of guidance and LSS are some of the distance education practices associated with it.

Nevertheless, these definitions still do not specify precisely the kind of tuition offered to the distance learner. An attempt to give that detail is probably expressed in definitions
given by Daniel (1996) and Peters (1973). In that regard, Daniel (1996:94) describes DE as:

*The offering of educational programmes designed to facilitate a learning strategy which does not depend on day-to-day contact teaching but makes best use of the potential of learners to study on their own. It provides interactive study material and decentralised learning facilities where learners can seek academic and other forms of educational assistance when they need it.*

On the same subject, Peters (1973:206) opines that DE:

*is a family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviours are executed apart from the learning behaviours, including those that in a contiguous situation would be performed in the learner’s presence, so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanistic or other devices.*

Looking at both these definitions and apart from highlighting the presence of an institution and physical separation between the institution and the learner, there is evidence that they now include elements of LSS, types of learning resources and nature of content delivery modes (Tait, 2000). However, the definitions still fall short of describing the status and specific characteristics and needs of the learner engaged in a learning process, an aspect underpinning independent study philosophy (Knowles, 1980). By this it is meant that the flexibility that the learner enjoys in making choices, and the autonomy exercised in being responsible for one’s studies (Moore, 2007), should be elements to be embraced in any definition of distance education. Perhaps, this is the reason there is likely to be subtle differences between the terms ‘distance education’ and ‘distance learning.’ From these observations flows the definition of distance learning.
2.2.1 (b) Distance learning
Given the definitions of DE, perhaps the question to ask is “Is there a difference between ‘distance education’ and ‘distance learning?’” King, Young, Richmond and Schrader (2001:1) define distance learning as:

*improved capabilities in knowledge and/ or behaviours as a result of mediated experiences that are constrained by time and/or distance such that the learner does not share the same situation with what is being learned.*

With regard this definition and comparing it with definitions of DE discussed earlier on, it appears the two terms mean more or less the same, except that in distance education focus is on what happens to the physical distance (or separation) between the tutor/institution and the learner. In distance learning, focus is on learner experiences or learner behaviour changes that manifest themselves during the learning process. The current situation at the institution under study embraces both foci and this study adopts this position and, hence, the two terms, distance education and distance learning are in some way used interchangeably. However, the study’s title refers to the ODL context instead of the DE context. Probably the use of the ODL context makes a difference because the catch word is ‘open’, a descriptive word not found in DE. Although literature abounds with conflicting views about the distinction between distance education and ‘open and distance learning’ (Lewis and Spencer, 1986; Folks, 1987; Rumble, 1989; Garrison, 1990; Sampson, 2003), some authors prefer to view ‘distance education’ as a subcategory of ‘open and distance learning’, for example, Lewis and Spencer (1986). Some propose that there is no distinction between the terms (Rumble, 1989) while others still think distance education is not synonymous with open and distance learning (Folks,
1987), a view supported by Garrison (1990). In any case, the modern usage of the terms tends to blur the distinction (Sampson, 2003). Meanwhile, differences between distance education and open and distance learning have been widely documented in the COL (2002) and UNESCO (2002) literature.

2.2.1 (c) Open and distance learning
Definitions of ODL presented by COL (2002) and UNESCO (2002) highlight notions of ‘openness,’ ‘flexibility’ and ‘access’ by learners to teaching and learning resources. The theory and practice of ODL emphasise the idea of opening opportunities for learners to study regardless of geographic, personal, socio-economic constraints such as age, gender, place and time of study, programmes offered, among other constraints (UNESCO, 2002) or allowing learners to study in environments with all constraints reduced to a minimum. It might suffice to explain in some detail the concepts ‘openness,’ ‘flexibility’ and ‘access’ since they are key features underpinning the ODL philosophy.

2.2.1 (c) i Openness
Moore and Kearsley (2005) point out that the term ‘open’ generally refers to four aspects.

- People not debarred on account of their lack of educational qualifications;
- place of study-in the sense that learning would be home-based and not restricted to classrooms or campus;
- the use of new methods of teaching; and
- ideas are expressed freely.
Considering the above factors, it clearly shows that the ZOU, indeed, subjects itself to open learning because the learners are given opportunities to study based on minimum entry qualifications, for example, five ‘O’-level passes including English or entry based on accreditation of prior learning (APL). Other constraints such as age, gender, place and time of study are immaterial.

2.2.1 (c) ii Flexibility
ODL institutions offer flexibility by allowing learners to choose programmes of their own, to study at their own pace, time and place, and in the process, to foster independent learning (COL, 2004). Learners can negotiate time for tutorials with their tutors and at the same time be enabled to maintain work and family commitments whilst continuing to study (Cercone, 2008). In line with this, the institution sampled in this study offers more than eighty courses from which learners can choose (www.zou.ac.zw). In some cases, the university also offers flexible arrangements in the payment of fees with learners allowed to pay registration fees deposits and the balance being paid through instalments (although subject to change and adjustments) (Chadamoyo and Dumbu, 2014). What it means is that the learners become more responsible for, and assume ownership of their own studies (Knowles, 1980).

2.2.1 (c) iii Access
ODL institutions should be able to create opportunities that provide their learners wide access to education (COL, 2002). Open access implies removal of all the bottlenecks that restrict potential learners from having free entry into distance education programmes. It also implies that institutions provide their learners access to education through provision
of various LSS and various teaching and learning resources that mediate and bridge the gap between the learner and the institution (Moore, 2007). For example, learners should be given opportunities to use course modules, computers, laptops and internet services to access course content of the programmes offered. Opportunities to have access to academic guidance through the use of mobile phones, e-mail services, as well as meeting face-to-face with the guidance counsellor, programme coordinators, and other administrative staff, are also very critical for learners’ success. In fact, the goal is to take educational resources to wherever the learner is (Kurasha, 2005). This is done through establishing District Learning Centres (DLC) in areas surrounding a regional university campus in order to allow and increase access to library and other service facilities (Mupa, Chiome, Chabaya and Chabaya, 2014). This is typical of the institution under study.

2.2.1 (d) The time and place contexts
Whilst the foregoing discussion has laid the philosophical contexts of the ODL mode, there is need for further illumination by examining processes that regulate, control, and dictate the distance learning operations. This is done by examining the time and place contexts which are also inherent in the definition of ODL. COL (2006) describes the time and place controls as given below:

2.2.1 (d) i Same time-same place
In ODL, learners can engage in the learning process at the same time and same place, for example, during face-to-face tutorials, seminars and orientation (Chikoko and Chiome, 2013). At the university under study, learners converge at regional university campuses for what are termed weekend school tutorials to engage in face-to-face interactions with
their tutors and peers (Chabay, Chadamoyo, Chiome, 2011). Learners can also be invited to attend seminars or workshops at designated centres if there is need for upgrading of skills in ICT or assignment writing. Orientation is again done at the same time and place to familiarise learners with university staff, library resources and other infrastructure (Chikoko and Chiome, 2013). These processes augment independent study done at home.

2.2.1 (d) ii Same time- different places
Due to advances in ICT, ODL permits that learners learn at the same time but in different places (COL, 2006). For example, delivery strategies such as teleconferences, or live radio broadcasts, allow learners located in different places to receive same course content at the same time (Adegbola, 2011). However, these types of content delivery strategies have limitations in that they are one-way communication systems devoid of two-way interactions such as from tutor to learner, learner to tutor or learner to learner (Chadamoyo and Ngwarai, 2012). Two-way interactions are important in that they provide immediate feedback that raises motivation and feelings of empathy.

2.2.1 (d) iii Same place-different times.
COL (2002) also identifies possible situations or contexts in which learners can study whilst in the same place but at different times. Typical examples of such situations are when distance learners visit such centres as the library, computer laboratories or DLCs. This means that a number of learners can use the same library or same DLC but doing so at different times. At the institution under study, it is the researcher’s experience that the
library and computer laboratories are located at regional campuses and, therefore, learners can visit these resource centres at different times. This arrangement provides the necessary flexibility needed by adult learners.

2. 2. 1 (d) iv Different place-different times.
In ODL, content and LS can also be delivered when learners are in different places and at different times (COL, 2006). This means that adult learners are apparently responsible for their own learning and, therefore, decide where to study, when to study and what to study (Knowles, 1980). Examples of such situations occur when learners use internet services, audio and video cassettes to access content and for interacting with course designers. At the institution sampled in this study, it is the researcher’s experience that during orientation each new learner receives a video cassette that contains the Vice Chancellor’s motivational and welcome speech. Learners can play this video at their own different homes or places and at their own different times. A typical example of when learners are able to study at different places and at different times (COL, 2006) is when they use the course modules. According to the researcher’s experience, the institution sampled in the study provides learners with the course modules that enable them to study at their own places and at their different times. This means that learners, because of the convenience of using the module, can study whilst at their homes, workplaces, on the buses or even in the comfort of their bedrooms and at whatever time (Chadamoyo and Dumbu, 2014). This makes ODL delightful to adult learners.
In light of the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that the time and place contextual significance confirms the philosophical nature of the ODL mode of delivery. This is because the synchronous and asynchronous nature of the time and place contexts give learners the freedom to choose the what, when, how and where to study (UNESCO, 2002), without compromising the quality of expected standards. This also confirms the ‘open learning’ nature of ODL. Just to resonate the meaning of ‘openness’ as alluded to earlier on, Rowntree (1992:13) cited by COL (2010) describes ‘open learning’ as a philosophy which implies a:

*conflation of shared beliefs about teaching and learning. Among these beliefs are beliefs about opening up learning opportunities to a wider range of people and enabling them to learn freely and productively without inhibitions emanating from barriers to access.*

The freedom of choice and openness accorded to distance learners in ODL is not without limitations (COL, 2006). Many ODL institutions impose minimum restrictions to openness in order to allow achievement of expected performance and quality standards (Brindley, Walti and Zawacki-Richter, 2008). At the institution under study and indeed in many ODL institutions, it is the researcher’s experience that learners are supposed to meet certain expectations through adhering to given deadlines on registration and submission of assignments and dissertations. They still need to adhere to minimum entry qualifications, follow given course outlines and are subjected to writing standardised examinations leading to their award of a qualifying certificate.
2.2.1 (e) Agreed characteristics in the definition of ODL

Given all this background about the conceptualisation of ODL, it leaves many questions unanswered about whether there is any agreed definition of ODL. Several authors in literature have reached a consensus on the characteristics that each definition of ODL should pay attention to. The following are the characteristics drawn from Keegan (1990), COL (2000) as well as Moore and Kearsley (2005):

(i) The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process; this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education.

(ii) The influence of an educational organisation both in planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of LSS; this distinguishes it from private study and teach yourself programmes

(iii) The use of technical media; print, audio, video or computer, to unite teachers and learners and carry the content of the course

(iv) The provision of two-way communication so that the learner may benefit from or even initiate a dialogue; this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education

(v) The quasi-permanent absence of a learning group; people are taught as individuals and not in groups with a possibility of occasional meeting.

Looking at these ODL characteristics, it is now possible to trace the historical evolution of the definition of ODL as it moved in about four distinct generations, originating at the beginning of the nineteenth century up to the current period. A synopsis of the description of these generations derived and adapted from UNESCO (2002:23) is given overleaf:
Table 2.1 Generations of ODL and their delivery modes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>ICT Level and mode of delivery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Generation</td>
<td>1950’s-1960</td>
<td>Correspondence Systems dominated by one technology e.g. print, radio and television, slides, printed material sent through postal systems among other forms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Generation</td>
<td>1960-1985</td>
<td>Educational television and radio systems but without computers e.g. audio cassettes, television, video cassettes, fax, and print.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Generation</td>
<td>1985-1995</td>
<td>Multimedia systems e.g. audio and video cassettes, computer based materials, face-to-face learner support, internet services, tele-conferencing technologies, e-learning technologies among other similar technologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Generation</td>
<td>The current generation</td>
<td>Internet–based systems with multimedia technologies, access to databases and electronic libraries, one-to-one interactions synchronously and asynchronously through e-mail, computer conferences, bulletin boards among other similar technologies including desktop video conferencing, web-based media.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNESCO (2002: 23)

The metamorphosis, as shown in the table above, which has taken place in ODL from its genesis to its present state, shows its dynamic propensity to try and catch up with the dynamic and diverse demographic variables of adult learners (Wallace, 2007; Botha and Coetzee, 2016), as well as with continuous improvements in ICT. The true nature of the evolution is well stated by Moore and Kearsely (2005) who describe ODL as a changing paradigm, one that is perpetually evolving, non-static, and dynamic. For this reason, the definition of open and distance learning becomes very difficult to be universally accepted. This leaves the researcher to take a simpler and more recent view by Onwe (2013:123) that describes ODL as “any form of learning in which the provider enables
individual learners to exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning.”

Following this review on the conceptual framework in the ODL context, two themes have emerged. First, there is the context of ODL that allows learning to take place whilst the learner and the tutor/institution are separated by distance in both time and space. Second, there is the concept of the mediation strategies that should be put in place in order to bridge the gap between the learner and the tutor. These issues are relevant to this study because they are the mediation strategies that the study refers to as ‘LSP’. It is the phenomenon of LS that mediates between the learners and the tutors operating in the context of ODL. However, in order to have a comprehensive picture of all the issues involved, there is need to add a third dimension in this discussion, that is, the concept of the ‘adult learner’. Questions such as “who is the adult learner and what are his/her needs and characteristics?” need to be addressed. In order to effectively design mediation strategies (learner support strategies), there is reason to consider learners’ needs and characteristics as a starting point (Tait, 2000). The section overleaf reviews literature on the concept ‘adult learner’ as well as ‘adult learner needs and characteristics.’

2.2. 2 Defining the adult learner
NCES (2007), a US Department of Education, reports that the participation levels in adult education activities have, for the most part, steadily increased over the past three decades. Tunnehil (2009) puts the number at 30 percent of today’s college learners who are adult learners whilst a more recent view by Caruth (2014) puts the figure at 50 percent. Moreover, a number of policies such as education for all, gender equity, equal
access, women advancement, empowerment and job creation, emanating from independence of former colonised countries, have contributed tremendously to adult learner engagement in adult distance education (NCES, 2007). As such, these participation increases can be seen in the proliferation of distance education programmes characterising distance education institutions across the globe (Garrison, 2000). Because of such an immense involvement of adult learners in distance education, it, therefore, becomes most prudent for distance adult educators to really focus on how the adults learn and to really know who the adult learner is (Hansman, 2001). However, due to so many variables characterising human nature, such as race, gender, age, ability, class, home background and other social and economic attributes, it becomes a mammoth task to describe and define a “typical adult learner” with certainty, particularly with regard to those engaged in ODL (Cercone, 2008).

Thus, in attempting to define who the adult learner is, many nations and societies across the globe are guided by the “legal age of majority” (which differs from culture to culture) to determine when a person becomes an adult (Cercone, 2008). In Zimbabwe, according to the Zimbabwean Constitution (2013) it is at the age of 18 that a person is legally allowed to perform certain functions an adult is expected to perform by society, for example, being able to marry (without consent from parents/guardians), to vote or to stand in court. Otherwise below the age of 18, one is considered a minor. However, given this guideline, one is bound to ask whether ‘age’ is the only dimension used to define an adult learner in distance education. It appears not. Literature abounds with information indicating some variations in describing who the adult learner is, although age, more than
any other factor, remains more consistently regarded as the main guiding factor (Park and Choi, 2009).

Moore and Kearsely (2005) suggest the ages between 25 and 50 as characterising most distance education adult learners. Thus, as Cercone (2008) comments, the more one understands about the age ranges of adult learners, the more one understands about the nature of their learning. Holt (1995) believes adult learners are defined as those learners who are aged 25 and over, and are usually on full-time employment, attending classes on a part-time basis. Different from Holt (1995), Glenne (1996) suggests the age of 18 as the age of adult learners who are most likely to benefit from DE after attaining secondary education level. In some cases, as Glenne (1996) adds, these adult learners may not even have completed traditional formal schooling due to most of them having found it difficult to pay fees and to cater for higher residential study costs. They may also have suffered from prohibitive social conditions relating to marital relationships, racial, class or gender discrimination, as well as poor home backgrounds. All these variables interfere with self-paced independent studies appropriate for adult learners. In other cases, some of these adults could be school leavers needing some form of DE to get them into the job markets. Thus, as compensation for these limitations, ODL institutions would have to provide multi-faceted learning environments sensitive to the particular needs of these learners (Glenne, 1996).
Contributing to the debate on ‘age’ as the determinant in defining an adult learner, Coleman and Furnborough (2010) investigated on learner characteristics and learning outcomes of some college beginners at Spanish distance education institution. The two researchers found the majority of those distance learners falling within the age ranges 30 to 49. Somehow disregarding the notion of ‘age,’ Forrest (2006) posits that in distance education, adults are those individuals who have begun assuming adult roles in society, whether they are the 16-year old mothers or the 87-year- retirees. This means, one is considered adult if one has assumed the primary social role of worker, spouse or parent and has left the principal social role of full time learner that children and adolescents hold (Cercone, 2008).

Thus, in light of the above debate, it appears there are no ‘typical adult learners’ in distance education since, as Bjorklund and Bee (2008) argue, ‘age’ is just a number. This means that the term ‘adult learners’ just represents a diverse set of individuals with distinctive demographics, social locations, aspirations, and levels of preparations (Forrest, 2006). Persons may be considered adults as long as they are able to take on roles expected of adults by their societies, be it social, psychological, or economic. What it means is that, as Bjorklund and Bee (2008) elaborate, psychological maturity levels and social roles, as well as life situations can be used to define who the adult learner is and not necessarily the age of the learner (Gibbons and Wentworth, 2001).
In view of this, the present study chose to take the cultural, social and economic derivations as dominant factors in describing the distance adult learner. In fact, at the sampled institution, and according to the researcher’s observation, the learner’s age is not an important factor for entry requirements into a degree programme. What matters is the ability of the person to make choices of what he/she wants to do. Sometimes choices are made with the guidance of the tutor based on the ability to decide on the roles commensurate with being a distance adult learner (Bjorklund and Bee, 2008). That individual who might be single, a parent, spouse, unemployed or a full-time worker, or someone, who because of his/her nature and characteristics, finds it difficult to enrol for on-campus courses, is considered an adult learner the moment he/she joins distance education and as long as that person is responsible for making his/her own decisions. Of course, adult learners may have other needs and characteristics that motivate them to join ODL. These characteristics are as varied as there are learners (Cercone, 2008).

2.2 3. Defining the term andragogy
Smith (2002) and Zmeyov (1998) view andragogy as a theory of adult learner characteristics, the main purpose of which is to plan, realise, evaluate and correct the activities of adult learning. Related to this is the interpretation of Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2005: 60) who perceive andragogy as an intentional and professionally guided activity that aims at a change in adult persons. Johnson (2000) views andragogy as an approach to learning meant to satisfy the needs of an adult learner in every aspect of his/her life. Apart from addressing the needs of adults, Cercone (2008) sees andragogy as a learning theory that takes note of significant differences in the learning characteristics
between children and adults. Further illumination comes from Cooper and Henschke (2009). The two authors cite Savicevic (1999) whose version is that of conceptualising andragogy as a scientific discipline that deals with problems relating to adult education learning in all of its manifestations and expressions, whether formal or informal, organised or self-guided, with its scope of research covering the greater part of a person’s life.

Sandlin (2005) summarises the above ideas by conceptualising andragogy from three different viewpoints, that is, as a method, as a philosophy, and as an ideology. As a method, Sandlin (2005) asserts, andragogy is a way of teaching adults and helping them to learn. As a philosophy, andragogy views adults as learners driven by belief systems based on individual freedom to choose what best satisfies their needs and interests. As an ideology, Sandlin (2005) adds that andragogy promotes individualism as a virtue and individual growth as the purpose of education, and emphasises self-fulfilment and private interests over public ends.

As noted earlier on, most of these ideas are based on Knowles’ own version of andragogy (Knowles, 1968; 1970; 1980). The study derives the meaning of andragogy from such Knowles’ ideas, the main argument of which anchors on adult learners having different needs and characteristics from those of children or young learners (Henschke, 2009). As such, any approach meant to teach adults should be directed towards addressing problems related to, and meeting the needs of, adult learners (Knowles, 1980). In his book “the Modern Practice of Adult Education; Andragogy versus Pedagogy” (Knowles, 1970),
and based on his observations and experiences in adult education practices, Knowles popularises and emphasises the differences between adults and children’s learning by defining andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1990:54) as opposed to pedagogy “the art and science of teaching children (Tappin, 2013:4). To project and further illuminate his ideas, Knowles unpacks his concept of andragogy into a theory predicated on a set of four and later six assumptions or principles (Knowles, 1980) based on the characteristics and needs of adult learners. Thus, according to Knowles (1980), adults have a self-concept that makes them self-directed learners; they have vast experiences that they bring into the learning context; they are ready to learn and are problem oriented; and they are intrinsically motivated and urged by the need to know why they are learning. An explanation of these six assumptions is given below:

2.2.4. Defining the term learner support in ODL
The concept of ‘learner support’ is the key component of this study. As such, its meaning and significance pervade the whole of this study. To this effect, there is need to examine it in a deeper way so as to project its meaning and conceptualisation by examining its status and provision in ODL and in the context of this study.

Meanwhile, as the pace setters in LS research situated at the OUUK, for example, Tait (1995; 2000), Simpson (2002), and Thorpe (2003) tried to come to terms with the concept LS, its meaning and conceptualisation became more and more elusive and varied depending largely on context or from researcher to researcher’s points of view (Lee,
2003). Some researchers such as Leach (1996) have since questioned whether there is any broad consensus about what LS means in open and distance learning. In response to Leach’s (1996) question, the section below summarises some varied definitions suggested in literature.

Early definitions on LS are derived from pioneers such as Holmberg (1989) and Moore (1990). These researchers consider LS as all two-way communications that promote study pleasure and motivation derived from feelings of personal relations between the learner and the tutor.

Simpson (2002) of the OUUK takes a broader view of the concept ‘learner support’. He describes LS as all measures extending beyond the production of study materials which support learners in the learning process. Simpson (2002) goes further to categorise LS into two broad areas; that is, academic support, which mainly comprises tutorial activities, and non-academic support, which mainly comprises administrative and institutional services.

Tait (2000) also of the OUUK places activities of LS in a taxonomy characterised by:

(a) Cognitive functions that address individual learner needs through mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources
(b) Affective functions that promote commitment and enhanced self-esteem through provision of a supportive environment

(c) Systemic functions concerned with effective, transparent and learner friendly administrative processes and management systems

Thorpe (2002) relates LS with regards to on-line environment and re-defines LS as “all those elements capable of responding to a lone learner or a group of learners before, during and after the learning process.” Thorpe (2002) further acknowledges the interactive nature of LS and distinguishes LS and course material production. She splits the functions of LS into two, that is, administrative services that are provided before, during and after the course study and academic services that include tutoring as well as those services that assist learners to work collaboratively and to comprehend meaning of teaching and learning materials.

In line with the categorisation of LSS by Tait (2000) and Thorpe (2003), a number of authors and researchers in literature tend to prefer describing LS according to a variation of elements that define a unique educational process and learner population found at a given ODL context (Brindley, 1995). Keast (1997) cited by Lee (2003) provides a comprehensive list of such elements that most researchers and practitioners in literature have also suggested (Reid, 1995; Tait, 1995). Lee (2003) adopts Keast’s (1997) list and categorises such elements as comprising (a) academic support, (b) administrative support (c) technical support and (d) guidance and counselling support.
(a) Academic support

The goal of academic support is to provide services that facilitate collaborative and interactive learning among learners or between them and their tutors. Academic support also entails providing intellectual skills and capacities through provision of appropriate support services that aid understanding of relevant subject matter.

(b) Administrative support services

Administrative support services serve to assist learners to smoothly navigate in their learning encounters and processes such as admissions, registration, financial aid, records maintenance and course scheduling.

(c) Technical support services

Technical support services assist learners to effectively operate various ICTs that mediate knowledge acquisition with regards learners computer skills, and skills in using various communication tools (Lee, 2003).

(d) The guidance and counselling services

The guidance and counselling services aim to deal with learners’ emotional and psychological support that helps them absorb various pressures experienced in the learning activity. It is also meant to boost confidence and solve problems that interfere with the study process.
After analysing all that has been discussed so far about the definitions of LS, it becomes more convincing to say LS encompasses all of those interactive activities and services in education that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process. These include tutoring and teaching, counselling and advising, administrative activities for service to learners such as admission and registration, among other services (Tait, 1995). As Thorpe (2002) states, LS also includes facilitation of learning communities through collaborative learner networking, use of social media, telephone, internet and learning centres.

LS also embraces services such as orientation, providing study skills, resource distribution, career and personal counselling, library and information systems and infrastructural support for activities such as examinations writing, peer tutoring and alumni organisation (Anderson, 2004). It also involves e-learning activities that comprise the use of cellular phones and SMS messaging techniques, e-mailing, use of the web and all computer-assisted learning activities that enable distance learners achieve their academic success (Chadamoyo and Ngwarai, 2012).

Whilst e-learning strategies play a very important role in mediating between the learner and the tutor, they sometimes fail to appeal to the unique characteristics pertaining to the personal emotions of distance learners (Hannah, Jenny, Laxton and Mahony, 2010; Juntinsen, Saliroma and Laitos, 2010; Hawkridge and Wheeler, 2010). Holmberg (1989) is convinced that any strategy that mediates between the learner and the tutor should touch feelings of personal relations between the two. Thus, Holmberg’s theory about
learning conversations (Holmberg, 1989), and Moore’s theory of dialogue (Moore, 1990); come in very strongly in providing a two-way communication system that promotes study pleasure and motivation.

With regards ODL learners, it should be noted that they possess unique needs that transcend beyond the normally provided LS interactions that require that learners work alone during most of the learning process. Lee (2003) also notes that these adult unique needs go far beyond the existing LSS normally provided in non-traditional settings. It, therefore, calls for the recognition that effective and appropriate LSS be put in place in order to meet these learners’ unique needs and this eventually promotes successful adult learning.

Literature has also provided evidence indicating that researchers and ODL practitioners concur on recognising the provision of a wide array of LSS as key to the success of learners (Tait, 2003; Mupa, Kurasha and Chiome, 2013). This necessitates that ODL institutions have a learner services unit that co-ordinates all LSS rendered by an institution. It is the researcher’s experience that the sampled institution has such type of unit headed by a Student Advisor, whose role is to coordinate LS activities that embrace academic guidance and counselling, psychosocial counselling, pre-admission and post-admission services. The Student Advisor also helps learners to make course choices and process registration data. In addition, he/she organises orientation, prepares study skills
tutorials, mobilise teaching and learning materials as well as providing financial guidance.

The missing link could be that these services are being provided without consultation having been made with learners. This scenario precipitates the fear of offering services that are a mismatch of adult learner andragogical needs and characteristics in a given context. This study was intended to provide elucidation on that because whilst many researchers have written about what services should be available, it is unfortunate that not all give advice on how to provide them (Brindley, 1995). How LSS should be provided was the focus of the current study. Moreover, with the environment now becoming increasingly competitive to the extent that even the once traditional institutions now want to adopt distance delivery mode for some of their courses, it then becomes paramount that LSP in ODL institutions be interrogated seriously in order to ensure that these institutions fulfil their mandates through effectively engaging learners in both administrative and academic activities and through provision of appropriate LSS.

In light of the above discussed evidence on LSP, and in pursuit of the problem situated in this study, it should be borne in mind that it is the learners, not anybody else, who best understand difficulties they go through in their studies, hence any LS system and provision should be based on their needs rather than being imposed from the top. This position is vividly expressed by Sewart (1987:72) who states:
It does not seem unfair to suggest that there is an overwhelming tendency within the field to offer systems from the viewpoint of the institution teaching at a distance rather than from the viewpoint of the learner learning at a distance.

What Sewart (1987) means is that if LSS are provided without considering learners’ perspectives (needs and interests), then there is a danger that institutions will use trial and error methods to find out what works and what does not work as they experiment with different types of LSS, whilst in the process learners suffer (Tait, 2000). Knowing what learners want then becomes critical for any ODL institution intent on providing appropriate LSS for the benefit and motivation of distance learners so that they complete their study programmes (Sewart, 1993).

2.3 Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Study
The study focuses on how adult learners in ODL are supported to learn, with ZOU as a case of analysis. Given the context of ODL whereby adult learners learn whilst separated from their tutors/institution (Garrison, 2000), one of the best practices to support adult learning is the provision of LSS based on individual learner needs (Tait, 2000). To this end, the theory that appears to give the overall theoretical ‘lens’ (Falloon, 2011) through which adult learners can be supported to learn, and indeed one that this study has adopted, is the Theory of Transactional Distance (TDT) by Moore (1993, 1997, 2007).

Moore (1997) argues that the ODL context is not simply a geographical separation of learners and tutors/institution, but more critically, it is a pedagogical or rather an
andragogical concept that describes relationships or behaviours that are characterised by potential misunderstandings existing between learners and their tutors. In order to account for these misunderstandings, Moore (2007) further clarifies that there is a psychological gap or bridge to be crossed through provision of various information and communication technologies that link the learner and tutor inputs. Moore (2007) calls this gap the transactional distance, hence, his ideas became known as the Transactional Distance Theory.

With this background, Moore (2007) identifies three variables that constitute the learner and tutor behaviours observed in a transactional distance interaction of any ODL programme. Two of these variables, namely dialogue and structure, relate to tutoring behaviour. The third, namely, learner autonomy, describes learning behaviours.

2.3.1 Dialogue
Moore (1997:10) defines dialogue as the “the extent to which, in any distance education programme, learners and educators are able to respond to each other, with both parties respecting each other, listening to each other and building on each other’s contributions.” In addition, according to Moore (1997), dialogue, which is also called a teaching and learning conversation by Holmberg (1989), is a quality aspect reserved for positive interactions. These positive interactions should result in positive resolutions of the learners’ problems leading to improved understanding of the learners. Thus, the more dialogue there is between the learner and the tutor, the less the transactional distance
becomes. However, at this point, it should be noted that Moore’s (1993) ideas on TDT, have been built on Knowles’ (1980) andragogical philosophy that views the relationship between learners and their tutors as one that nurtures a spirit of joint inquiry and one that underscores respect, acceptance and support for the adult learner.

In order to sustain this tutor-learner relationship, Moore (2007), again confirming Knowles’ (1980) ideas, emphasises the notion that whatever dialogue there is between learners and tutors, the interactions should be based upon a clear understanding of the adult learners’ andragogical needs and characteristics. Drawing from this premise and guided by the TDT, the study finds it necessary to investigate what these andragogical needs and characteristics are, as well as the resultant LSP created to meet these needs by listening to what learners say.

### 2.3.2 Structure

With regards to the second variable, Moore (1993) views structure as the expression of rigidity or flexibility given to the adult learner in order to make decisions upon his/her studies in terms of choosing the content, the tutoring strategies and assessment procedures, basing all this on learners’ needs and characteristics. From another angle, structure is determined by the nature of the communications media being used, the philosophy and emotional dispositions of the learners and tutors, as well as the ability of the education programme/institution to respond to the learners’ needs (Falloon, 2011). All these ideas provide relevant information and guidance to this study with respect to
investigating the extent to which the LS strategies put in place accommodate the learners’ needs in a given ODL context.

2.3.3 Learner Autonomy
The third variable of the TDT is what Moore (1993) calls learner autonomy. Moore (1993) defines learner autonomy as the extent to which the learner, rather than the tutor, determines the goals, the learning experiences, and the assessment decisions of the teaching and the learning process. These views support Knowles’ (1980) andragogical philosophy that perceives learners in ODL as adult learners with mature self-concept and capable of handling self-directed learning. This study also pursues these ideas and explores the extent to which learner autonomy, as an adult learner characteristic, can influence or enhance the design of an effective LSP in ODL.

Given this theoretical background, it should be noted that the ultimate support that is given to the individual learners is determined by the proportional input or interplay of the three variables as they affect each other differently and in different proportions (Moore, 2007). For example, an increase or decrease in one variable may result in the same of another variable. Whatever the case, the study has noted that such a theoretical framework as presented by the TDT provides a useful lens through which this study could suggest appropriate learner support strategies that can be of use in ODL institutions, more so in the institution under study.
2.4 Empirical Reviews, Reflections, Arguments and Gaps Identified in the Study on LSP in ODL

2.4.1 Question number 1: How do learners describe their demographic characteristics as factors affecting LSP in ODL?

2.4.1 (a) Description of adult learner characteristics
As they come to join various distance education programmes, adult learners have various characteristics that bear implications on their learning. Hardman and Dunlap (2003) observe that many of these adult learners choose to do distance education programmes because they live in remote geographic areas that make it impossible for them to enrol at traditional campus-based institutions. They could be people with work shifts and work schedules, as well as having business commitments that require more flexible arrangements not offered by campus-based course schedules (Botha and Coetzee, 2016). They can also have personal and family commitments, including having children at home and taking care of others (Devisakti, 2016). In many cases, they are remote, isolated and lonely with no one to look up to for educational assistance (Mbukusa, 2009).

Cercone (2008) reiterates the idea of adult learners having many responsibilities and situations involving having to balance between study and issues such as family, jobs, childcare, domestic violence, and the need to earn an income. All these factors can interfere with the learning process (Hardman and Dunlap, 2003). Apart from these limitations, adults, like all other humans, can also suffer from indecisions in making personal choices in their lives. However, most adults enter educational programmes voluntarily and are capable of juggling around their studies with family responsibilities.
(Cercone, 2008). In addition to this, Cercone (2008) admits that most adults are highly motivated and task oriented.

Stahmer (1995), in an attempt to describe an adult learner, came up with the following conclusions. Adult learners could be older workers capable of providing new skills demanded by the labour force. They could be people currently in the workforce or could be highly skilled professionals seeking to upgrade their skills and knowledge. Some adults join distance education to meet the demands posed by advances in technologies at their workplaces. Some have the habit of changing their jobs and careers every five years, hence, they need the relevant knowledge and skills. Others could even be managers, supervisors or directors looking for career advancement and further promotions who need higher organisational skills engendered by their changed work and business environments.

Zemyov (1998) sees more positives in adult learners. He sees adults as possessing considerable practical, social and occupational competencies. They are conscious of their own life-goals that are relevant and required by life-long learning. They also possess a certain degree of background knowledge in the areas in which they want learning to go, as well as wanting to acquire new learning as quickly as possible. Floyd and Powell (2004) wrap up the discussion by describing successful distance adult learners as people who are self-disciplined and having self-confidence that urge them to overcome frustration and confusion.
Be that as it may, adult learners face a number of challenges as observed by Perraton (2012). Perraton (2012:12) raises a pertinent issue that suggests that adults, by joining distance education, find themselves “in an extremely unusual learning situation if they are studying by themselves, one with which they are unfamiliar with as learners and one with which tutors are also unfamiliar with them.” As such, all efforts in adult education should be channelled towards meeting learners’ needs and characteristics to the extent of aligning most teaching materials with the local and individual needs of particular learners (Sampson, 2003; Hussain, 2013). Whilst most teaching materials can be mass produced, Perraton (2012) argues that what cannot be mass produced or pre-determined are learners’ needs because these have to be discovered from the learners themselves. This is what makes this study relevant as it seeks to discover learners’ needs and interests through telling it as it is. In this regard, an approach that this study takes and one that focuses primarily on how to meet adult learner needs and characteristics, as well as explaining how adults learn to learn in distance education, is andragogy. The following section explains the concept andragogy in detail in terms of its assumptions, philosophical basis as well as its implications to the teaching and learning of adults.

2.4.1 (b) Knowles’ six assumptions

1 Adults have a self-concept

According to Knowles (1980), as adults become mature, they develop a self-concept which gives them freedom to choose what they want to learn. The self-concept directs that adults become independent and tend to resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them (Taylor and Kroth, 2009). With maturity comes an adult
learner’s inclination to become a self-directed human being capable of being more responsible for one’s learning. As Knowles (1984) in Blondy (2007) affirms, adults become more actively involved in the decision making processes of those things that affect them as they develop a sense of discriminating what is important or not important for them. As a way of emphasis in relation to self-directed learning, Merriam and Brockett (2007:137) state “adults assume control of their learning.”

As Blondy (2007) explains, the notion of self-concept and self-directedness does not mean adults are left out from interacting with others. If anything, adults desire a learning environment that is collaborative, welcoming and one that fosters mutual respect and trust (Knowles, 1984). Additionally, the notion of self-concept does not mean that adults develop equally and maintain the same levels of self-directedness at all times and in all situations. As Knowles (1984) acknowledges, some adults may become more independent and more self-directed than others depending on certain factors such as experience, age, or learning context. Going against his own conviction, Knowles (1984) admits that in some learning contexts, for example, when doing simple, and basic skills training, a pedagogical model of instruction as opposed to an andragogical one, may be preferred.

2 Role of learner’s experience

Knowles (1984) also believes that as adults mature, they accumulate vast experiences which they bring with them to the learning environment. As such, adult learner experiences become a valuable resource for both the learner and facilitator as each shares
and contributes towards a common understanding of the subject matter. In the same vein, if those prior experiences are positively used in the learning episodes, Taylor and Kroth (2009) comment, they become the richest resource available from which facilitators can rely on as they help adult learners become open-minded towards sharing their experiences with others (Knowles, 1984).

As they become the best resource for each other, Knowles (1984) advises that such adults should be encouraged to participate in group discussions and collaborative assignments that could draw on the heterogeneity and expertise within groups. This distinguishes adult learner experiences from those of children since the former are based on the different types of roles they occupy in society. Nevertheless, not all adults have the same needs. Adults have different needs. To this end, Knowles (1980) recommends that learning contracts be used since they enable learners to adopt personalised learning plans in preparation for their academic work. This is confirmed by the results of the study conducted by Cassity (2005) on non-traditional college adult learners. The results of the study revealed that the participants reflected their experiences thoughtfully in their academic writings.

Despite all these benefits associated with adult learner experiences, Knowles (1984) notes that on the contrary, in some cases, adult learner experiences can negatively affect learning through preconceived notions about reality, habitual ways of thinking and activity, as well as prejudices developed through life experiences. Adult learners with
such limitations, Knowles (1984) points out, should be encouraged to become more open-minded and be ready to accept other learners’ experiences.

3 Adults possess a readiness to learn.

The experiences adults go through enable them to develop a readiness to learn new skills in order to cope with specific situations. Adults face a number of challenges that may interfere with their learning and these challenges demand that they rise to the occasion in order to overcome the obstacles. Rising to challenges requires that adults have a certain degree of readiness to solve the problems. In most cases, as adults enter the learning environment, they learn to recognise the value of new knowledge as a means to develop in all respects (Blondy, 2007). Most of the distance learners that join the ODL institutions often experience life transitions such as birth, divorce, loss of job or change of employment that trigger their readiness to learn. Thus, adult learning arises primarily out of necessity as adults are ready to appreciate the relevancy or value of what is to be learned (Taylor and Kroth, 2009).

As people mature, their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their new social roles (Knowles, 1984), and as they engage on a learning task, adults often rely on their readiness based on past experiences to achieve the task. Considering that not all adults undergo the same experiences, some need to go on an extra mile in order to make themselves ready for the new learning (Blondy, 2007). For example, at ODL institutions such as the sampled institution, learners need to undergo certain training such as in computer literacy skills, study skills or examination writing
skills in order to increase their readiness to succeed in independent, self-directed study, which, in most cases, is voluntary (Lawrence, 2007). Whilst this is plausible, the question still remains if institutions really know what learners need, if, for example, there is no deliberate intention to give them opportunity to say what they think they want. This is where this current study was found relevant.

4 Adults have an orientation to learning

With adulthood comes an orientation to learning. Adults become problem or task-centred instead of being subject-centred, the latter of which is characteristic of children (Knowles, 1984). Adults become more life-centred in that they are “motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them to perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (Knowles, 1981:59). Blondy (2007) believes adults pursue learning because they need immediate application of the learning to life situations. Knowles (1980) ends by saying that learning experiences should be related to life situations or to life tasks or goals. Thus, as adult learners join distance institutions of higher learning, they seek to do those programmes that have the potential of getting them promotion or placements on higher salary grades or those that satisfy their academic goals.

5 Adults have a motivation to learning

Knowles’ fifth assumption is on adults’ motivation. That means, as a person matures, the motivation to learn becomes mainly internal as opposed to children’s external inclination. As such, they are the adult internal motivations that drive the individual to attain life
goals. Learning, being one of the adult’s life goals, serves as a means of providing an adult with some fulfilment, be it completion of a degree programme, getting job promotion, or getting salary increment. Motivation to learning, therefore, becomes a tool to improve the quality of life in an immeasurable manner (Taylor and Kroth, 2009).

As adults choose and value what they want to learn, they become more motivated to achieve. Unlike children that are motivated mainly through extrinsic materials, Knowles (1984) is convinced that adults are best motivated to learn primarily by intrinsic factors such as increased self-esteem, self-actualisation or just recognition. To emphasise his notion of internal drive, Knowles (1984:12) wrote “when a person becomes older, his/her motivation to learn comes from his/her self.” In other words, as Pew (2007:18) affirms, “learning is pursued for its intrinsic value.” Unlike extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation makes a difference in that it makes adults responsible for their own motivation, as well as enables them to function as more autonomous and more socially responsible thinkers (Mezirow, 1997).

Examples of internal motivators that urge adult learners to carry out their intentions, beginning with those that make them return to school or those that make them persist in their studies are summarised by Tannehil (2009:18) as follows:

- The need for academic credentials for career advancement
- The need for a career change
- Need for life transitions such as divorce or death of a spouse
- Currently unemployed and seeking a future employment opportunity
- For education sake
- As a requirement of a current job
- For social services
The current study is yet to discover whether these internal motives as cited by Tannehill (2009) are different from those exhibited by adult learners in the ZOU.

6 Adults need to know why they are learning

The ‘need to know’ is the last assumption that Malcolm Knowles added to his initial four assumptions on adult learning based on adult needs and characteristics. According to Knowles (1984), as a person matures, one develops a need of wanting to know why one is learning something or not learning something. As such, and when presented with learning tasks, adults need to know what, and why they are learning. As they discover the value of what they want to learn, adult learners begin to invest a considerable amount of resources, for example, time, energy or even finances in order to accomplish their intended goals. It is common that at their initial entry into an ODL institution, adult learners consult (from others) why they should enrol onto a certain programme. However, Knowles (1987:170) argues that “it is seldom convincing for them to be told by someone (like a boss) that it would be good for them.” What this means is that adult learners need to find out on their own why they are learning something. Normally, they base their judgements on their previous experiences and self-concepts which then guide them to know or to have the ability to choose what is good or not good for them. Once they become self-convinced that something is of value to them, they become more motivated to achieve their intended objectives.

It is the experience of this researcher that the ‘need to know’ tendency is exhibited when new adult learners seek advice from programme coordinators or specifically from the
Student Advisor about which LSS are available in order for them to use in their studies. It is this information that the present study intends to interrogate further so as to inform adult educators about how to design effective learner support systems that could assist the learners to succeed in their studies.

An analysis of all these ‘noises’ and proclamations made by Knowles (1968; 1970; 1980; 1984) about andragogical needs and characteristics shows that they were meant to initiate and push forward his main argument that adults are uniquely and distinctively different from children, hence, in educational philosophy and practice, methods used to teach adults (andragogy), according to Knowles (1980), should be different from those used to teach children (pedagogy). This argument has spawned a lot of debate and research even to this day. This study bears witness but is persuaded to agree more with Knowles’ ideas than opposing them. The fundamental viewpoint is that if ODL institutions today claim to deal with adults, then their educational philosophies and practices should be derived from, and be seen to be driven by andragogical philosophies and practices rather than pedagogical practices (Knowles, 1984). As a way of illumination, a summary of the differences between andragogy and pedagogy drawn from literature, for example, Knowles (1968), Taylor and Kroth (2009), Henschke, (2009), and Tappin (2013) is given below.

2.4.1 (c) Differences between andragogy and pedagogy
Andragogy deals with adults who commence their higher education studies mindful of what they need to know and what they want their learning to do for them (Taylor and
Kroth, 2009). They have a mature self-concept that makes them believe in themselves, and that directs them to become independent, learner-centred (as opposed to teacher-centred) individuals (Knowles, 1968). Most adults are learning resources who normally possess significant and relevant experiences that they contribute to the learning contexts. Adults are generally responsible, self-directed learners and this requires that tutors and adult education practitioners become facilitators whose role is to guide the learning process. Adults are driven more by internal motives aimed at satisfying personal, social and professional goals more than what children can imagine. They desire an interactive, collaborative learning environment that involves and engages them in decision-making processes. Adults want to do those things they see are of value and of immediate application to them as opposed to children or young learners who may be comfortable with postponement of learning outcomes (Henschke, 2009).

On the other hand, pedagogy is generally described as “the art and science of educating children” (Tappin, 2013:4). Tappin (2013) further explains that children have relatively less experience and are less responsible when compared with adults. In the learning contexts, they are subject-centred relying on their teachers who feed them with information as well as direct their learning. In pedagogy, teachers make decisions about what is to be learnt, when and how content should be learnt. When using pedagogical methods, teachers spend a great deal of time trying to motivate the children because young learners are driven more by external motivators than internal motivators. Children are less capable of making their own decisions as they rely more on adults for their direction and management.
Thus, Knowles (1980) assumes that these differences between adults and children should also call for differences in teaching and learning implications. However, Knowles (1980) quickly points out that whilst many pedagogical strategies can be applied to adult learning, not all andragogical strategies can be applied to young learners. For example, young learners cannot be left to decide on their own course of learning to the extent adult learners are allowed to do (Tappin, 2013), considering that adult learner competencies and complexities allow them to take their studies whilst at the same time they take other roles such as being a parent, spouse or worker (Taylor and Kroth, 2009).

Emphasising and summarising the above ideas, Taylor and Kroth (2009:8) wrote:

*Adult learning needs are different from those of young learners and should be approached differently; they want to be participants in their learning, want their experiential learning to be appreciated and respected, and want less structure and management than younger learners because they are more self-directed, purposeful and goal oriented than younger learners. Understanding this will inform the development and delivery of curricula and course delivery systems.*

In view of the above assertion by Taylor and Kroth (2009), it is the essence of this study to strive to unravel the andragogical needs and characteristics of adult learners of the institution under study so as to inform the course delivery systems through the provision of more effective LSS to its learners. Additionally, meeting needs of an increasingly growing number of adult learners will continue to be demanded by ODL institutions in the coming years (The College of Public Health Institute of Gerontology, 2011). Consequently, consistent and regular interrogation of andragogical needs and
characteristics and the way these influence the design of more effective LS systems in given ODL contexts, the ZOU in particular, become necessary and paramount.

2.4.1 (d) Critiquing Knowles’ assumptions
Although Knowles’ (1980) assumptions concerning adult learners are likely to be embraced by many adult educators today, they have been critiqued in literature for not accurately portraying all adult learners and further, for promoting general and prescriptive ideas of typical learners (Henschke, 2009). For example, contrary to Knowles’ notion that adult learners are internally motivated, many adults are externally motivated as they strive to adapt to situations and to improve on their lives on a day-to-day basis (Pratt, 1993).

In more specific terms, Knowles’ version of andragogy was not easily accepted by some adult educators of the time, who tended to dismiss it as inadequate, unscientific, not well researched and misleading to adult educators (Heinschke, 2009). For example, Hartree (1984) asserted that if viewed from the psychological standpoint, Knowles’ theory of andragogy failed to make good its claims to stand as a unified theory because it lacked coherent discussion of the different dimensions of learning. Equally, if viewed as a philosophy, it fell short because it did not incorporate an epistemology. Davenport (1987) argues that the theory lacked clarity and solid empirical support. Jarvis (1984) posits that the theory was not grounded in sufficient empirical research; while Pratt (1993) notes that the theory spawned further debate to clarify certain unclear terms.
Indeed, this study adopted Pratt’s view since the aim was to investigate further the issues surrounding andragogy as a philosophical underpinning in understanding how adults learn. Pratt’s (1993) stance appears to foster the creation of additional unclear terms intended to define aspects of adult education and indeed this is the direction that this study intended to follow. This study also accepted Knowles andragogical theory in the same manner other adult educators of the time accepted it (Henschke, 2009). They acknowledged that the theory stimulated a great deal of interest to the extent that it provided a framework for understanding adult learner needs and characteristics and the extent to which these influenced the way adult learners are helped to learn.

After feeling the heat of continuing criticisms unleashed by several of his contemporaries, Knowles modified his views on andragogy in later works (Knowles, 1980; 1984; 1990) to a position where both pedagogical and andragogical methods can be used either by children or adults depending on circumstances (Clardy, 2006). In fact, Knowles (1980:43) retreated from his earlier position by making the following statement:

*I am at the point now of seeing that andragogy is simply another model of assumptions about learners to be used alongside the pedagogical model of assumptions thereby providing two alternative models for testing out the assumptions as to their “fit” with particular situations. Furthermore, the models are probably most useful when seen not as dichotomous but rather as two ends of a spectrum, with a realistic assumption in a given situation falling in between the two ends.*

The reason why Knowles (1980) is retreating from his earlier position could be the realisation that adults’ learning may also involve pedagogic strategies. For example, adults need external motivation and guidance from their tutors in the same way
children do (Pratt, 1993). In fact, Knowles (1985) confirms this position when he further clarifies and defines his concept of andragogy as:

\[
\text{a system of concepts that, in fact incorporates pedagogy rather than opposing it (Knowles, 1985:8).}
\]

In light of all this debate on andragogical characteristics and needs and considering the underpinning argument that adults should be taught differently from the way children are taught, it makes sense to point out that if ODL institutions are to meaningfully serve their learners, then whatever teaching and learning that goes on should be aligned to learners’ andragogical needs and characteristics (Henschke, 2009). Failure to do that would be a matter of taking a horse to the river but without having the means of making it drink. In relation to this study, it would mean that whatever LSS that an ODL institution is capable of providing, they should be aligned to, and be in tandem with the andragogical characteristics of its learners (Knowles, 1980). Section 2.4.2 seeks to get information from the selected Sub-Saharan and Caribbean countries about how LSS are currently provided in ODL in order to establish implications to andragogical teaching and learning.

2.4.2 Question number 2: How are learners experiencing LSS currently provided in ODL?

2.4.2 (a) Synopsis of LS experiences in selected Sub-Saharan African countries and the Caribbean
Given that LSF aim to create optimum conditions for learner success and enhance quality and equality of educational provision (COL 2002), it follows that every higher education institution that offers distance education should have a LSF that provides services to its learners. The case studies cited below and summarised in the ADEA Report by COL (2002) illustrate different LS experiences adopted by ODL institutions in selected contexts of Sub–Saharan Africa.

(i) LS experiences in Zambia
According to COL (2002), LSP in Zambian ODL universities consists of a decentralised LSS spread around regional centres. This network of regional centres enables learners to register courses and receive course materials at their provincial centres without having to travel to Lusaka. Learners are exposed to a wide range of programmes of study that respond to the diverse professional and personal needs of learners at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. They also use course materials, especially modules, which are user-friendly, professionally written and rich in content, coupled with written assignments. Courses are taught by highly qualified staff that mark learners’ work and provide them with detailed feedback. A flexible tuition fee payment arrangement enables learners to overcome most of their financial challenges. However, learners sometimes face challenges that are related to the implementation of certain educational policies. They also lack financial resources and adequate political support (Siaciwena and Lubinda, 2008).
(ii) LS experiences in Namibia
A number of authors have written about LSP in Namibian universities (MoWES, 2005; Mbukusa 2009; Haufiku, 2010; Onwe, 2013). Observations made by MoWES (2005) and later narrated by Onwe (2013) about LS experiences at the Centre for External Studies (CES) at the University of Namibia (UNAM) point in the direction that both academic and administrative services are offered at study centres spread across the country. The university attempts to meet the needs of the distance learners through face-to-face weekend school tutorials, making use of audio-tapes for language courses, establishing supportive study groups and facilitating communication with tutors. However, Mbukusa (2009) and Haufiku (2010), reporting on similar issues, found out that distance learners face challenges or barriers of having inadequate LSS due to the dispersed nature of distance learners situated in various parts of the country.

(iii) LS experiences in Mauritius
In Mauritius, as earlier on reported by Jheengut (1998) and confirmed by Onwe (2013), LS experiences include induction session and face-to-face meetings with tutors who provide feedback through marked assignments. Learners receive further support through phone tutorials, audio conferencing, peer group meetings and counselling.

(iv) LS experiences in Uganda
Contrary to the impression given by Dzimbo (2001) and Bbuye (2006) that LS experiences in Ugandan universities were deficient in interactive activities, Onwe (2013) argues that LS in Uganda appears satisfactorily provided through seven upcountry IACE
centres that offer study materials in order to assist learners to complete their assignments. The ODL institutions offer face-to-face orientation sessions that introduce learners to the tutors and course requirements, as well as prepare learners for examinations. Learners engage in organised group studies coupled with group or individual counselling. Library services are obtained on campus (Onwe, 2013).

(v) LS experiences in the Caribbean Countries
UNICEF (2012) reports LSP in the Caribbean countries. Similar to what is found in most Sub-Saharan countries, LSP in the Caribbean countries that use ODL as a delivery mode is also limited and inadequate to the extent that quality, learner enhancement and success are seriously affected. Learners are also affected by barriers such as inadequate or ineffective communication that creates feelings of isolation among and in between learners. This leads to learner dissatisfaction and drop out without completion.

Whilst the selected countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (under section 2.4.2 (a) seem to take LS as a priority, there is no evidence that these descriptions of LS have been derived from what learners say they want. What comes out of the analysis of these descriptions of LS shows a generalised, uniform type of LSP that is devoid of in-depth study of learners’ andragogical needs and characteristics. Without input of knowledge of learners’ needs and characteristics, adult education practitioners may find it difficult to formulate strategies appropriate enough to enable learners to achieve academic success. This study
will fill in the gap to find out how learners really experience and what they actually want in their studies in order to effectively inform LSP in the ZOU.

2.4.2 (b) Empirical studies carried out on LSP in selected ODL contexts: Deficiencies identified

The need for LS in ODL derives from the recognition that distance learners go through their studies whilst separated from their education providers (Holmberg, 2003, Lee, 2003; Moore, 2003; Thorpe, 2003). It is this separation that causes feelings of isolation and loneliness among learners, hence, the need for appropriate LSS. Appropriate LSS, according to Ipaye (2007), provide a warm and supportive atmosphere that enables learners to achieve self-confidence, thus, assisting them to achieve personal success in their individual academic and life goals. Conscious of this power of LS on learners’ success, it has become the major motivation for many ODL institutions to find out what they are doing in relation to LSP. This study has reviewed current studies in literature that investigated LSP in different ODL institutions and contexts, with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa in which the present study context is situated. Overleaf are such selected studies whose review informs the current researcher towards developing further insights into the goals of this study.

(i) Study by Gatsha and Evans (2010) in Botswana
Gatsha and Evans (2010) carried out a study on distance learners situated in the remotest and most marginalised parts of Botswana. The researchers used a mixed-method approach to document information from the participants about their perceptions and
experiences with LSP at these remote ODL contexts in Botswana. Results indicated that LS was constrained because learners faced challenges that included geographical and psychological isolation in terms of distance and connectivity. Curriculum content did not resonate well with the environment and the medium of instruction used was a barrier to learning. Financial resources did not allow equal opportunities for accessing educational resources for those learners. Worse still, policy statements raised expectations that could not be met. For these reasons, the study (by Gatsha and Evans, 2010) recommended that these institutions prioritise stakeholder support, develop infrastructure for ICT and libraries, mobilise financial resources to enhance LS initiatives and ensure that the learning support, particularly of the language used, was integrated and embedded in the teaching and learning materials.

(ii) Study by Bbuye (2006) in Uganda
Bbuye (2006) conducted a study to establish the status of LS in Ugandan ODL universities, and to establish possible strategies that could be adopted to develop relevant and efficient LSS within Ugandan ODL universities. The study used a qualitative paradigm that employed interviews, focus group discussions, participatory experiences, and observation and documentary checklists to solicit data from the participants. Similar to what Gatsha and Evans (2010) found out, Bbuye’s (2006) findings revealed that support for the distance learner was not sufficient in universities, and that although it involved tutoring and study- centre activities, interactive teaching/learning was absent. However, it was observed that the activities that were already in existence, if organised
systematically, would improve the organisation and implementation of LSS for the learner.

Earlier on in 2001, Dzimbo (2001) had also identified some deficiencies in LSP in some Ugandan universities. Dzimbo (2001) carried out a study on LSP at Makerere University in Uganda. He found out that the LSS existing then were not fully developed since the distance learners at this university were supported primarily through face-to-face sessions and print-based materials. ICT development was still in its infancy.

(iii) Study by Baloyi (2013) at the University of South Africa (UNISA)
A similar study to that of Bbuye, (2006) on LSP but this time generating data from lecturers’ perspectives, was carried out by Baloyi (2013). Baloyi (2013) carried out a qualitative study on lecturers’ views on LS in the Department of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) at UNISA. The study found out that accessibility of some LSS such as tutorials, communication and collaboration between lecturers and learners was a cause for concern. The study revealed challenges faced by rural learners in accessing the internet and other facilities. Whilst modern ICT was in place at UNISA, LSP was hampered by lecturers’ unfamiliarity with the use of some of these advanced technologies such as myUNISA, hence, the study recommended further training for lecturers in computer literacy and ICT.
(iv) Study by Dzakiria (2005) at the Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)
Outside Sub-Saharan Africa, Dzakiria (2005) carried out a qualitative study on a cohort of distance learners doing their studies at the UUM. The study investigated learners’ views, experiences and perspectives on the role of LSS provided at UUM. Similar to findings revealed by studies in Sub-Saharan Africa discussed earlier on, Dzakiria’s (2005) study singled out the much-talked about issue of isolation and alienation of distance learners from their tutors as the biggest hurdle to LSP. Participants reported feelings of frustration and disappointment due to lack of sufficient contact with their tutors as factors killing their motivation to learn. The study also revealed that learners were taking too long to receive feedback on questions at a distance, had difficulties in communication and asking for help and possessed inadequate technological skills.

The study recommended urgent training and development for distance practitioners to provide timely feedback and make the LSS reach distance learners as much as possible in order to minimise frustrations. The issue of learner frustration had also been reported elsewhere by Hara and Kling (1999) whose study on a Web-based distance education course at a major U.S. university suggested that learners’ frustrations emanated from three sources, namely: receiving delayed feedback, battling with ambiguous instructions and experiencing technical related problems. The study by Hara and Kling (1999) concluded that these frustrations inhibited access to educational opportunities.
Analysing these studies, it is apparent that the point being emphasised is that learners want support (Tait, 2000), given that their ODL contexts render them separate and isolated from their tutors and from the whole of the institutional administrative staff. The goal of the institutions, therefore, is to close this gap by putting in place well informed LS systems. The findings in the discussed studies carried out in most ODL contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa, show convincing evidence that these institutions are performing below expectations in terms of providing effective LSS to their learners. The LS systems (cited in the studies) manifest deficiencies or inadequacies probably engendered by lack of informed decisions by distance education practitioners or their lack of knowledge of what learners want. The same scenario is also evidenced by recent studies on LSP in the Zimbabwean context as reported by Kangai, Rupande and Rugonye (2011); Mapolisa (2012); Chadamoyo and Dumbu (2012); Chadamoyo and Ngwarai (2012); Mupa, Kurasha and Chiome (2013). Two other such studies carried out on the Zimbabwean context, that is, one by Ndudzo (2013) and the other by Mwenje and Saruchera (2013) are briefly discussed below.

(v) **Study by Ndudzo (2013) on LSP in the ZOU**
In Zimbabwe, Ndudzo (2013) conducted a descriptive survey design to find out the extent to which distance learners in the ZOU were using or were satisfied by the LSS provided by the institution. Results of the study showed that the LSS that were being provided by the ZOU, were generally underutilised. Perhaps it was going to be interesting if the study had shown that what was being provided in terms of LSS was
what learners wanted because providing LSS that conflicted with learners’ needs could have been the cause for the underutilisation.

The study by Ndudzo (2013) recommended that the institution under study should increase access to LSS through improving the quality of modules, increasing tutorial hours, updating the university website and making it more interactive, as well as moving towards aligning the LSS to the learners’ needs. Aligning LSS to the learners’ needs is the whole essence of the present study as it seeks to enlighten distance education practitioners on how to provide LSS based on learners’ needs and not just on what ODL institutions are prepared to provide.

(vi) Study by Mwenje and Saruchera (2013) on LSP in the ZOU
Mwenje and Saruchera (2013) carried out a similar study to that of Ndudzo (2013). The aim was to assess the extent to which learners’ satisfaction and expectations could be used to enhance quality service provision in the ZOU. Mixed methods were used to solicit data from participants. Whilst the results showed that learners were generally satisfied with the LSS provided, their study also found out that, on the whole, the institution did not prioritise learners’ perspectives as tools for quality service enhancement. This conclusion alone paints a bleak picture about the way LS is provided in the institution, hence, something seriously needs to be done, with respect to acknowledging learners’ perspectives as a critical factor in informing decisions on LSP in ODL. This is consistent with Ozoglu’s (2009) argument which points out that support systems that do not account for the opinions and preferences of target learners would be incomplete and misguided.
2.4.3 Question number 3: How do learners describe what they want regarding LSP in ODL?

2.4.3 (a) Need for learner support in ODL

Several authors in literature (Holmberg, 2003; Moore, 2003; Simpson, 2002; Thorpe, 2003) provide evidence that suggests the need for LS in ODL. This is in recognition of the notion that the provision of LS is necessitated by the idea that learners want it (Tait, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) believes that whether a learner is capable or not capable a learner at any one stage or level needs support from some more experienced mature persons in order for him/her to cross the zone of proximal development (ZPD), or what Moore (1990) refers to as the ‘transactional distance.’ In light of this position, it may not be reasonable to suggest that LSS are meant for learners with less than adequate skills, who are to be removed when they (learners) are equipped with these skills or when institutional attrition challenges have been resolved. In other words, LSS should not be treated as a temporary measure but as central and playing a major role in making learners succeed in their academic and career endeavours, regardless of the institution experiencing retention problems or not (Brindley, 1995; Dzakiria, 2005; Baloyi, 2013).

There could be other reasons why LS of different types should be provided at different stages of learners. Dowling and Ryan (2007) suggest that it is at these stages that ODL institutions can plan and have the opportunity to provide appropriate LSS that maximise learner retention and overcome feelings of isolation of those mature learners who would have left formal education long back (Simpson, 2002; Mills, 2003). For example, the
National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) has formulated a LSS that aims to clarify learners’ real needs through reconciling the conflicting demands of home and work and minimising problems that are in connection with isolation as well as with problems resulting from previous experiences (Ipaye, 2007).

2.4.4 Question number 4: How do learners describe andragogical strategies they consider most appropriate for learner success in ODL?

2.4.4 (a) Andragogical implications to LSP in ODL

The theme of andragogical philosophy that threads through this study underscores the idea of self-directed learning (Tuquero, 2011) that learners become who they are as they mature with age. According to Knowles (1984) and also highlighted by Blondy (2007), self-directed learning implies that adult learners experience a deep psychological need to be perceived and treated by others as being capable of taking responsibilities for themselves. Thus, by applying the andragogical principles and practices derived from the unique characteristics of adults as learners, certain outcomes are bound to occur better than if those principles and practices were not used (Clardy, 2006). Emphasising this assertion, Knowles (1975:14) in his book “Self-Directed Learning” wrote:

----there is converging evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught. They enter into learning more purposefully and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners.
What this implies in turn is that as adult educators plan for adult learning, they capitalise and take advantage of adult learner characteristics in order to maximise learning experiences of these mature learners. In other words, it is when adult educators are familiar with the andragogical characteristics that they are better informed about the design and implementation of appropriate LS strategies in given contexts.

To reflect upon Knowles’ (1984) ideas more critically, Clardy (2006) is convinced that two basic questions lie at the centre of adult educational phenomenon:

1. Do adults have unique learning requirements and needs for which the educational process should be tailored in order to produce the best practices?

2. If so, what are the best way(s) to provide educational experiences to adults?

These two questions captured so much relevance and attention to the extent that the researcher found it necessary to peruse more literature that was likely inclined to address the two questions. Coincidentally, an attempt to address the first question was done in section 2.4.1 page 53 of this study, leaving the following section 2.4.4 (b) to address the second question.

2.4.4 (b) Best ways to provide andragogical educational strategies to adult learners

(i) The role of adult educators

In order to provide the best ways of educational experiences, literature provides that adult educators should understand the andragogical process and assumptions (Knowles, 1980;
What this means is that the adult educators should employ a constructivist approach that calls for cooperative, guided interactions between the tutor and the learner with many resources made available to the learner (Vygotsky, 1978). During these interactions, the tutor (adult educator), takes the role of the facilitator who encourages and guides the learner to develop his/her own potential through creating knowledge based on prior experiences. In doing this, Knowles (1984) calls upon educators to follow a seven step andragogical process in the planning and practices of the andragogical programme. Henscke (2009) summarises the seven step andragogical process as follows:

**Step 1**

Adult educators or ODL institutions should establish an environmental climate conducive to adult learning. This means that adult educators should provide both a physical and psychological environment that generates a sense of mutual respect, collaborativeness, mutual trust, supportiveness, openness, authenticity, pleasure and humanness.

**Step 2**

A mutual planning procedure should be created that acknowledges the learner’s potential (whether alone or in groups) in planning and participating in decisions of what is to be learned, how it is learned and when it is learned. Whilst many critiques, for example, Jarvis (1984), Hartree (1984) and Devenport (1987) may argue that not all learners are capable of planning their own learning goals, Knowles (1978) strongly feels that this is the cardinal principle of adult learning.
Step 3

Adult educators should be capable of accommodating adult learners’ own needs by identifying the desired learning competencies and juxtaposing these against the learner’s current abilities. In this way, a self-assessment of what the learner wants to learn and what support he/she wants, is reached.

Step 4

Adult educators should help learners formulate their own learning objectives although this should not be the sole and final basis for defining objectives (Clardy, 2006)). However, Rossman (2001) believes that the formulation of learning objectives presents an excellent opportunity for the adult learner to respond to expressed or felt needs and to be an active player in deciding and judging the learning outcomes.

Step 5

Adult learners should be involved in the designing of their learning programmes. This means that learners should participate in selecting and planning the appropriate sequence of activities carried out to achieve the specified objectives. To make it more meaningful, activities should be planned in line with situational contexts of learners, as well as the institutional capacity to provide the required supportive resources.
Step 6

At this point, the tutor, acting as a facilitator and resource person, identifies a number of methods, resources and materials, including time that he/she should use in order to achieve the objectives. For example, a tutor can organise face-to-face tutorials, group discussions, or make it possible for learners to access a wide range of learning resources that help them clarify learning expectations.

Step 7

Finally, adult learners should be involved in evaluating their own learning experiences, including their learning outcomes, adequacy of learning, as well as their progress with the material (Clardy, 2006).

In view of the foregoing steps, Knowles (1980) admits that these steps do not have to be applied invariably. Darden (2014) concurs by stating that an andragogical theory is relative and is not a one-size-fit all approach. As such, tutors as well as learners have to be selective and sensitive to “fitness of purpose” for one to realise an andragogical experience or in the words of Jerby, Hoover and Giambatista (2015:30), “a whole person experiential learning.” Otherwise, if selection of appropriate objectives, methods, activities and resources is not followed prudently, then the learning activities may turn out to be more pedagogical than andragogical, resulting in the learner being side-lined in activities that he/she is purporting to be the main participant. The main issue here is that
each adult learner should decide and be involved in what is to be learned. For this reason, adult educators should know what learners want so that during learning encounters at any given point and context, an andragogical experience and practice are enhanced and realised by learners. To that effect, an andragogical experience can be defined as a situation when a learner becomes involved and feels in charge and in control of the learning process, with the tutor acting as a facilitator or guide (Knowles, 1984).

(ii) The role of ODL institutions

In applying andragogical learning practices, ODL institutions have a major role to play. In playing this role, the missing link, which has been the running theme in the review of literature in this study, has been the practice of ODL institutions providing what they consider best for learners instead of focusing on what learners believe are their needs and interests (Blondy, 2007). This means that what ODL institutions could be providing could be a mismatch to what learners’ want, a position which can be corrected more positively if ODL institutions become familiar with an andragogical practice.

With regards the role of institutional instructors acting as facilitators, Jung (2009) opines that instructors should promote various interactive activities that focus more on adult learners’ experiences and ideas and less on the context itself. This means the institution’s role would be to provide LSS that are responsive to these adult learner needs and experiences. Brindley (1995) had earlier on suggested goals that would guide institutions
on the implementation of andragogical principles and the development of appropriate LSS for distance learners. These principles are stated overleaf:

1. Institutions should aim to develop independent learners who are capable of taking responsibility for their own learning, as well as being instrumental and active in the learning process.

2. Institutions should empower learners to own learning contracts in which curriculum and assessment methods are negotiated with learners and where learners can share their experiences with one another and challenge and validate each other’s ideas and opinions.

3. Institutions should be capable of personalising the learning system to the extent that the adult learners are privileged to enjoy exceptions to certain rules in order to accommodate their complicated lives.

4. Institutions should democratise the education system through offering opportunities for learners to inform themselves so as to make better decisions and improve their skills.

5. Institutions should adopt early engagement initiatives that help prospective learners discover themselves and make informed decisions about their education.

In light of the above suggested principles, proper implementation of these would make learners avoid challenges engendered by bureaucratic red tape which in turn causes
confusion and frustration, as well as causing difficulties in receiving service that might give learners access to appropriate learning opportunities.

2.4.4 (c) Strategies that bring about andragogical experiences: Empirical research carried out.

The study sought literature that describes empirical research carried out to demonstrate strategies that bring about andragogical learning experiences to adult learners. Two such classical examples of empirical research have been identified: one by Dearnley (2003) and the other by Lentell and O’Rourke (2003).

Dearnley (2003) carried out a study on the experiences of adult nurses studying an upgrading course through open learning in the UK. The results were that these mature learners adopted strategies at work for sharing information and for giving and receiving reassurance from colleagues and friends. Learners also turned to peers and tutors from their tutorial groups. These strategies helped them to sustain their motivation as they faced the challenges of change. They also experienced a range of personal and professional development characterised by changing ways of knowing, and increased motivation for living and learning.

Lentell and O’Rourke (2003) in COL (2005) asked a group of distance educators to propose strategies for tutorial support at a workshop presented at Cambridge Conference on ODL in 2003. The following strategies were proposed: (a) decentralising the
organisation, planning and execution of learner support, making it as local as possible and calling upon local resources for tutors or mentors from teachers and other professionals, for example, health care workers, (b) supporting learner groups by providing materials specifically for group work in addition to the teaching materials, (c) developing self-assessment tools that groups of learners could use and (d) linking learning to the workplace and involving employees.

COL (2005) synthesised ideas from the above research and proposed andragogical strategies underpinned by:

(a) Strengthening community-based delivery approaches at study centres that were enriched with learning resources such as reference books, dictionaries, and visual aids, as well as ready-made semi-structured resources to support and extend the tutor’s repertoire.

(b) Introducing a two-tier tutorial system coupled with interactive technologies and broadcasting.

(c) Introducing shorter life programmes with regard to duration and management of courses.

(d) Integrating with established mainstream systems such as polytechnics and high schools that allow access to educational infrastructure by distance learners.
In view of the above proposals, integrating and collaborating with established mainstream systems is critical to distance learning institutions. For instance, at the ZOU, some regional district learning centres may be situated in areas where such established mainstream infrastructure is scanty and inaccessible. It, therefore, becomes imperative that institutions find alternative ways that enable learners to access facilities that fulfil the teaching and learning functions of distance learning. Most importantly, institutions should liaise with their learners regarding best possible locations for such infrastructure for use by learners.

2.4.4 (d) General considerations when providing LSS in ODL
In the literature so far discussed in this study, there is growing evidence that recognises the need to reflect more critically on the role that the provision of LSS plays when considerations for adult learner needs come first. ODL institutions claim to satisfactorily provide LSS such as administrative support, academic support, guidance and counselling support, technical support, and peer support, among other LSS. Brindley (1995) argues that very little attention has been paid to how these interactions enhance learning, particularly when they are linked to andragogical needs and characteristics. To this effect, general considerations when providing different elements of LSS are hereby discussed.

(i) Administrative support services
In the provision of administrative LS, literature on ODL provides that ODL institutions have to take cognisance of the fact that their learners learn whilst separated from them
(COL, 2005; Jerby et al., 2015). As such, ODL administrators should ensure that soon after learners have signed their admission forms, issues pertaining to administrative LSS, for instance, adequacy and availability of educational packages such as tutorial letters, courses on offer, assignment topics, important due dates and scheduled events, including orientation and weekend school tutorials, are noted and are in place. Administrative procedures, such as payment of fees, registration and choice of courses, should be properly managed so that learners have a one-stop service encounter with the institution. Information pertaining to where and how to access these services should be readily available. Usun (2004) further suggests that certain kinds of information and services provided by specific or specialised officers such as technicians, including who to contact when important decisions are made, should be availed to learners well in advance. If certain materials are to be dispatched, for example, examinations materials, then precautions have to be made regarding security, storage and venues. Putting in place all these services makes institutions look more organised and ready to serve to the best interests and approval of these mature learners who want to be in control and in charge of their self-directed learning.

(ii) Academic LSS

Academic support services focus on facilitating collaborative learning and increasing interactivity between distance learners and tutors or among learners themselves (Lee, 2003). These academic support services include packages such as tutorials, academic advice, assignment and examination writing skills, study skills, as well as research skills (Usun, 2004). As such, tutors need to know the learners’ needs and interests, including
their socio-cultural environments, before these packages are offered. Issues to deal with assignment writing and feedback, weekend school tutorials and library services have to be handled in line with learners’ ability to successfully access these services. Imagining that all services to be accessed by adult distance learners could be more or less the same as those accessed by on-campus learners, it means a lot of considerations have to be made by the ODL service providers. In particular is the recognition that distance learners join distance education programmes whilst inadequately prepared to cope with the special rigours and requirements of independent study (COL, 2005). In addition, they have not yet assessed their own needs, educational goals or learning styles. In this scenario, it is when personal LS systems become vital and his type of support system is normally provided by tutors. Given that tutors serve as an interface between the learners and the institution, Mupa et al. (2013) indicate that the tutors’ role then becomes vital but at the same time, they should not claim ownership of all knowledge. Basically, their role should be to direct learners’ learning through clarifying objectives, marking assignments and giving feedback, providing face-to-face tutoring, and initiating interactivity that responds to individual adult learner needs and interest.

(iii) Guidance and counselling support services

The debate on application of guidance and counselling services has been widely researched (Tapfumaneyi, 2013). The debate borders on the observations made by Kangai et al. (2011) that the provision of guidance and counselling services to distance learners rests on three factors, namely: the nature or characteristics of adult learners, the
capacity of the institution to cope with demands and the level of the technological development the institution’s country has reached. Of the three factors, it is the andragogical demands (adult learners’ characteristics) that determine whether an institution has the capacity to provide adequate guidance and counselling services to its clients and what technological platforms should be in place (Tapfumaneyi, 2013). Although most ODL institutions have established LSS units or personnel for purposes of providing effective guidance and counselling services it is not certain that learners access it. Mbukusa (2009), studying about the extent of access to tertiary education in rural areas of Namibia, casts doubt on whether distance learners operating in remote areas of their countries or working in rural areas equally receive the same quality services as their counterparts living in more technologically enabled environments. Kangai et al. (2011) raise similar sentiments. To further clarify this issue, Gil-Jaurema (2014), discussing LSS in ODL, seems to point out that this aspect of guidance and counselling services, especially with regard to wellness and health promotion, as well as considering the physical and emotional aspects of on-line distance learners, has not been fully explored. This study attempted to tow this line of thinking by contributing more empirical evidence with regard provision of guidance and counselling services to distance adult learners using ZOU as a case study.

(iv) Peer support services

Support from other people who are more experienced than the distance learners themselves, at whatever given point and time, is a subject well researched by Vygotsky
(1978) in his theory of learning through social construction and his principle of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978), just like Tait (2002), is convinced that learners need peer support, that is, support from colleagues, alumni, co-workers, family members and community members. Learning derived from a community of learners is rich because of its diversity in approaches, ideas, views, and opinions. This cross-fertilisation of information and interactivity give distance learners a better chance of understanding more deeply and more widely.

(v) Technological support services

Gao (2012) defines technological support as the resources that learners can access in order to carry out the learning process. It also includes monitoring the efficient operation of media and technical assistance. For example, learners, particularly those in remote areas, as well as some older learners, may need technical support in using various computer functions or mobile phones in accessing various internet and on-line services. Due to the developments in technological services that now dictate the pace and direction of distance on-line learners, Simpson (2012) argues that frustration and disengagement by non-technical distance learners may creep in. Hence, the sooner the institution provides training in IT skills, the better for the distance learners. Technical skills are also vital as they enable distance learners to interact with others through e-mails, face-to-face tele-conferencing, Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, and other social media platforms (Lambert, Erickson, Alhramelah, Rhoton, Lindbeck, Sammons, 2014).
Garrison (1989) observes that since the tutor and adult learner are separated in ODL and the two-way communication is necessary, then technology is required to support the educational transaction. Lundin (1993) concurs with this sentiment by asserting that technology helps education to (a) do things better, (b) do things previously impractical and (c) do new things. Bates (1995) also believes that technology is more learner-centred and produces better quality interactions between the learner and the information as well as between the learner and other learners. As such education service providers need to consider how technology can offer approaches better suited to adult learning (than ever before) by adapting and modifying their approaches in novel ways and through effective technology integration (Price and Kirkwood, 2008).

With regards to effective technology integration, Lambert et al. (2014) are convinced that when implemented successfully, effective technology integration enables learners to construct their own learning using computer hardware and software tools. This arrangement allows learners to experience self-directed and self-driven learning, which is the hallmark of andragogical philosophy (Knowles, 1980). To benefit fully from an andragogical self-driven learning, Manganello, Falsetti, Spalazzi and Leo (2013) suggest that adult educators should create a Personalised Learning Environment (PLE) which, when fully utilised, should eventually culminate into a Personalised Knowledge Space (PKS). Cumulatively, these two learning environments enhance ODL by:

(a) allowing learners to easily select, organise and retrieve the resources they want at their own pace and discretion,
(b) streamlining the interaction process among learners,

(c) allowing trust and personal relationships among fellow learners and tutors to develop, and

(d) allowing opportunity for learners to develop community learning (Cercone, 2008).

Whilst all these ideas on the provision of technology to adult learners point to the possibility of creating platforms for facilitation of learning, there could be some challenges when it comes to andragogical considerations. COL (1995) observes that a common practice prevalent in ODL institutions is that of providing technological resources on the basis of the institutional capacities to provide them instead of basing on the needs and concerns of the adult learners. As such, institutions sometimes provide what they think adult learners need but this may not be the same with what these learners actually need.

In the UK, Price and Kirkwood (2008:4) report the extent of the impact the use of ICT has had on higher education as it brings with it “heightened levels of expectations in terms of speed, increased access, personalised services and on-demand services.” As such, more deliberate and robust strategies need to be crafted in order to meet these expectations especially those that benefit adult learners in ODL contexts. Bates (1991) cited in COL (1999:9) suggests that to meet some of these ICT demands, institutions
should be guided by a number of factors. These factors, summarised by the acronym ACTIONS, are outlined on page below.

A. Access: this refers to where learners will learn, that is, at home, at work, at local centres. ‘A’ also stands for ‘availability’ and ‘affordability’.

A. Costs: what are the capital and recurrent costs? Which costs are fixed and variable?

T. Teaching/tutoring functions: what are the presentational requirements of the subject? What teaching/tutoring and learning approaches are required?

I. Interaction and user-friendliness. Do learners require a great deal of training to use this technology?

O. Organisation: what changes in organisation will be required to facilitate the use of a particular technology?

N. Novelty. To what extent will the ‘trendiness’ of this technology stimulate funding and innovation? To what extent will use of this technology enhance learner interest and motivation?

S. Speed. How quickly and easily can material be updated and changed? How quickly can new courses be produced using this technology?

Generally, what the above factors imply is what Perraton (2012) perceives distance teaching should be. Perraton (2012) perceives the central role of distance tutors as that of discovering the educational needs which the provision of LSS is going to meet, and to relate the teaching technologies to the local, and even to individual needs of particular learners. What this means is that the provision of any LS should be dialogical, a two-way process that enables tutors to learn from their learners while at the same time assisting them.
When wrapping up the discussion so far done regarding learners’ needs and interests in relation to provision of LSP, one thing that has prominently emerged is that learners’ needs and interests cannot be mass produced (Perraton, 2012). As such, educators should have certain considerations as guidelines when planning LSP. Cercone (2008:138), drawing ideas from the andragogical philosophy (Knowles, 1980), summarises some of these initial considerations that learners, as adults, need.

1. Adults need to be actively involved in the learning process.

2. Adults need scaffolding to be provided by the instructor. Scaffolding should promote self-reliance, and it should allow learners to perform activities they were unable to perform without this support.

3. Adults have a pre-existing learning history and will need support to work in the new learner-centred paradigm.

4. Adults need the instructor acting as a facilitator.

5. Adults need consideration of their prior experience. The instructor should acknowledge this prior experience. Adults need to connect new knowledge to past events.

6. Adults need to see the link between what they are learning and how it will apply to their lives.

7. Adults need to feel that learning focuses on issues that directly concern them and want to know what they are going to learn, how the learning will be conducted, and why it is important. The course should be learner-centred versus teacher-centred.

8. Adults need to test their learning as they go along, rather than receive background theory.

9. Adult learning requires a climate that is collaborative, respectful, mutual, and informal.

10. Adults need to self-reflect on the learning process and be given support for transformational learning.
11. Adults need dialogue and social interaction must be provided. They need to collaborate with other learners.

COL (1999) cites a few examples as shown in table 2.2 below (modified by the researcher) in order to clarify implications for providing some specific LS services meant to address specific administrative and academic andragogical needs and characteristics,

**Table 2.2: Andragogical implications for the design of specific LSS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Andragogical need</th>
<th>Learner support strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>If learners are paying for the course themselves</em></td>
<td>Then institutions should avoid expensive media; and also provide appropriate fees payment arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>If learners have a fixed amount of time available for studying</em></td>
<td>Then tutors have to adjust the times they are available to learners and also to adjust times they think learners are able to commit themselves to tutorial attendance and to completing assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>If learners do not see any reason why they should send in assignments regularly for correction and feedback</em></td>
<td>Then tutors should emphasise how doing assignments and receiving their tutor’s feedback comments might benefit them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>If learners have considerable experience in the subject covered by the course</em></td>
<td>Then tutors should appeal to that experience by using examples suggested by learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>If learners are women and men</em></td>
<td>Then tutors should make sure that arrangements for tutorials and the language, examples and behaviour used by all learner personnel, are clearly welcoming to, and inclusive of men and women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>If learners have to travel great distances to reach centres</em></td>
<td>Then tutors should be careful to make the tutorial programme as convenient, effective and useful as possible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: COL (1999:2-5). Learner Support in Open and Distance Learning: Training toolkit: Commonwealth of Learning and Asian Development Bank*
2.4.5 Question number 5: To what extent can ODL institutions provide a LSF that matches adult learner needs and characteristics in ODL?

2.4.5 (a) LSF in ODL

As institutions grapple to address adult learner concerns in ODL, one of the demands they should provide is comprehensive LSF that meet learners’ needs and characteristics, as well as accommodating the demands of the institutional contexts. In ODL, learners’ needs and interests should not be taken for granted but they should be acknowledged as depending on context in which learning takes place or in which learners are situated. Although the technological challenges that characterise most ODL contexts are real, Block (2010) in Baloyi (2013) argues that it is the choice of technology that can become the force behind access to equitable LSS by all learners regardless of location, social or economic circumstances. Nevertheless, once an institution decides to offer ODL, it should be its culture, value systems and contextual situation that should dictate and drive the provision and delivery of LS in line with andragogical characteristics of the learners (Brindley, 1995). To this end, a successful learner support service is a result of the learner’s awareness of everything that goes on in the programme from the day of registration up to graduation.

Due to the proliferation of ODL institutions across the globe, it may follow that these institutions have adopted and adapted various learner support models or frameworks that fulfil functions serving their respective learners. However, research has shown that most of the existing learner support frameworks in today’s ODL institutions are designed from
the institution’s point of view, not from that of a learner (COL, 2005). As such, learners are often forced to go to various offices to receive support services that conflict with information, services and advice they want (Floyd and Powell, 2004). To this end, when designing frameworks for LSS, institutions should ask themselves a number of questions that seek to verify whether learner support frameworks are meeting the needs of those served. One way of doing this would be to critique all assumptions of whatever framework or model adopted so as to establish their appropriateness, not only for the institutional context but for the learners’ cultural and environmental contexts, including those in deprived and less privileged areas.

To review the subject of the LSF more practically, the study selected the following LSF, found in literature, beginning with the earliest ones emanating from the industrialised models of distance education (Brindley, 2008).

(i) LSF by Allan Tait of the OUUK

Allan Tait also of the OUUK (Tait, 2000) developed a learner support framework slightly different from the generic framework of the OUUK. Tait (2000) drew six elements which he considered were crucial to be part of a learner support framework. The six elements included learner characteristic, course or programme demands, geography, management system, scalability, and technological structure. A brief description of these characteristics is given below.
(a) Learner characteristics: These are the ones that influence the design and development of an institutional LSF, and, hence, make up an essential element of that framework.

(b) Course or programme demands: These influence the manner tutorials and assessment of a course or programme is conducted.

(c) Scalability: This relates to the intended volume of activity depending on the number of learners enrolled.

(d) Geography: This relates to the density of population in both rural and urban areas, that is, investment in terms of learner support, should be planned in relation to, for example, transport availability and other costs.

(e) Management of systems: Management of information flow, quality assurance or institutional budgets should influence, or are influenced by the LSS adopted by an institution.

(f) Technological infrastructure: These are technologies which learners themselves have access to and technologies that the ODL institution can afford to provide (Tait, 2000).

Notable on Tait’s (2003) framework is the consideration of learners’ characteristics which, in a way, influence and guide the formulation of the LS of any given institution practising ODL. In recognition of this component, this study argued that any architecture
of a LSF should begin by considering andragogical needs of adult learners if it is to serve the intended purpose (Blondy, 2007).

(ii) LSF for distance learners at community colleges in the United States (US)

Another type of LSF is that proposed by Floyd and Powell (2004). Floyd and Powell (2004) in their book (Chapter 7) on ‘New Roles for Learner Support’ propose a model committed to help community colleges in the US reconfigure their support services for distance learners. The model, called the ‘Inclusive Learner Services Process Model’ focuses on meeting the needs of learners based on collaborative planning and engagement with those learners. The model identifies five phases that include (a) the Learner Intake Phase; (b) the Learner Intervention Phase; (c) the Learner Support Phase; (d) the Learner Transition Phase; and (e) the Measurement of Effectiveness Phase (Floyd and Powell, 2004).

(a) The Learner Intake Phase involves the setting of goals and assessing of learners’ readiness for learning, including their desire and ability to engage in distance learning. LSS embraced in this phase include the admissions, pre-enrolment assessment, registration, financial aid, information technology and orientation.

(b) The Learner Intervention Phase assists learners in self-development and independent learning as well as providing learners with instruction on learner success strategies, technology training and on-line faculty advising.
(c) The Learner Support Phase involves academic advising, instructional support and tutoring, library and bookstore services, disability services, networking, as well as offering study tips and test taking tips.

(d) The Learner Transition Phase acknowledges and recognises the idea that career development and counselling services are key to learner success, hence, career, transfer, and job placement services are provided during this phase.

(e) The Measurement Phase assesses retention, graduation and persistence rates, reviews on-line course evaluations, accountability and use of feedback.

A closer look at these phases projects the idea that the learner comes first; hence, all programmes and services should be designed and implemented with learner success as the primary goal.

(iii) LSF for non-traditional learners at the University College Dublin (UCD)

Similar to a LSF reported by Floyd and Powell (2004) is a framework proposed by Dowling and Ryan (2007). Dowling and Ryan (2007) present a LSF based on the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) programme at the University College Dublin (UCD) premised upon the ‘centrality of the learner.’ The framework advances the debate beyond the traditional dichotomy in LS between institutional academic and non-academic responsibilities. It demonstrates how institutional responses, regardless of the framework adopted, can translate learners’ needs into learner success. Dowling and Ryan’s (2007) learner support framework has five phases:
(a) The Day-to-Day Learner Support phase;

During this phase, the institution provides day-to-day academic advisement that responds to administrative queries coming through mobile phones, e-mails, and drop-in service manned by personal tutors. Counselling and advice is also available on module content and assessment and this is further supported by the use of a managed learning environment.

(b) The feedback and Learner Progress phase

During this phase both written individual feedback and general whole class feedback on written coursework are practised with tutors outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the submitted coursework. The timely provision of feedback and close monitoring of progress are necessary, so is the setting of coursework deadlines and proactive management of learner workload.

(c) Study Skills Development phase

UCD offers modules on accredited study skills development at the early stages of a programme. These modules include planning and organising study, learning from lectures, reading, note-taking and memory techniques, referencing guidelines, preparations for examinations, academic writing skills and developing critical thinking skills.

(d) Induction and Learner Integration phase
UCD also provides induction and learner integration services scheduled over a weekend prior to the official programme commencement date. The purpose of the weekend is to ease the learners’ transition into formal education.

(e) Personal Tutors phase

This phase at UCD involves personal tutors who act as administrative managers of the various programmes and are responsible for the provision of academic support outside of the class weekends. This support acts as a central interface between the learner and the institution.

The message meshed in, and permeating through all the above outlined LSF underscores the view that learners’ success is more likely to be realised if the distance learners’ andragogical needs are viewed as a starting point. To this effect, as Tait (2000) argues, LS should not be limited to initial advice or induction, but should be embedded in the curriculum design and in advisory and support services provided by personal tutors throughout their studies. This study is more inclined to agree with this view.

2.5 Gaps Identified
In review of the literature on LS so far discussed, two issues emerge. First, that LS has been defined as ‘all’ interactive activities (academic and non-academic) and ‘all’ services that are provided by an ODL institution and which distance learners can access in order to achieve academic and career success (Thorpe, 2003). In other words, literature seems to have failed to identify what is not LS in ODL except a few instances where authors
mention ‘content’ and ‘production of learning materials’ as exceptions to LSS (Tait, 2002). Whilst acknowledging that there may be exceptions, and when people would want to apply a critical analysis of the argument, there is no reason why researchers cannot contest the inclusion of these two aspects under LSS. For instance, if a learner has to access the learning materials, then the learning materials should have relevant ‘content’ or subject matter, otherwise without relevant content, the learning materials are of no service to the learner. In addition, the learning materials have to be produced and made available to the learner if they are to be of service to the learner. This means, if there is no production of the learning materials, there is also no service to the learner. Following this argument, it means that both content and production of learning materials can be considered as LS elements. The study is, therefore, persuaded to take the view that everything that happens between the learner and the tutor or institution, from the day of learner entry up to the day of exit should be considered as LSS.

Second, where elements that constitute LSS are mentioned in the literature reviewed in this study, the word ‘tutoring’ instead of the word ‘teaching’ has been deliberately used. Tutoring connotes helping another person learn (Tait, 2002) and in ODL this is in line with the andragogical, learner-centred and constructivist approaches (Henschke, 2009). On the other hand, ‘teaching’ connotes ‘transmission of knowledge’ which implies a teacher-centred, pedagogical approach, depicting learners as receptors rather than creators of knowledge (Knowles, 1980). As such, teaching depicts a scenario where a teacher stands in front of a large class and dishes out information to learners as what happens in the traditional or conventional higher education contexts. Thus, comparing the
two approaches (tutoring and teaching) and given the context of distance education (where the learner is separated from the tutor during most of the times) there is no basis to imagine that teaching per se can be of use in ODL, notwithstanding the fact that the word ‘teaching’ is a generic term that can be used to describe any situation where one person helps another person to learn. Following this argument, it is prudent to derive clarification by going back to the question asked by Leach (1996). Leach (1996: 101) asks: “Is there a broad consensus about what ‘supporting individual learning’ might mean in DE?”

The question asked by Leach (1996) in the foregoing paragraph provokes some thoughts and raises a number of issues beginning with re-igniting a long standing discourse on whether it is still relevant to talk of ‘teaching’ in ODL rather than ‘facilitation of learning’. The notion of facilitation of learning or managing learners instead of ‘teaching learners,’ appears to be the issue on the agenda of most modern ODL institutions across the globe (UNESCO, 2002). Whilst it might be difficult for ODL practitioners to know for sure whether learners gain confidence and everything they are supposed to learn after engaging and interacting with various LSS in independent and self-directed learning (Thorpe, 2002), it should be borne in mind that due to the context of distance learning, where learning occurs whilst the learner and tutor are separated (Brindley et al., 2008), LSP can easily displace teaching through provision and use of appropriate, technologically driven, interactive activities and services. Thus, following this line of thought and as evidenced by this study’s literature review, there is more persuasion, as well as becoming more compelling than ever before, for distance education practitioners
to say time is now ripe in ODL institutions to stop using the term ‘teaching’ and all its connotations of ‘transmission of knowledge’ and to replace it with the term LSP in reference to all situations where adult learners are helped to learn (andragogy) in ODL contexts. LSP would also mean that the learning of self-directed adult learners is facilitated through an environment of social interaction and social construction (Ingirige and Goulding, 2009; Wang, Chen, and Anderson, 2014) which is an aspect strongly supported by an andragogical philosophy (Blondy, 2007).

Whilst this idea of conceptualising LSP as a replacement of teaching in ODL may sound far-fetched in the mind of today’s readers, the least that ODL institutions can do is as advocated by Tait (2003) cited by Gil-Jaurema (2014). Tait (2003) advocates a position where ODL institutions should begin focusing on integration of LS with teaching instead of considering LSS as separated from other teaching functions within institutions. Only by adopting this position can ODL institutions be considered useful and stepping towards encapsulating an andragogical philosophy. It is hoped that findings in this study would carry forward this debate.

Finally, in concluding this debate on LS provision to adult learners in ODL, it might seem as though the provision of learner support is the panacea to all adult learner teaching and learning challenges. Yet a reflection on literature on LS provision so far reviewed in this study inherently carries connotative evidence that supports that it is not the provision of LS services per se that transforms the teaching and learning landscape of
ODL learners, but the andragogical advantage they make of its use. This means that there is a need to consider andragogical implications, coupled with a comprehensive, professional, development programme that collaborates with, and incorporates an institution’s senior managers, tutors (including their departmental and faculty board members), and support staff so that appropriate policies, supporting structures and resources are in place for effective and appropriate LS provision and implementation. This then requires a **rethink** of how ODL institutions can support initiatives to provide LSS to their learners in order to achieve both learners’ and institution’s academic success. It is hoped that this study shall interrogate and critique these issues through the lenses of the learners and staff working in an ODL context of which the ZOU is the case study.

### 2.6. Chapter Summary

The chapter was divided into four major subheadings, namely; the conceptual framework, the theoretical framework, empirical studies carried out, and gaps identified in the review of literature. Under conceptual framework, four major concepts were discussed. These were the ODL context, the adult learner concept, the andragogical philosophy, and the learner support concept. Under the theoretical framework section, Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory was identified as the most appropriate theory that informed this study. Under the empirical studies section, selected studies were discussed to bring out learners’ experiences of LSP in different ODL contexts. Examples of LSF used by selected ODL contexts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, were also discussed.
The chapter ended by pointing out gaps identified in the review of literature. The next chapter will discuss the methodology used in the study.
CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction
The previous chapter focused on the review of related literature that informed the formulation of the research problem and research questions. This chapter dwells on themethodology that was used to provide research evidence to the findings. The chapter begins by providing the justification for the philosophical and interpretive stances underpinning the study. It goes on to spell out the selection procedures of participants focusing on the sample, sampling techniques and procedures and research sites from which participants were drawn. This is followed by describing and justifying the data generation instruments and the data analysis procedures used. Issues related to finding the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, as well as the study’s ethical and legal bindings conclude the chapter.

3.2 The Philosophical Underpinnings of the Study
This section describes the ontology, epistemology, theoretical perspective, paradigm, methodology and methods that guided this study.

3.2.1 Ontology
Crotty (2003:10) defines ontology as the “study of being.” Ontology is concerned with what kind of world we are investigating, with the nature of existence and with the structure of reality. Guba and Lincoln (1994) simplify the definition of ontology by stating that the ontological assumptions are those that respond to the question “What is
there that can be known?” or “What is the nature of reality?” In this regard, ontology can be viewed from two different perspectives. Firstly, from the positivist view which believes that the social world is predictable and there is stable law-like reality out there (Seidel, 2010). Secondly from the post-positivist view which believes that there are multiple, emergent, shifting realities out there that can be obtained through subjective experience (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). This study took the post-positivist view which is essentially of a social world of meanings. The researcher assumed that the world that is investigated is a world populated with human beings who have their own thoughts, interpretations and meanings. In this study, this position was justified by the use of the different research methods and techniques of the interpretive design such as interviews and focus group discussions that aimed at interpreting adult learners’ feelings and needs in ODL.

3.2.2 Epistemology
Epistemology is “a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” (Crotty, 2003:3). It is also concerned with answering the questions about “What is knowledge?” and “What do we know about reality?” Thus, the epistemological stance used in this study was constructivism. Constructivism is of the view that all knowledge and meaningful reality is constructed through human interaction and interpretation of the world (Piaget, 2013). That knowledge is developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. In this regard, meaning is not discovered but constructed (Kelliher, 2005). The reason why constructivism was the epistemological stance of this study was that it tried to answer the question” How can the knowledge of andragogical needs and
characteristics enhance the provision of LSS in ODL?” By presenting a case study of adult learners in the ZOU, the construction of meaning was transmitted within an essentially social context through interviews and focus group discussions.

3.2.3 Theoretical Perspectives
Crotty (2003) describes a theoretical perspective as one that informs the research methodology, and thus, providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria. Since the ontology in this present study was mainly concerned with human world of meanings and interpretations, and the epistemological stance was mainly constructivist in nature, it logically followed that interpretivism was the theoretical perspective chosen for this study.

(a) Interpretivism
In order to address the research questions, the researcher in this study employed the interpretivist philosophy based on the ontological assumption that pure reality cannot be known as it can only be interpreted through human senses and experiences, resulting in different perspectives of reality (Scotland, 2012). The interpretivist approach is also based on the underlying assumption of placing people in their social contexts, thereby creating knowledge and having greater opportunity to understand the perceptions they have of their own actions (Kelliher, 2005). According to Myers (2008), the goal of the interpretivist approach is that of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. Contrary to the positivist assumptions that there is an objective reality independent of the observer (Iacono, Brown and Holtham,
interpretivists posit that reality is not objectively determined, but is socially constructed through a variety of data sources (Kelliher, 2005). Simply put, people cannot separate themselves from what they know; meaning, the researcher and the participants under investigation are linked together to an extent that who they are and how they understand the world is a central part of how they understand themselves, others and the world.

With this understanding, the study took the post-positivist view that there is multiple, emergent, shifting reality out there that can be obtained through subjective experience (Seidel, 2010). As such, knowledge claims or findings are created as they emerge through open dialogue in which conflicting interpretations are negotiated amongst research participants. To this effect, the study explored the phenomenon of LSP in the ZOU from the point of view of how learners, staff and the researcher subjectively experienced it.

(b) Hermeneutics
Whilst interpretivism was the dominant philosophy for this study, hermeneutics was also used. Collins (2010) views hermeneutics as another alternative philosophical position that can be embraced within interpretivism, both of which are approaches that “reject the objectivist view that meaning resides within the world independently of consciousness” (Collins, 2010:38). In other words, as Myers (2008) observes, hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation that focuses primarily on understanding and interpreting the meaning of qualitative textual data (Myers, 2008). To this end, in this study, textual documents that
were considered information-rich (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002) were
selected in order to illuminate the phenomenon of LS by getting a deeper understanding
of the meaning of learners’ experiences through using rich written narratives (Ajjawi and
Higgs, 2007). Details of such textual data are given in Appendix J page 323. Thus, given
that both interpretivism and hermeneutics promote the value of qualitative data in pursuit
of knowledge (Kaplan and Maxwell, 1994), it follows that in this study, the researcher
used the qualitative research paradigm which Goldkuhl (2012) affirms is often associated
with interpretivism.

3.2.4 The Research Paradigm
Every research has a paradigm that sets out the study’s intent and puts it in motion whilst
driven by some motivation and expectations of the researcher. According to Krauss
(2005), a research paradigm is a world view or a whole framework of beliefs, values and
methods within which the research takes place and within which the researcher works. It
is the basic system or world view that guides the investigation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).
It also supports the ontological, philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of the
study (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Thus, instead of the positivist or quantitative
research paradigm, this study chose the qualitative research paradigm.

3.2.4 (a) The qualitative research paradigm
A qualitative research paradigm is described by Patton and Cochran (2002) as one that
uses a naturalistic, multi-method approach that seeks to understand phenomena in
context-specific settings, such as a real world setting. With qualitative research, the
researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomena of interest but tries to interpret it in meanings people bring to them (Patton and Cochran, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Golafshani, 2003). It is often framed in opposition to quantitative research paradigm that seeks significance in terms of statistical figures to identify large-scale trends in order to determine causal and correlative relationships between variables (Kraus, 2005). As such, the allure of qualitative research is that it seeks to build a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of ‘lived experiences’ of the participants and conducted in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2015). According to Merriam (2009) and Yin (2011), the task of the qualitative researcher is to discover patterns of meaning that emerge from multiple sources of data and to present these in the participants’ own words. To this effect, this study sought to describe the phenomenon of learners’ experiences with LSP as seen through the lenses of the adult learners and staff at the ZOU. The study went further to investigate the adult learners’ needs and characteristics as presented in the participants’ own words.

3.2.5 The Research Methodology
The research methodology, as opposed to the method, is the “strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of the methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 2003:3).

Creswell (2013) asserts that during investigation in qualitative research, a range of methodologies are used to explain and interpret phenomena. Creswell (2013) outlines five qualitative research methodologies namely; the narrative research method,
phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. For this study, the researcher chose the case study as the research methodology.

3.2.5 (a) The case study research methodology
Whilst many authors in literature have written on the case study approaches (Soy, 1997; George and Bennett, 2004; Baxter and Jack, 2008), they are Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) who are considered by this study to have extensively explored the processes involved. Both Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) emphasise the idea that, like any qualitative design, the case study method is built on the constructivist paradigm that “recognises the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but does not reject outright some notion of objectivity” (Baxter and Jack, 2008:545). In more specific detail, Yin (2003:23) defines the case study method as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.”

As for Baxter and Jack (2008), the case study method provides tools that enable researchers to explore complex phenomena, as well as allow a deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena within their contexts. Tellis (1997) views a case study as an ideal qualitative research method when a holistic in-depth investigation of the phenomenon is needed. Zucker (2009) adds by pointing out that a case study seeks to bring out the details of a phenomenon of interest from the viewpoints of the participants within their real-life contexts and it uses a variety of data sources (Yin,
In other words, issues are explored, not using one lens, but a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood. Through social construction, participants are able to tell their stories and in the process, describe their views of reality. This enables the researcher to better understand the participants’ actions. Because of the flexibility and rigor embedded in this method, it then becomes possible to develop theory, evaluate programmes and develop the necessary interventions (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

Yin (2003) categorises case studies into three types, explanatory, exploratory and descriptive. This study used a descriptive multiple case study which Stake (1995) refers to as instrumental case study. It was descriptive because the researcher was able to describe the phenomenon of LSP in relation to the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). It was instrumental because it enabled the researcher to understand more than what was obvious to the ordinary observer (Stake, 1995).

Since both Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) insist that a case study should have a proposition or theory that will guide the development of a conceptual framework, the researcher’s proposition in this study was “it is only when adult learners say who they are, say what they want, how they learn and how they want taught (andragogy), that education practitioners will be in a position to design and provide more relevant and effective support services to their learners.” The proposition was informed by the social constructivist epistemological underpinning which states that human beings construct
knowledge through social interaction with other actors (Vygotsky, 1978). In order to understand how learners interact with the LSS in their different learning environments the researcher used and presented data generated from multiple research instruments (see section 3.6 page 120) (Neal, Thapa and Boyce, 2006). The instruments solicited and illuminated the learners’ views and perceptions about LSP within their different real-life teaching and learning contexts (Patton, 2002).

Given that the descriptive multiple case study method was preferred in this study, it should also be known that it posed some challenges in that data were often restricted to the participants’ contexts studied, whereas, there could have been some bias in the selection of those participants. In order to mitigate bias, data collected in one context, for example, in RC2 were collated with data collected from another context, for example, RC3 in order to establish authenticity. Furthermore, because of the openness and flexibility in data generation, it was likely that data were overwhelming and more prone to unpredictable and subjective conclusions. However, considering the careful and systematic planning that went into the crafting of the selection procedures regarding participants’ real-life situations (see section 3.2.5 page 110), the analysis of the issues and problems involved, the case study findings (of this study) could still be judged as credible and trustworthy.

3.3 Selection of Participants
Before data generation methods are discussed, it is prudent to begin with how participants in the study were selected.
3.3.1 Population
Marshall (1996) describes a study population as the totality; usually persons, to which the researcher wishes to generalise the study findings. However, unlike the quantitative studies that seek statistical generalisation, Yin (2011) argues that in qualitative studies, researchers aim at drawing a qualitative (small) sample from which an in-depth, rich, contextual understanding of the phenomenon is obtained and to which an analytic generalisation can be made. In this study, such a population, from which an analytic sample was drawn, comprised all learners and staff in the ten regional campuses of the ZOU.

3.3.2 Sampling Technique

3.3.2 (a) Purposive maximum variation sampling technique
Patton (1990) emphasises the idea that in qualitative inquiry, the focus is on depth of information generated from relatively large qualitative samples selected purposively. The purpose of purposive sampling, according to Patton (1990), is to select information-rich cases whose study is to illuminate the questions under study and from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of research. For this reason, the researcher used purposive maximum variation sampling to select research participants.

Out of the many types of purposive sampling given in literature (Patton, 1990; Ellsberg and Heise, 2005; Remenyi, 2008), the study used the maximum variation sampling technique. Remenyi (2008) describes maximum variation sampling as a technique that
involves selecting key demographic variables that are likely to generate useful data for the programme. The maximum variation technique enabled the researcher to document participants’ variations that helped in identifying common patterns that cut across contextual or demographic diversities. The researcher, using information from learners’ files obtained from the academic registry of the ZOU, employed purposive maximum variation technique to select participants situated in different environmental contexts. For example, two learners were drawn from a rural set up; two from an urban set up and the remaining two from a quasi-rural context (newly resettled farms).

3.3.3 Sample
In contrast to quantitative research that requires standardization of procedures and random selection of participants, selection of participants in qualitative research is purposeful (Sargeant, 2012). Participants selected are those who can best inform the research questions and enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, whilst quantitative research requires statistical calculation of sample size to confirm the outcome, in qualitative research, sample size is not generally predetermined (Sargeant, 2012). The number of participants depends upon the number required to inform fully all important elements of the phenomenon being studied. In this study, sample size was sufficient when additional data generation processes did not result in identification of new concepts or could not provide additional insights, an end point called data saturation (Trotter, 2012) or redundancy of information (Cleary, 2014).
Given the foregoing background, the researcher sought more evidence to guide the selection of the study sample. Two specific classical examples in literature came to light. In the first example, Cobbleedick (1996) chose a very small sample of four participants. Cobbleedick (1996) interviewed four artists when he/she investigated ‘artists’ information seeking behaviours’. Though the sample chosen by Cobbleedick was small, it represented the diversity in the population of interest, that is, it comprised one sculptor, one painter, one fibre artist and a metal smith. In the second example, Attfield and Dowell (2003) also used unstructured in-depth interviews to investigate ‘information seeking and use by journalists.’ Their sample consisted of twenty-five journalists comprising nineteen home news writers, four feature writers, one obituary writer and one systems editor. In consideration of these examples, the researcher selected a sample that he considered large enough to best inform the study questions and one that would enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study. Put in a more dramatic way, McCracken (1988:17) categorically states that qualitative research “does not survey the terrain, it mines.” Patton (1990) also argues that qualitative researchers should not focus on the breath or number of participants involved, but the depth or detail of participants’ responses. Detailed descriptions of participants in the study sample are given in section 3.5 overleaf. However, before these details are discussed, it is logical to talk about how the researcher identified the research sites from where the participants were drawn.

3.4 Research sites
Several authors in literature including Yin (2003; 2015) and Stake (1995) have suggested that placing boundaries on a case can prevent the topic and research area becoming too
broad. For this reason, the researcher found it critical to bind the case in terms of place or research sites. The ZOU has ten Regional Campuses (RCs), one situated in each of the ten provinces of Zimbabwe. Out of these ten RC’s, the study drew its participants from only three of them. One is situated in Masvingo Province and was coded RC1, the second in Midlands Province and was coded RC2 and the third in Manicaland Province and was coded RC3. The reason why these three regions were selected was solely because of the participants who were believed to have knowledge and experiences about the characteristics that expressed andragogical needs. In addition, the three regions were preferred to other regions because of their convenience and easy access. They geographically lie along the same route which stretches from Manicaland Province through Masvingo Province to Midlands Province. Coincidentally, the researcher was based in Masvingo Province (in which RC1 is situated) which is situated midway between Manicaland and Midlands Provinces of Zimbabwe. A detailed description of the participants is hereby given.

3.5 Participants

(a) Learners
In this study, the researcher purposively selected six 4th year undergraduate open and distance learners to participate in unstructured individual in-depth interviews (Berg, 2007) (see section 3.6.2 page 122 for justification). These participants pseudo named P1 up to P6, drawn from all faculties of the institution, shared the same LSS that included, but not limited to, the library, the modules, assignments and tutors. The difference was in their geographical and situational contexts. Out of the six learners selected, two were
purposively drawn from an urban set up, two from semi-urban settlements and two from rural areas. These learners had spent at least three years studying with the ZOU, hence, considered information-rich (Patton, 2002) and well informed about the phenomenon of LSP. Furthermore, the six 4th year undergraduate learners were drawn from RC1 of the ZOU where the researcher worked as a Senior Student Advisor tasked with the responsibility of ensuring the provision of LSS. Drawing learners from RC1 where the researcher was based facilitated easy access to the participants who were situated in different geographical and contextual sites surrounding RC1. The different geographical and contextual sites also gave the researcher the opportunity to capture some maximum variation (Remenyi, 2008) of the learners’ perceptions that were likely to address the study’s research questions.

(b) University staff
The study also invited members of staff of the ZOU working at RC1 to participate in individual in-depth interviews. The members of staff comprising two male full-time academic tutors, coded AC1 and AC2, respectively, and two female non-academic administrative staff, coded AD1 and AD2, respectively, were purposively and conveniently selected to participate in the study. These members of staff were considered information-rich (Patton, 2002) and were also well informed about how LS was provided to distance learners in the ZOU. In the ZOU, fulltime lecturers work as programme co-ordinators for the various course areas of the university curriculum. To this effect, they take part in the designing of various LS strategies offered by the university, and the administrative members of staff are normally the implementers. The study, therefore,
expected both the programme co-ordinators and administrative staff to address issues regarding the extent to which the ZOU was responding to diverse and varied learners’ needs and characteristics in terms of providing LSS, and to what extent their knowledge of andragogy (how adult learners learn) influenced them to enhance strategies for LSP to learners in ODL.

(c) Focus groups
Apart from the ten participants (six learners and four ZOU staff), the study also utilised focus-groups as a way of triangulating data sources (Morgan, 1997; Krueger, 1998). As such, two focus-groups, coded FGD1 and FGD2, respectively, had each comprising 10 Student Representative Council (SRC) members, conveniently drawn from RC2 and RC3, respectively. A group of ten members for a focus-group was considered appropriate because Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that a focus group comprising 6-10 participants is large enough to share a variety of perspectives. Moreover, these SRC members were chosen because they were considered to be representing the views of the other learners in their respective regional campuses with regard LSP. RC2 and RC3, other than RC1, were chosen (as focus group sites) in order to triangulate research sites leading to strengthening the confirmability of data generated (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996). Furthermore, the degree of convergence of the in-depth interview data generated by learners and university staff at RC1 and the data generated from the focus-group discussions at RC2 and RC3, respectively, were going to help the researcher identify whether the phenomenon being studied was persistent and consistent (Stake, 1995). During data generation, the researcher took advantage of the dates and times (as advised
by the researcher’s counterparts in RC2 and RC3 when these SRC members met to conduct SRC business in their respective regions.

As a way of illustrating what has been described under 3.5 above, find below a table denoting the relationship among the type of data generating techniques, sample size, and research sites chosen for this study.

**Table 3.1 Relationship among data generating techniques, sample size and research sites**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Generating Technique</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Research Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Unstructured individual in-depth interviews</td>
<td>Six 4th year undergraduate learners: P1 to P6</td>
<td>RC1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| b) Unstructured in-depth interviews | 2 full-time academic tutors: AC1 and AC2  
2 members of administrative staff: AD1 and AD2 | RC1 |
| c) Focus group discussion (one) | 10 ZOU SRC members: FGD1 | RC2 |
| d) Focus group discussion (two) | 10 ZOU SRC members: FGD2 | RC3 |
| e) Direct and participant observation | Researcher and participants | RC1 |
3.6 Research methods
Both Patton (1990) and Yin (2003) agree that the hallmark of qualitative case study research is the use of multiple data generating techniques, a strategy which Patton (2002) calls triangulation. Multiple data sources add texture, depth and multiple insights to an analysis and can enhance the credibility of results (Baxter and Jack, 2008). As such, the researcher acknowledged the use of triangulation in the choice of data generating Techniques which are discussed overleaf.

3.6.1 The observation method
Observation is probably the most common data generating technique in qualitative case study research (Crossman, 2010). In this study, the researcher, guided by a checklist (see Appendices I page 322 and J page 323 adapted from Kawulich, 2005) on what to record during observation (based on the study research questions), used both the direct and the participant observation to draw data from the participants. During direct observation, the researcher, as an outsider, simply observed and recorded the behaviours of learners as they interacted with LSS and with members of staff of the ZOU. As a Senior Student Advisor responsible for LSP at the ZOU, the researcher used direct observation to enable him to use his personal experience to discern which of these learners’ interactions were directly related to the area of study and which were not, as the data unfolded. To increase authenticity of data generated, direct observation was augmented with photographing and video recording of participants as they carried out their daily activities.
The researcher also used participant observation. According to Mack et al. (2005), participant observation is a qualitative method with roots in traditional ethnographic research. As such, it helps researchers to learn the perspectives held by participants and capture behaviours as they occur in the participants’ natural contexts (Kawulich, 2005). In addition, Mack et al. (2005) describe participant observation as a method that enables the researcher to develop a familiarity with the cultural milieu that proves invaluable throughout the study. For these reasons, participant observation gave the researcher a nuanced understanding of the breath and complexities of contextual human interactions. It also made it possible for the researcher to uncover factors important for a thorough understanding of the participants’ perceptions about the phenomenon which of course were unknown when this study was designed. This confirmed the assertion made by Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, and Namey (2005) that there is no substitute for witnessing or participating in phenomena of human interaction. Thus, with participant observation, the researcher became one of the participants since this technique allowed him to hear, to see and to begin to experience reality (with the phenomenon of LSP) as the participants did (Marshall, 2006). This was possible because the researcher was one of the persons whose responsibility was to provide and monitor LSP at RC1 at the time.

The researcher faced a number of limitations in using participant observation. The method was somehow time-consuming although this was mitigated by the researcher being more focused and by becoming more familiar with the social and cultural awareness of the participants. It was difficult to document data generated through participant observation since the researcher had to rely on diligence, memory and
personal discipline to write down and expand the field notes as soon as they were made. Above all, it was necessary to have a deliberate effort to strive at achieving objectivity since the method was inherently subjective.

3.6.2 Unstructured in-depth interviews
Berg (2007) defines an interview as simply a conversation with a purpose. This study used unstructured in-depth interviews (Corbin and Morse, 2003) to draw information from the individual (learner) participants, staff participants and from the focus groups as the researcher interacted with them while they were in their various geographical contexts. After the researcher introduced the topic, the natural flow of conversations determined the questions (Guion, Flowers, Diehl, and McDonald, 2011), and the focus was to uncover important information that was considered special to an interviewee (Dana, Dawes and Peterson, 2012). As emphasised by Mack et al. (2005), unstructured in-depth interviews gave a human face to the research problem. This offered the participants the opportunity to express themselves in a manner ordinary life rarely affords them and at the same time, allowed the researcher to grasp a vivid picture of the participants’ perspectives on the research topic. Above all, the researcher used unstructured interviews to eliminate power imbalances (Marsh, 2014; Corbin and Morse, 2003) in the relationship between him and the participants, and to avoid social desirability bias (Oakley, 2005), a tendency by participants to answer questions in a manner that can be viewed favourably by others.
Through unstructured in-depth interviews, the researcher allowed the participants’ perspectives on learner support to unfold and the researcher’s role was to convey an attitude that the interviewees’ views were valuable and useful (Marshall, 2006). Furthermore, although the use of control is minimal when using unstructured interviews, the researcher always encouraged interviewees to relate experiences and perspectives that were relevant to the problems of interest to the study (Burgess, 1982). To this end, the researcher used what Briggs (2000) and McCann and Clark (2005) call an ‘aide memoire’ or agenda (see appendices B page 312 and C page 313). An aide memoire is an open-ended and flexible list of questions or themes that guide the researcher to maintain a degree of consistency across different interview sessions (Burgess, 1984). Unlike interview guides used in structured interviewing, an aide memoire or agenda does not determine the order of the conversation but is subject to revision based on the views of the interviewees. However, it is not as if an aide memoire has no structure. Cobble Dick (1996) and Attfield and Dowell (2003) used them successfully by making aide memoire have a loose structure or guide in order to ensure that all issues of interest were covered and information generated was consistent and relevant across all interviewees. The two examples were persuasive enough to motivate the researcher to adopt the use of an aide memoire in the study. In the present study, two such aide memoire, one for the learner participants (Appendix B page 312) and the other one for the staff participants (Appendix C page 313) were used to collect data based on the research questions.

In the study, unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted by appointments made through telephone calls or when the researcher met the participants in their natural
settings, that is, normally at their homes, workplace or the Student Advisor’s office as they came to the Regional Campus office (RC1) to seek various LSS. Within the time frame set by the study, that is, between June and September 2015, (see Appendix E page 315) it was possible to conduct three cyclic interviews lasting for about 60 to 90 minutes per every session. For each interview, the researcher combined unstructured in-depth studies with audio tape recording of the personal or group narratives (Marshall, 2006) of the participants’ interactions with LSS.

Whilst there were so many advantages offered by using unstructured in-depth interviews, there were also some limitations. As indicated by Patton (2002) with reference to major challenges faced by the researcher using unstructured interviews, the researcher needed a significant amount of time to generate large volumes of data, and it was difficult to control the degree of directiveness of the questions and statements proposed during the conversations. The researcher also met challenges in analysing overwhelming data generated by unstructured interviews. As a way of circumventing these challenges, it was important that the researcher remained focused and directed proceedings by being constantly guided by the study’s research questions and by use of probes in order to deeply understand and build coherence in the direction of the conversations.

3.6. 3 Focus group discussions (FGD)
A focus group interview is one of the techniques that the researcher used to generate data. Rabee (2004) describes a focus-group discussion as a technique involving the use of in-
depth group interactions in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative sampling of a specific population, this group being focused on a given topic.

When combined with participant observation, FGDs are especially useful for gaining access, focusing site selection, and even for checking tentative conclusions (Morgan, 1998). For example, the researcher gained access to RC2 and RC3 sites that were selected to give maximum variation of experiences of LSP in ODL. Furthermore, the cost of FGDs is relatively lower. They also provide quick results and can increase the sample size of qualitative studies by permitting more people to be interviewed at one time (Krueger, 1998). However, the researcher should be careful not to lose control of the group interview due to power dynamics and time loss often characterising the focus group interviews (Rabee, 2004). For instance, some members of the focus groups wanted their views to be considered as more important than those by others. Some wanted to dominate the discussion, and the researcher had to check if that was not disturbing the smooth flow and direction of the discussions.

The two focus group interviews, one at RC2 and the other one at RC3, respectively, were conducted with members of the Student Representative Council (SRC) of the respective regional campuses. At the ZOU, each region has its SRC Chapter comprising ten to thirteen members. These selected members’ voices were meant to represent the general learners’ views with regard their social and academic welfare. As Patton (1990) points
out, the purpose of FGD is to bring together people of similar backgrounds and experience to participate in a group interview about major programme issues that affect them. The researcher, therefore, took advantage of the times (dates) when the two groups of the SRC members were holding their SRC meetings at their respective regional campus offices. An opportunity to interact with such groups was to ensure a wider variation of the learners’ experiences with the learner support phenomenon in their own contexts. Yin (1995) observes that a triangulation of contexts enhances confirmability and credibility of the results. For example, ideas obtained from RC2 were cross-checked and correlated with ideas from RC3 to ensure that all variations were captured.

Although focus group research has many advantages, as with all other research methods, there are limitations. Dilshad and Latif (2013:197) aptly summarise some of them as follows:

a) The researcher has less control over the data produced than in either quantitative or one-to-one interviewing.
b) By its nature, a focus group discussion is open-ended and cannot be entirely pre-determined.
c) It should not be assumed that the individuals in a FGD are expressing their own individual views. They are speaking in a specific context, within a specific culture and so sometimes it may be difficult for the researcher to clearly identify an individual message.
d) On a practical note, focus groups can be difficult to assemble.

In this study, it was not too difficult to assemble the focus group because the participants were comprised of two pre-existing SRC groups (Kitzinger, 1994) with similar socio-characteristics, and hence they were comfortable to talk to each other. The researcher took advantage of meeting the groups on the days they normally held their SRC meetings
in their respective regional campuses. To this effect, there was the common purpose that hang between the researcher and study participants, that is, we were both responsible for learner affairs and support; it was relatively easy to keep on track in our discussions because of what Rabee (2004) calls ‘applicability,’ which means, we were interacting because we were both knowledgeable about the study area. For example, issues concerning tutoring, provision of reading materials, internet services or customer care services were common to both the researcher and focus group members because both sides were familiar about issues related to teaching and learning in the ZOU.

3.6.4 Institutional documents
In the ZOU, the researcher’s observation was that there were a number of institutional documents that were used by university authorities to find out about issues relating to learners’ problems. Such institutional reports comprised the programme coordinators’ monthly reports, the Student advisor’s monthly reports, learners’ feedback reports placed in the suggestion boxes and other university documents that stipulated the general strategies for LSP to learners. Out of all the documents listed above, and for purposes of this study, only 14 learner feedback written narratives that were deposited in the ‘learners’ suggestion box,’ were purposively selected and used for data analysis. The documents were coded, not in any order, as D1, D2, and D3 up to D14 (see Appendix K page 324). The narratives required that the learners express their subjective experiences about their teaching and learning at the university, particularly with regards the provision of LSS. For purposes of this study, a special suggestion box clearly marked ‘4th year undergraduate learners’ was created and reserved for this cohort of learners and into
which they deposited their written feedback narratives. It was from these written feedback narratives that the researcher extracted data for analysis. For example, D5 raised issues on the need for training in language skills and proficiency. The information was then correlated with similar issues raised in FGDs or individual in-depth interviews for purposes of testing authenticity.

3.6.5 The researcher’s role in the study
The work of the researcher as a Senior Student Advisor responsible for providing academic advice and ensuring the provision of adequate LSS to learners, provided insights into the understanding and interpretation of learner support views as experienced by both learners and university staff in the ZOU. During direct and participant observation data generation periods, the researcher systematically noted and recorded events, behaviours and artefacts (objects) he interacted with in the natural research sites chosen for this study (Marshall, 1996). For example, things such as time and day of meeting, name of the participant, meeting place, issues raised and time of departure were used to build field notes that guided the researcher towards discovering the recurring patterns of behaviour and relationships, including complex participants’ interactions with the phenomenon in natural social settings (Patton, 2002). Participant observation allowed him to use his personal reflections into the participants’ lived experiences with the phenomenon (Iacono, Brown and Holtham, 2009). However, he took special precautions not to allow his own emotions to influence the decisions he made through being discreet, restricting participants’ identities to anonymity, restricting comments to neutral interpretations and carefully managing ethical dilemmas (Kawulich, 2005).
3.7 Data Generating Procedures

3.7.1 Entering the research sites

Gaining access into the research sites is one of the most crucial tasks of the researcher doing qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Johl and Renganathan, 2010). It involves a combination of planning, perseverance and hard work (Kothary, 1985 cited by Kondowe, 2014). The researcher therefore, was mindful of the fact that in order to gain entry and develop rapport with the participants, it was crucial that he got accepted. Before interacting with the participants, the researcher got permission to carry out the research from the Administrators of the ZOU (see Appendix A1 page 320), the institution that acted as a gatekeeper (Johl and Ranganathan, 2010). Such institutions normally demand that they know about what the researcher would be investigating and of what value the study would be to the institution. For example, the researcher gave the proposal of the thesis to the ZOU authorities. To this end, permission was granted by the authorities of the university under study (see Appendix A2 page 311). The researcher was also aware that in order to develop positive relationships with the participants, he had to present himself well through good inter-personal verbal and non-verbal communications.

In getting access to the participants, the researcher stated the purpose and benefits the research was going to give to both the participants and the ZOU authorities. The researcher then went on to assure the participants of strict adherence to ethical and legal considerations (Yin, 2015) (also see section 3.10 page 144 for detail) by masking participants’ names through use of pseudo names to gain confidentiality and anonymity. For instance, all six learner participants were known by the pseudo names P1 up to P6.
The two participants from the academic staff were referred to as AC1 and AC2, respectively, and those from the administrative staff were referred to as AD1 and AD2, respectively. Focus Group Discussions were known as FGD1 and FGD2 respectively.

In all cases, communication was done in English except in very few cases when a vernacular language was used to give more meaning to issues discussed despite that all participants could communicate in both English and ChiShona. Mobile phone calls and SMS messages were used to make appointments, particularly with participants in rural and semi-urban set ups where, due to lack of computer technologies, the use of email was non-existent. To get in touch with FG in RC3 and RC2, the researcher had to go through his counterparts (research assistants) (see Appendix L page 325 for detail) who held the same position as his in those regions. Appointments were done taking advantage of the days when the respective FG met for their SRC meetings. Once that was established, it was important to notify the participants about the agreed dates on which interviews had to be conducted (Rabee, 2004).

The aim of the study was to investigate the learners’ and staff’s experiences with the phenomenon of LSP in ODL. To accomplish this task, the researcher had to conduct the study in three cyclic phases in adherence to interpretive qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 2013)
Phase One

In the first phase, the researcher wanted to have a familiarisation of the actual sites of the participants. Contrary to suggestions put forward by Yin (2011) that in some way a pilot study may be regarded as not necessary in qualitative research, the researcher found it necessary to have a pilot study (see details on Appendix L page 325-328) in order to give him the opportunity to familiarise with the research sites and participants with similar andragogical characteristics. The pilot study was conducted in the same sites identified for the actual research but using different participants. Information from the pilot study enabled the researcher to identify those areas of the research that needed improvement during the actual research visits. After the pilot study, the researcher then began to prepare for the actual research visit.

During phase one, the researcher used unstructured interviews to capture participants’ description of their demographic data that comprised descriptions of each participant’s demography and real context, existing LS infrastructure, distance from RC1 and from main community service centres, among others aspects. For example, participant P1 was a female single parent staying at a rural primary school 208 kilometres away from the RC1. Learner participant P5 was a married undergraduate man, a politician staying at a farm 97 kilometres along the Gutu to Harare highway. With regard to FGs at this initial phase, it was paramount that the researcher identified the initial indications of social norms and projecting perspectives on LS that those FG held (Mack et al., 2005). Document analysis involved searching through the suggestion box to look for those
articles with issues that directly related to the research problem. For example, one document (D1), enquired about delays in feedback of marked assignments. Another document (D6), enquired about increasing library opening hours. The information was noted as field notes. All such information was purposively selected for further data analysis.

When the researcher sought to hear and listen to the participants about their situations and experiences with LSS, all conversations were recorded as field notes and audio recorded for further analysis. The researcher also took photographs of the participants’ contextual sites. At the end of the initial phase, it was evident that there was unfinished business regarding more exploration of the participants’ views and experiences with LSP. This necessitated the second phase.

**Phase Two**

In the second phase, the researcher continued with field work through revisiting each of the data sources as he sought further insights and in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences with LSS. The researcher found the use of unstructured interviews critical in understanding the complex feelings and perceptions of the participants who, during those moments, were not constrained by an imposition of any a-priori categorisation of structured interview questions. The researcher allowed the unstructured conversations to flow naturally or specifically to what Yin (2015) describes as ‘going with the flow’ and with interview conversations drawn from what Turner
(2010:755) describes as ‘in the moment experiences,’ that is, experiences (feelings) felt at those particular moments. Based on these clarifications and guided by an aide memoire (see Appendices B page 312 and C page 313) the researcher took note of what aspects the data sources left out during the first phase, and that gave him further opportunity to rephrase questions that filled in omissions and at the same time checked his understanding of what had been said.

In cases where the unstructured interviews seemed to be digressing, the researcher used a variety of **probes** (Yin, 2011, Anderson, 2010) to encourage participants to elaborate their answers and to explain why and how they felt about their experiences (Mack et al., 2005). Anderson (2010) presents a variety of probing techniques that include both direct and indirect probes. Examples of such probes used by the researcher to seek further illumination from interviewees included questions such as “*What do you mean when you say you are not satisfied by customer care services?*” or “*How do you feel about being a female student?*” or “*Can you tell me more about the value of peer groups?*” Indirect probes relating to verbal expression of empathy, for example, “Now I understand why you say female students have more responsibilities than their male counterparts,” or mirroring techniques that repeated what the participant said, were also used. In addition to probes, the researcher used some culturally accepted body language gestures such as smiles, head nods, or eye contacts in acknowledgement of the participants’ responses in order to increase confidence and satisfaction in the whole conversational interactions.
During this phase, data were recorded using a variety of data recording techniques (Anderson, 2010) that comprised field notes, audio tapes, photographs, and learners’ feedback written narratives. Video recordings were also done to capture the participants’ cues and emotions, which Yin (2015) say are aspects that add value to other interpretive dimensions. For example, the tone of the voice, the smiles, eye contact other facial expressions were videotaped. As strongly supported by Hoepfl (2009) and Anderson (2010), the researcher additionally used poignant and illustrative verbal quotes that were audio-recorded and transcribed to support evidence at every data analysis stage. Sargeant (2012) concurs that this manner of conducting data generation is effective because the triangulation of multiple data sources, for example, data from field notes relating to challenges faced by learners in their study contexts was triangulated with similar data reported by learners through audio recordings and supported by photographs of learners in their respective study contexts. Triangulation enabled the researcher to validate evidence given, as well as provide a comprehensive view of the emerging themes.

Notwithstanding issues relating to ethical considerations, the researcher was careful not to compromise the trust and confidence that united him with the participants. As such, it was considered important that participants willingly and voluntarily imparted information and that issues regarding anonymity and confidentiality were prioritised.
Phase Three

In phase three, the researcher was doing what Gummessen (2000) in Johl and Renganathan (2010) referred to as ‘mental access,’ that is, when the researcher then began to understand what was happening in the investigations and how it was happening. As noted by Johl and Renganathan (2010), the aim of the researcher in this third phase was to ascertain consistencies or inconsistencies of emerging patterns in the findings unfolded earlier on, as well as elaborating blurred perceptions. To this end, the researcher concluded follow-up interviews that included talking to individual participants through mobile phone calls and SMS messages, coupled with face-to-face interviews. Whilst it was fairly easy to repeat interacting with the individual learner participants, it was not the same with FG. The researcher managed to interview only some of the FGD members with others keeping on changing the scheduled meeting times. However, the researcher had to rely on the commitment of his counterparts (who acted as research assistants) situated in the FG sites and who strove to get in touch with the other seemingly hidden FG members, until sufficient and exhaustive information was obtained.

The process of confirming and disconfirming, revising and refining of data through member checking (see section 3.9.2 page 142) in a back and forth mode and corroborating data from various data sources continued until no more data produced new results. At this point of saturation (Remenyi, 2008), the researcher became aware that it was time to manage withdrawal from the data generation process and, therefore, time to exit the study sites.
3.7.2 Exiting the research sites
On exiting the study sites, the researcher was guided by Yin’s (2011) suggestion that planning how to exit is just as important as planning how to enter the research sites. When exiting the research sites, the researcher was mindful of the fact that it was time to maintain good relationships with the participants and to thank them for the mutual understanding that had existed during the data generation period. The researcher was also keen to listen to the participants’ reactions to the farewell comments such as: "Thank you very much we had a nice time with you." This was done lest there could have been some infringements on the participants’ ethical and legal rights overlooked or seemingly gone unknown to the researcher.

Surprisingly, before the researcher finally packed his tools in readiness for exit, he was excited by some comments uttered by the participants, acknowledging how he had conducted and presented himself to them, the respect shown in relationship and confidence building, the openness and candidness of the unstructured interviews, and the way he had considered them as partners and not as subjects. This motivated the researcher and filled him with the hope that whatever data that were generated were done through mutual cooperation and, therefore, could be leading to genuine and authentic results, regardless of the perception that data generation and analysis in qualitative research may be too subjective, too loaded and hence too difficult to manage.
3.8 Data Analysis Procedures

3.8.1 Data presentation
Data were presented using checklists (Seidman, 2015) and matrices that presented summaries of themes and categories drawn from various data sources. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe a matrix as a tabular format, set up as rows and columns that collects and arranges data for easy viewing in one place. Checklists also permitted the presentation of, for example, participants’ demographic data (Appendix F pages 316-317), interview schedules and protocols (Appendix E page 315), evidence of data generated by different learner participants (Appendix G pages 318-310) as well as permitting cross-referencing of data between different sources but relating to the same theme identified (Appendix H page 321). Checklists, particularly from observation tools, were used to illustrate expected, specific and predictable results and also to demonstrate the frequency, absence or presence of specific events. Verbal quotes (Hoepfl, 2009) as presented by different participants enriched the data by adding the participant’s voice and this strengthened the credibility of evidence generated. Photographs showing evidence of some learners’ experiences with LS also added some interesting dimensions as they supplemented verbal data (Holm, 2008).

3.8.2. Data analysis and interpretation procedures
Having gone through the three cyclic phases of data generation, undoubtedly, as noted by Thorne (2000), data analysis then becomes the most complex of all the phases of a qualitative project. In contrast to quantitative analysis that focuses on searching the truth, qualitative analysis takes the position that an interpretive understanding is only possible
by way of uncovering and deconstructing the meanings of a phenomenon (Sargeant, 2012). According to Rabee (2004) and Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative analysis aims to bring meaning to situations and occurs concurrently with data generation. Sargeant (2012) highlights the purpose of qualitative analysis as that of interpreting the data and the resulting themes in order to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Joubish, Khurram, Ahmed, Fatima and Haider (2011) explain that once the process of qualitative data analysis has begun the processes of identifying, coding, and categorising patterns found in data also begin. As for Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), data analysis is interpretational as the researcher is looking for patterns (threads, constructs, or commonalities) within the data to explain phenomena. Soy (2006) further explains that data analysis in qualitative research may begin informally during interviews or observations and continues during transcription when recurring themes, patterns and categories become evident. At the end of it all, through the process that Stake (1995) calls ‘categorical aggregation,’ qualitative data should be converged so as to have a holistic picture of the emerging themes, that is, an attempt to understand the overall case. In fact, “the ultimate goal of the case study is to uncover patterns, determine meanings, construct conclusions and build theory” (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003, in Kohlbacher, 2006).

In literature, some authors, for example, Miles and Huberman (1994) have attempted to define the actual stages or steps to be followed during qualitative case study data analysis. Sargeant (2012) justifies three stages of interpretive analysis.
1. **Deconstruction**, meaning that the participants have to read and re-read their narratives or contributions to the interviews to confirm authenticity of information they initially provided.

2. **Interpretation**, meaning the researcher has to make sense of the emerging themes, and

3. **Reconstruction**, that is, the researcher has to find relationships among codes and themes in search of meaning.

The above process is similar to Seidel’s (1998; 2010) description of qualitative data analysis which eventually was adopted by this study. Seidel (2010) presents a simplified process for analysing qualitative data based upon the three principles of **noting** things, **collecting** things and **thinking** about things. Seidel (2010) clarifies these three principles by indicating that the qualitative data generation and analysis process is not linear but is:

(a) **iterative and progressive** because it is a cyclic process that keeps on repeating. Indeed, the process of data generation and analysis was iterative in that it involved a three phase cyclic process that kept on repeating data generation and data analysis from the same source or from different sources.

(b) **recursive** in that one part may lead the researcher back to another part. For example, after thinking about what P1 said in terms of experiences with LSP, the researcher was also interested in what P2 said and continued collecting more data or replaying audio tapes for clarification.
(c) *holographic* in that each step in the process entails the whole process. The aim of data analysis was to converge all data from various data sources so that a holistic picture (not bits and pieces) of the case would emerge. This was facilitated by the processes of data generation and data analysis happening concurrently.

Thus, borrowing from, and using a step-by-step simplified version of all the propositions cited above, and guided by the study research questions, the researcher, during data analysis, followed an inductive process as shown in the steps below:

First, the researcher made summaries of his preliminary observations through reading and annotating transcriptions from all data sources.

Secondly, for each research question, the researcher continued to make summaries and identified all relevant emerging patterns through triangulating various data sources that attempted to address issues raised in the research question.

Thirdly, a coding system of themes was developed and this was followed by coding the themes by type of theme, data source and context. This process continued until no more relevant themes were emerging from the data or there was redundancy or saturation (Remenyi, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

Fourthly, recurrent themes per each data source were condensed into broad categories, and these were supported by participants’ verbal quotes and audio recordings to help illustrate the points (see Appendix G pages 318-320).
Fifthly, the resultant themes were discussed and converged so as to have a holistic picture of the phenomenon.

Finally, conclusions were drawn from the discussions and recommendations made, leading to a final narrative report of the study.

3.9 Verifying Trustworthiness and Credibility of the Study
A study’s ‘trustworthiness’ is increased when data analysis and interpretation are triangulated; participants’ perceptions are verified in a systematic manner; and the project’s data chain of evidence is established (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996). Taking note of this guideline in verifying trustworthiness and credibility of the present study, the researcher drew lessons from Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) and from Ellsberg and Heise (2005). Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) argue that to meet the criteria for a scientific research, the knowledge obtained should be systematic, methodical, critical and general. Ellsberg and Heise (2005) add that the findings should reflect what the research sets out to answer, rather than reflecting the bias of the researcher. Therefore, in trying to meet the set criteria, particularly in minimising bias, the following procedures were used:

3.9.1 Triangulation
The researcher used triangulation (see details on Appendix L page 335) by generating data from different sources, and comparing findings from those different sources (Patton, 2002). The researcher also presented a solid description of data so that he could lead the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the experience under study (Stake, 1995).
He then established an identifiable chain of evidence (Remenyi, 2008). For example, data generated from direct and participant observation methods, from unstructured in-depth interviews, and from focus groups were triangulated in order to put checks and balances to the overall picture gained.

3.9.2 Member checking
With member checking, the researcher had his draft reviewed by the participants so that they could assess how far those drafts reflected their perspectives. This meant that the researcher allowed in-depth interviews and FG participants to re-read the presentations, followed by collaboratively reconstructing the data summaries using audio tapes to enhance transparency and confirmability (Patton and Cochran (2002). In a way, the participants’ positive responses to cross-checking of the general descriptions of their experiences indicated that the researcher had accurately captured the contextual experiences of the participants and, therefore, without the imposition of his presuppositions.

3.9.3 Bracketing
In bracketing, Yin (2015) advises that the researcher must ‘bracket’ his/her own preconceptions and enter into the individual’s life world and use the self as an experiencing interpreter. Chan, Fung and Chien (2013) describe bracketing as a way a researcher puts aside his/her repertoire of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately capture participants’ life experiences. This meant that in the present study, the researcher deliberately ‘bracketed’ himself by becoming aware of, at the same
time, setting aside his own assumptions, in order to understand phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants.

3.9.4. Using purposive maximum variation sampling
In order to triangulate study sites, the study used the purposive maximum variation type of sampling. Patton (1990) and Suri (2011) describe maximum variation sampling as a strategy that ensures a representation of geographic or participant variation among study sites. For example, in this study, the researcher triangulated data from three research sites which were RC1, RC2 and RC3. This technique enabled the researcher to document diverse variations that helped him to identify common patterns that cut across contextual and participant variations (Patton, 2002). The common patterns that emerged from the triangulation strengthened dependability and credibility of the study.

3.9.5. Establishing rapport with participants
Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest that having a prolonged exposure to the phenomenon under study within its context facilitates establishment of good rapport between the researcher and the participants. Good rapport between the researcher and the participants increases trust and, therefore, reduces potential for social undesirability in data generation during interviews. Thus, the researcher, as a Senior Student Advisor in the ZOU and having been entrusted with the responsibility of providing academic advisement to learners for eight years then, had a prolonged engagement with the participants in the study. The prolonged engagement enhanced trust between him and the participants, and trust between people reduces suspicion and doubt, hence, there was no
reason why participants in this study could not have brought out the truth about their experiences and from their own perspectives.

3.10 Discussion on Ethical and Legal Considerations
Glesne (1999) states that ethical considerations are inseparable from the researcher’s everyday interactions with research participants. To this effect, the researcher aimed at putting measures that could meet certain ethical and legal considerations. But before enforcing the measures, he borrowed suggestions from Remenyi (2008) that, in considering ethical issues, the researcher should take account of the context in which he/she would be working, the aim of the research and how sensitive the topic would be. In the same vein, the researcher considered whether the questions he was going to ask were traumatising, or making participants uncomfortable or fearful of the consequences, humiliating or painful.

In view of the ethical and legal considerations and before conducting the research, the researcher sought permission from the authorities of the ZOU for using its learners and staff as participants, and for investigating issues concerned with the institutional matters. That permission was granted (see Appendices A1 and A2 page 320 and page 321, respectively).

This was followed by seeking informed written consent from the participants by explaining clearly the objectives of the research and how they were going to benefit (or
taking risks) from participating in the research (see Appendix D page 314). In order to tighten ethical considerations, the researcher also sought voluntary participation of the participants as well as reassuring them that their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were protected by concealing their identities from the public as well as informing them about how the data were used and stored.

Finally, participants were informed that they were also free to exercise their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research process without being affected in any way.

3.11 Chapter Summary
The chapter focused on the methodology adopted by the study, at the same time spelling out details of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings that guided the study, the way participants were selected, the way data were generated and analysed through triangulation of various data sources, as well as the justification of the decisions undertaken. As such, the study adopted a qualitative case study research method that provided evidence based on research questions, leading to research findings. The chapter concluded with the re-affirmation and verification of the trustworthiness and credibility of the study as well as pointing out the ethical and legal framework that bound the research processes. The next chapter (Chapter 4) deals with data presentation, analysis, discussion and interpretation that will lead to establishing findings and conclusions of the study.
CHAPTER IV  DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction
Chapter 3 dwelt on discussing the research methodology that was used to unearth the data. In this chapter, focus in on data presentation, analysis, discussion and interpretation of results leading to findings, conclusions and recommendations. The chapter begins by realigning the research topic with the research questions that guided data generation. To this end, the study explored how the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics of adult learners enhance the design and provision of LSS in ODL using the ZOU as a case study. Regrettably, most previous research in literature dwelt more on the preparation of the teaching and learning materials for distance learners without clearly articulating how the LSS in the form of teaching and learning materials were provided to the distance learners (Gao, 2012). Meanwhile, many ODL institutions continued to solve problems related to the provision of LSS using trial and error methods that were not supported by evidence based on empirical research. (Morrison and Anglin, 2012; Cercone, 2008). This study, in this chapter, attempts to fill in this gap by using empirical research to unfold issues related to LSP and how adult learners studying in ODL contexts want these issues addressed.

4.2 Data generation and presentation
The study used a qualitative case study research method to address the main research question “How can the knowledge of andragogical characteristics and needs of adult
"learners enhance the provision of LSP in ODL?" The following sub-questions supported the main research question:

1. How do learners describe their own demographic characteristics as factors affecting LSP in ODL?
2. How are learners experiencing LSS currently provided in ODL?
3. How do learners describe what they want regarding LSP in ODL?
4. How do learners describe andragogical strategies they consider most appropriate for academic success in ODL?
5. To what extent can an ODL institution provide a learner support framework that meets adult learner needs and characteristics in ODL?

In order to address the research questions, data were generated using the following qualitative methods; observation, unstructured in-depth interviews, two focus group discussions and document analysis. Data generated were presented using checklists and matrices (see Appendices F pages 316-317 and G pages 318-320). The researcher analysed data through collating and converging emerging issues into major themes that formed the basis for discussion.

4.3 Demographic data of participants
Demographic data of six adult learners purposively selected from RC1 of the ZOU are presented in Appendix F pages 316-317. All the six learners were 4th year undergraduate
students in their final year of studies and hence, considered well informed about the experiences of LSP in their respective study contexts. Apart from the six learners, two focus groups, FGD1 and FGD2, each consisting of undergraduate students situated in RC2 and RC3, respectively, of the ZOU participated in the study. In addition, 2 male academic members of staff responsible for teaching adult learners and 2 female administrative staff members responsible for providing LSS in the ZOU were also interviewed and complemented the sample

4.4 Data organisation
Data generated were organised into themes based on the five research questions listed under section 4.2 on page 151. The following major themes emerged from the data:

- Adult learners’ demographic characteristics and their influence on LSP in ODL
- Adult learners’ experiences and how they influence LSP in ODL
- Adult learners’ perceptions about what they want done regarding LSP in ODL
- Andragogical LS strategies preferred and their implications to LSP in ODL
- Proposal towards an ideal LSF in ODL

4.4.1 Adult learners’ demographic characteristics and their influence on LSP in ODL
The focus of the study was to find out the extent to which the knowledge of the adult learner characteristics, herein described as andragogical characteristics, could inform the
practice of LSP in ODL. Such andragogical characteristics were drawn from six learners (participants) as they responded to research question number one: *How do learners describe their own demographic characteristics as factors affecting LSP in ODL?* This question was asked also in recognition of the conviction that Gao (2012) has. Gao (2012) believes that understanding the role of learner demographics in ODL can assist education practitioners to make decisions regarding ODL programmes and what resources need to be allocated to meet the needs of distance learners. Thus, data generated as described by the learners themselves were organised and presented as shown in Appendix F page 316-317, based on the following themes:

- Gender
- Age
- Marital status
- Family dependants
- Geographical location, distance from the Regional Campus and transport
- Employment status
- Previous qualification and current programme undertaken
- Language, communication and religion

### 4.4.2 Adult learners’ experiences and how they influence LSP in ODL

Participants, as adult learners, were asked to describe their own experiences regarding LSP in ODL. This was meant to give responses to research question number 2: *How are
learners experiencing LSS currently provided in ODL? All data generated regarding learners’ experiences with LSP were collated and categorised in the following sub-themes:

- Administrative LSS and provision
- Academic LSS and provision
- Library and reading materials support
- Guidance and counselling support
- Technical support
- Technological support
- Family support
- Peer support
- Financial support
- Quality assurance support

4.4.3 Adult learners’ perceptions about what they want done with regards to LSP in ODL
Under this section, learners were asked to respond to question number 3: How do learners describe what they want done regarding LSP in the ZOU? Here, learners were required to say precisely what they wanted done with regards LSP. Data generated were also collated and categorised as laid out in section 4.4.2 page 150.
4.4.4 Andragogical LS strategies preferred and their implications to LSP.
Under this section, participants were asked to say what LS strategies they preferred as well as describe their implications to adult learning. This was in response to question number 4: *How do learners describe andragogical strategies they consider most appropriate for academic success in ODL?* Possible LS strategies were clustered as laid out in the last column of Appendix G pages 318-320.

4.4.5 Reflections and proposal of an ideal LSF in ODL
The fifth and final segment under chapter 4 dwelt on reflections and discussion on factors constituting an ideal LSF in ODL. Drawing from the reflections, a LSF that could be considered suitable for use in ODL was proposed.

4.5 Research Question Number 1: How Demographic Characteristics of Adult Learners Affect LSP in ODL

4.5.1 Gender characteristic as a factor

In ODL, the aspect of the knowledge of gender characteristics with regards to their impact on open and distance learners is critical (Knowles, 1980). Without taking a special interest on how to address challenges or how to recognise benefits engendered by gender differences, distance education could be missing an important facet in enhancing the success of learners in ODL. Whilst it is difficult to consider gender aspect as a standalone variable, that is, not tied up to other factors such as marital status, employment status or cultural status, it is paramount to note that it is critical to
interrogate specific gender biased characteristics or behaviours that affect adult learning in as much as researchers interrogate the support needed to mitigate related learning barriers (Kirkup, 1996)

In this study, gender for the learners was characterised by three males and three females (Appendix F pages 316-317). The study sought to find out how learners described their experiences as influenced by gender when learning through ODL. When asked to describe themselves in an interview, all learners (P1 to P6) started by reaffirming their gender status, oblivious of the fact that in a face-to-face interview, the interviewer clearly sees the gender status of the interviewee (hence no need to mention). For instance, one would start by saying “I am a female----” (P1, P4; P6) or “I am a male----” (P2, P3, P5) before one continued to state other variables. The reaffirmation of gender status (female/male domain) reveals the biological, psychological and social or even the philosophical makeup of the individual that the researcher should pay attention to, and hence points in the direction that “whoever I am or whatever I do or need, it is because of my gender.” That alone, no matter how obvious it may appear, can only be overlooked to the detriment of the researcher’s interrogation. What it means is that gender sensitivity has meaning and significance in the individual’s biological and psychological disposition to act, hence, needs to be handled carefully if tutors are to assist adult learners to learn.

Female adult learners in particular suffer from unknown fears of participating in multiple roles in the family or in society at large (Kirkup, 1996). Literature spells out some of
these multiple roles as being a housewife, a worker, a spouse, a child bearer and carer, one who looks after the husband and does the household chores (Cercone, 2008), among other peculiar roles. All these roles were confirmed by study participants who commented:

P1- I am a single mother aged 33, and I teach at a primary school 187 kilometres from the Regional Campus.

P4- I am a female state registered nurse, married to a ‘korokoza’ (gold panner,) looks after 2 children and an aged father.

P6- I am a single female student----, stay with my own parents----, and work as a bank teller at ZB Bank (Appendix F pages 316-317).

All the above gender related quotes as voiced by female adult learners were evidence of andragogical characteristics that have the potential of negatively interfering with adult learners’ studies and the smooth progression of their study programmes. Coupled with other variables such as taking responsibility of a child and looking after an aged parent, P1 further stated that she was generally stressed and was struggling to pay fees. She lamented the distance she travelled to the Regional Campus and the costs borne in doing that (Appendix G pages 318-320). All these challenges warrant that adult education practitioners prioritise paying attention to them through provision of appropriate gender sensitive LSS.

Male learners may suffer the same fate. Male learners may be the bread-winners of their families, besides being spouses, fathers or heads of their families. The entire family burden may also lie on their shoulders and this may take a toll on their studies due to
some pressures. However, contrary to this submissive role of men to some pressures, men sometimes downplay the pressures and let their domineering, chauvinistic tendencies project them as people who are self-empowered to do things according to how they choose to do those things. Thus, instead of pondering on family responsibilities as burdensome, P2 (the male learner participant) downplayed all that and talked about his enjoyable experiences with the LSS he was receiving. P2 commented (Appendix G pages 318-320):

*I enjoy using internet; I find library assistants helpful in providing websites; weekend schools are important because we meet colleagues; I enjoy group discussion-----.* (P2)

A reflection on this reads into the idea that LS should not be considered as something that only addresses and alleviates challenges but should also be viewed as one that enhances performances based on existing competencies. In a way, learners, like industrialists, want value addition and beneficiation on everything they do regarding their studies. This means, if P2 enjoys using internet and group discussion, the adult education providers should pay attention to that and say what other LSS and strategies could still be provided to such a particular learner in order to enhance participation and achievement of further competencies and other higher order skills. In other words, what other opportunities can be created in order to make P2 continue enjoying using the internet, or continue enjoying group discussions? What else does P2 need to sustain his studies? All these questions should be addressed and this was the essence of the later sections of this study as they attempted to confirm Butcher and Rose-Adams’ (2015) assertions that LSS should be
provided on the basis of a thorough understanding of the learners’ circumstances as well as their abilities and requirements. In real terms, ODL should be designed to ensure compatibility with the diverse characteristics and needs of the adult learners.

4.5.2 Age characteristic as a factor
The general picture of a distance learner, according to some authors in literature (Cercone, 2008), is that of an adult learner whose age ranges from 25 to 50 years (Moore and Kearsley, 2005). To some extent, many authors in literature argue that when it comes to continuing with lifelong education, age is just a number and bears very little relevance to a person’s competence and performance (Bjorklund and Bee, 2008). However, this does not mean to say that biological transformations do not occur. Cercone (2008) posits that as a person matures, biological changes take place. When this happens, memory also decreases with short-term memory becoming limited to approximately five to nine bits of new information at a time. The andragogical implication to this is that these limitations should be considered when designing LS strategies, among which may be those that include providing and equipping learners with efficient study skills involving practice in chunking information, providing quick feedback to avoid decay of information and using a variety of graphics, images and tables. To this end, this researcher believes that looking at the age characteristic with greater attention (than overlooking it) could enhance a deeper understanding of the adult learner in ODL.

On the same note, Knowles (1980) observes that as people mature (with age), they develop a number of characteristics that serve to their advantage in the teaching and learning process. These characteristics, according to Knowles (1980), facilitate the ways
learners learn and enhance LS approaches that may be used to assist them to succeed in their studies. Knowles (1980) further opines that as people mature, they develop a self-driven concept that leads to a self-driven independent study. They possess a reservoir of experience that they bring to the learning context and have a readiness to learn and they strongly feel the need to know why they are learning something. They also become more intrinsically motivated and more oriented to do things that are of immediate benefit to them. As alluded to earlier on, all these psychological traits develop as humans mature from childhood to adulthood. Thus, adulthood becomes an age related feature and therefore critical in understanding how the adult learner can be assisted to learn.

Data in this study reveal that the learner participants sampled had a mean age of 35.5 years (see table below)

Table 4.1 showing mean age of learner participants in the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>P6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age in years</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Appendix F pages 316-317

The table above shows that this cohort of learners in the study sample fits very well into Knowles’ (1980) version of characteristics of mature adult learners who generally have the potential of being responsible and in control of their decisions. They have vast
experiences they could bring into their teaching/learning encounters with their tutors and have the requisite readiness to learn, as well as a disposition to know what is to be learnt and for what purpose. They are also capable of using intrinsic motivation to drive them into action and at the same time feel the need to be recognised and accepted as they are.

Research evidence that support the view that adult learners are capable of making their own decisions and prioritising their preferences are quoted from learner participants’ voices regarding their experiences with LS in the ZOU.

P1: *I am an adult and prefer doing things on my own and at my own pace.*

P2: *I enjoy using the internet; I find library assistants helpful in providing websites; I also enjoy group discussion.*

P5: *I find Regional Programme Coordinators very helpful in keeping me informed about the goings on at college.*

Adult learners are also capable of critically reflecting upon their behaviours and those of others as well as capable of judging what they consider helpful and of value to their learning and what is not. Study evidence regarding this is given below (Appendix G pages 318-320)

P2: *----sometimes tutors are not well prepared, with some simply coming to read the module instead of explaining issues.*

P3: *I find e-mail and SMS messages valuable in communicating with tutors. However, I am not happy with late feedback from tutors and from marked assignments.*

P3: *My husband shows very little interest in my studies. I had problems with rejoining college because regulations were not in my favour.*

P6: *I have problems with my research supervisor, it appears she lacks direction.*
The above proclamations by adult learners through descriptions of their age-related characteristics show the importance of knowing who they are. It is these voices that inform the adult education providers about how best they can maximise the support needed by such learners.

It is with age or maturity that adult learners begin to assume responsibilities of getting married, getting employed, having children and partaking in many responsibilities in society such as becoming community leaders or politicians (Cercone, 2008). It is paramount for the LS providers to know that all these responsibilities trigger certain dispositions in learners’ behaviours with regard to their experiences with learner support, and therefore require attention. For this reason, all adult learner behaviours should be considered with recognition of the fact that some learners are more sophisticated, more demanding and more diversified than others, hence, require more flexible arrangements and more personalised learning environments than others.

4.5.3 Marital status as a factor
The general description of the adult learner and, indeed, as evidenced by learner participants in the study (P1 to P6) is that of a person whose life is somehow hinged to his/her marital status. The marital status engenders more life statuses to the individual, for example, being a mother or father, a spouse, a breadwinner, a housewife, a caretaker or family head, among other statuses. A critical reflection on these statuses shows that they carry with them stories that tell about the person’s life activities, including how they
learn. In many cases, marital status may bring positive or negative connotations in the person’s life as such affecting the person’s life in one way or another. Study results suggest evidence to this.

Table 4.2 showing the marital statuses of the learner participants in the study (P1-P6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>I am a single mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>I am happily married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>I am married to a primary school teacher who is also studying with ZOU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>I am married to a ‘korokoza’ (merchandiser)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>I am married to a wife doing merchandising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>I am single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Appendix G pages 318-320

Looking at the marital statuses of the participants shown in table 4.2, we get a perception of individual differences in potentialities that relate very closely to their (participants) study trajectories. In this regard, no astute LS services provider can disregard the marital background of the learner, or profess ignorance of its significance in influencing the way the learner is supported to learn. For instance, because P1 is a single mother, she described her experiences with LS (Appendix G page 318 third column) in a manner that weighed heavily on her “single motherliness.” P1 said:

*I rarely visit the library due to cost. I am generally stressed because I am struggling to pay fees. The Regional Campus is very far, I wish it was in Chiredzi.(P1)*

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These sentiments relate with andragogical implications of an adult learner whose studies are interfered with due to financial constraints. This means that if one is to provide LSS to such a learner, the aspect of cost has to be considered seriously, that is, providing services that are affordable and accessible. The idea of learners getting value out of their money should be the guiding factor for any move meant to provide LS to such distance learners. In any case, the mandate of ODL as enshrined in the sampled institution’s Mission Statement is to provide access to university education in a manner which is affordable and flexible for such less privileged learners once their plight has been clearly understood.

The same can be said to marital statuses linked to P3 and P4 (see table 4.2 on page 160). Take for instance, P4 who is married to a ‘korokoza.’ A ‘korokoza’ is a derogatory tag used to describe someone (especially in Zimbabwe) who is not formally employed but relies on buying and selling paraphernalia for a living. This means that this type of person spends most of the time away from the family and probably quite removed from family concerns. The income is low and unstable; hence, the spouse (wife) cannot access certain services, especially educational services. Apart from financial problems, P4 expressed other different dimensions of LS challenges. P4 stated:

*I am isolated and lack both peer and family support. My husband shows very little interest in my studies.* (P4)

Such sentiments paint a very bleak picture of a married woman who is studying through ODL whist lacking family support or other forms of support. In the case of P4, her
marital status was adding no value to her studies, since, as she claimed, support was not forthcoming from her family and husband. Given such a situation, the issue of isolation by a distant learner then becomes a thorny issue, since by isolation, a learner finds it difficult to share his/her experiences and problems with others. On the other hand, isolation is a condition that a distance learner may experience, but one that should never be considered as a barrier because it can easily be minimised through provision of interactive support derived from family members or peers. When isolation occurs, a transactional distance (TD) is created and it is this gap or bridge that Moore (1993) argues should be crossed through use of various ICT that mediate between the learner and other learners or between the learner and tutors or between the learner and other resources or services. This resultantly creates new modes of communication and dialogues that render a distance learner no longer an isolated person. A point that the study is highlighting is that once such a learner situation is known (as in the case of P4), then it becomes easier for the service providers to craft strategies that help the learner to navigate through his/her studies, for example, in the case of the ZOU, it could be the Programme Coordinators or the Student Advisors. What is emphasised here is that learners studying through ODL want family support. The purpose of the study was to listen to such voices and then recommend that challenges engendered by, and associated with the marital status of a distance learner be looked at and attended to with the seriousness they deserve.
4.5.4 Family dependants as a factor

The andragogical characteristic of family membership or dependants was voiced by the majority of the learner participants in the study. The voices signify the importance that distance learners attach to family relationships and family interactions in as far as these factors affect their studies. Some studies in literature seem to suggest the positive benefits that family members accrue from each other (Jones, 2003). What it means is that every person whether parent, child or guardian, relies on support rendered by other family members in terms of their physical presence, social presence or intellectual stimulation and motivation. This is supported by studies carried out by Jones (2003) that showed how family members such as children provide the motive and inspiration to their parents to succeed in their studies. Therefore, in adult learning, the family factor becomes a critical component that cannot be overlooked when LS strategies are being considered. For instance, when studying through ODL, one may need assistance or support from other family members regarding moral support, financial support or even technical support given in the form of typing, editing and provision of supplementary reading materials. Group discussion and sharing of ideas on many topical issues may begin at family unit level before a wide collaborative study venture gets underway. Thus, in the provision of a comprehensive LSF distance adult learners should be supported with the realisation of the value family members contribute to each other in terms of their well-being and intellectual stimulation.

Meanwhile, there are studies in literature that argue and associate caring of dependants, especially caring of children and aged persons, as undoubtedly casting the biggest
domestic pressures on the individual who is studying (Jones, 2003). These pressures, whether linked to time, poverty, financial constraints or work commitments, in turn become impediments in the distance learner’s study life. A general picture depicted in the study is that of participants who voiced concerns over their roles associated with looking after dependants whilst being engaged in studies. Such concerns can be shown by the situation in which we find P1 (Appendix E page 314). P1 says:

*I am a single mother who looks after one child and my aged parents, of which one of them (the mother) is blind. I also look after my sibling, a brother, who is going to school.* (P1)

Given this scenario, it can be inferred that P1 was experiencing time and financial pressures. In the study, P1 clearly claimed that she was generally stressed as she battled to balance her study time and finances with caring for dependants. P1 expressed her emotions by commenting:

*I rarely visit the library due to cost of travelling. I only attended the first weekend school of the second semester. I am generally stressed because I am struggling to pay my fees and that of my brother.* (P1)

Probed further, P1 talked about failure to submit assignments on time, failure to raise fees on time and consequently delaying courses registration, as well as failure to cope with weekend school demands.

All such challenges frustrate learners’ motivation to effectively learn and if not attended to or properly addressed, they may lead to learners’ low retention or dropping out. The
implications of all this point to the realisation that tutors or institutional service providers dealing with such burdened learners should exercise empathy and should also recognise flexibility as a key solution towards mitigating further study challenges. Details of possible opportunities that can be created to restore and foster positive learning transformations to such learners are explored in sections that follow later in this chapter.

Similar circumstances revolving on family interrelationships and family dependence as characteristics demanding rethinking in the manner we view adult learning manifested in the descriptions given by participants P2, P3, and P4 as shown in table 4.3 page 165.

Table 4.3 contains voices expressing concerns about family relationships and family dependence over one’s studies in ODL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Concerns about family relationships or family dependence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>I have 2 children, one of them aged 6 months and the other one aged 3 years. However, I have to spare some time to play with my children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>I have three children, one of them is doing her first degree with Great Zimbabwe University, sometimes work and family commitments interfere with my weekend school tutorials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>I have two children, and also look after an aged father who is a widower and disabled. I am a nurse who works during the night and I find it difficult to balance family commitments and study time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above sentiments by the participants are voices that strengthen the evidence of how family relationships or dependents can either enhance study experiences or detract them
from paying full attention to their studies. The diverse andragogical backgrounds and experiences of such adult learners should draw the attention of the service providers so that appropriate LS guidance is provided. For instance, a nurse (P4) who works at night and has further commitments at home that interfere with her studies should again not be bothered by having insufficient or ineffective LS materials due to (for example) late dispatch of modules, assignment topics, or tutorial letters. Neither should she experience further bureaucratic nor technical hiccups that could continue to interfere with her study times. All these support services should be at her disposal and made available when and how she needs them so that the little time that she decides to spare for doing her study work should be used efficiently. The same can be said with learners P2 and P3 (in Table 4.3 page 165). Both these learners express feelings of being burdened by family responsibilities hence their expressions carry connotations of crying out for help. When this assistance is not forthcoming, it could be the case where higher institutions of distance learning are missing the point, an issue that this study would continue to recommend.

4.5.5 Geographical location and distance from the Regional Campus

ODL by its nature allows that learners benefit whilst they are situated in diverse geographical locations which could be some distance away from the institution. Moore (2007) argues that ‘the physical distance’ in distance education should be accounted for. Whilst in the past decade advancement in ICTs seems to have overridden the potential barriers associated with distance in distance education (O’Lawrence, 2007), participants in the study seemed to have been directly or indirectly concerned about separation from
their tutors and institution through distance (see table 4.4 page 167). What this means is that distance from the institution, as a factor, may influence a learner’s performance or may reduce his/her confidence in predicting the expected time given to complete the programme. Consequently, adult learners become perplexed by situations where learners and tutors are at a distance from each other (Rumble, 2001). This is because they experience a feeling of isolation (Perraton, 2000) due to separation from the institution, tutors and fellow learners. In the end, this makes them feel less prepared to appreciate the learner support their institutions provide for them to succeed in their studies.

Whilst ODL institutions have been acclaimed for providing access to higher education for adult learners previously denied this privilege (Makina, 2008), this expectation has not been matched with adequate LSP to raise hopes for such learners. Such lack of confidence in what institutions can provide regarding learner support associated with distance in distance education, was evident in the voices of participants in this study (see table 4.4 below).

Table 4.4 shows how distance in ODL directly or indirectly affects learners’ perceptions about their studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Learners’ perceptions about how distance affects them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Regional Campus is very far. I wish it was in Chiredzi town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>My research supervisor is far from my residence and is not easily accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>I am isolated------. I face financial problems and I rarely visit the library.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All the sentiments expressed by P1, P2, and P4, respectively, in the table above were an attempt to say that were it not for the separation by distance from the Regional Centre, they could have been in a better position to navigate through their studies. Paradoxically, that did not mean to say that participants wished that they were at a conventional university campus. All they were hoping for was a ‘connection to’ and not a “separation from” their institution. Perhaps, what was being expressed here is the idea of improving connectivity through use of various ICTs and increasing flexibility so that adult learners are able to do things in their own ways. This reminds us about not losing sight of the fact that adult learners, because of their andragogical characteristics, enjoy doing things according to their convenience of studying in the comfort of their homes whilst looking after their families or doing study related tasks in their offices as they attend to some core business or responsibilities attached to their employment.

Presumably, with so many adult learners now possessing highly technologically assembled mobile devices, learners would be comfortable in using technology-based media (Rahman, 2014) that facilitate on-line support services related to registration, guidance and counselling, submission of assignments, on-line marking and receiving feedback. Those staying in internet enabled environments would also benefit from using various communication platforms such as Facebook, twitter, Whatsapp, e-mailing, short message services (SMS) among other technology accustomed platforms. In other words, institutions need to provide standard data networking, protocols and infrastructure that enhance access to information by distance learners. The proliferation of these media resources in the distance education environment would mean that many distance adult
learners would be assisted both synchronously and asynchronously. In this regard, ODL becomes a teaching and learning model with far-reaching benefits to adult learners regardless of distance or separation from the tutors or institutions. For these reasons, geographical location or distance as given by study participants themselves becomes a major consideration in deciding what ICT to use and in what combination or circumstances for learners to benefit from studying at a distance.

4.5.6 Employment as a LS factor influencing distance learners
Participants in the study were asked to reveal their employment statuses and to what extent that impacted on their studies. Table 4.5 shows the results.

Table 4.5 shows employment statuses of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Employment status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>A primary school teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>A high school English teacher in Masvingo District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>An Agritex officer working at a provincial office in Masvingo town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>A state-registered nurse at a General Hospital in Masvingo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>A politician and member of parliament in Zimbabwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>A bank teller employed by Zimbank Bank in Masvingo town</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A cursory glance at the table above shows that all participants in the sample were adult learners with full time employment. Being employed is typical of most adult learners studying with ODL, as evidenced by results in the table. Therefore, employment becomes a major characteristic worth considering in the provision of LSS to adult learners. However, while each of these employment types could have the potential of giving
challenges to the distance adult learners with regards to how adult distance learners can balance their study and work commitments, none of the participants, when probed further, opted for a position where one would feel better placed to study (using ODL) without being employed. Listen to what P1 said:

_I thank God that I am employed and at the same time being able to study through distance learning. My small salary I get from my employment enables me to look after my family, to pay for my study fees but at the same time finding some time to study and do my course assignments._ (P1)

P2’s comments supported the above sentiments (by P1) when he said:

_I feel very happy that I am employed because the advantages of being employed and at the same time studying are that of allowing me to fulfil my work commitments and at the same time being able to fend for my family. I don’t see how it was going to be possible for me to pursue a degree programme without having money to pay for my fees and to fend for my family._ (P2)

Whilst P1 and P2 seemed as though they were appreciating the advantages enjoyed when one is working and at the same time studying, P3 saw it differently when he lamented how difficult it was to study whilst working at the same time. He wondered if the education providers were aware of the pressures caused by this dual preoccupation. P3 pointed out that:

_Whilst I enjoy working and studying at the same time, there is a lot of pressure that I feel when trying to balance work and study time? I sometimes knock off late from work and by the time I reach home I will be tired. Instead of taking a bit of rest I find myself doing other house chores meanwhile trying to compile heaps and heaps of notes for a written assignment. Tutors will be_
breathing fire if I do not meet the assignment due date. I am not sure whether they know how difficult that kind of situation is. (P3)

The comments made by P1, P2, and P3 above seem to indicate that the majority of the participants appeared comfortable with the hybrid type of life experiences that allowed them to integrate studying with work obligations. How to assist adult learners to gainfully integrate studies with employment commitments should then become the concern of adult education providers who should be able to do so with minimum conflict with other adult learners’ activities and interests. This position seems to concur with the perceptions of some authors in literature, for example, O’Lawrence (2007), Stahmer (1995), as well as Hannay and Newvine (2006). These authors seem to suggest that being employed could be one of the reasons that attract adult learners to study through ODL. With ODL, a distance learner is able to fulfil his/her study tasks without unnecessarily disrupting work commitments or career. Furthermore, this confirms Stahmer’s (1995) belief that it is within adult learners’ interests that they be able to upgrade their skills and knowledge in the workplace in order to adapt to changes and new demands emanating from development in technology. Above all, learners need to be financed in their education and the source of finance is gainful employment. With this knowledge, education providers should be in a position to establish better ways of capitalising on the adult learners’ gainful employment towards enhancing LSP.

In view of the discussion on adult learners’ employment, it is important to note that although the majority of adult learners are generally employed as evidenced by the
participants in this study; it does not mean that all of them get enough resources to meet the demands of what is required in their studies. Considering other issues related to family support, such as children going to school, payment of fees, mobilising of supplementary learning resources, purchasing of technological tools, need for typing and photocopying or getting access to internet services, learners still face challenges (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza, and Zebron, 2015) that require attention from the education service providers. Referring to such challenges, P4 had this to say:

Whilst we enjoy studying through ODL, we feel we are not clearly understood by our University authorities in terms of our capacity to fully meet our educational requirements. The small salary that we get from our employment, exacerbated by the hard economic environment that we are sailing through, makes us challenged to meet the required educational costs. It therefore requires that education administrators lessen the burden of making us do tasks that require extra costs for our education. (P4)

What this means is that not all employment has the capacity to fully meet the educational needs of the learner. Learners, therefore, tend to rely on the “other” support from the education providers. When asked to say what other support learners require to augment financial support from their employment, P6 had this to say:

We want our institution to handle learner affairs with care, including listening to our demands and understanding that such demands should be done in consideration of the individual needs and that where costs can be cut, it should be done, for example, by using more online services. (P6)

In concurrence with sentiments made by P6, P5 commented:
I am a politician and usually have a busy schedule throughout the day. I would appreciate a situation where more communicative interactions between me and the university are done online. (P5)

The two comments made by P6 and P5 above are critical in ODL. Firstly, that in the provision of LS, institutions should consider the convergence between the needs of the learner and services provided and, secondly, that priority should be given to using digitalised online technologies that reduce pressure on the financial income of the learner. The demand on online services was echoed by documentary evidence through learner comments posted through the suggestion box. One such comment read:

*Pliz (sic) we need to register online and do every process online.*

Whilst it is appreciated that the institution under study has embarked on a serious paradigm shift towards encouraging the use of a cocktail of online services, the researcher’s experience with working within the same institution confirms that more should be done. More should be done because O’Lawrence (2007) argues that ODL institutions should ensure that when using on-line services, the technology is effective, efficient and convenient. This is true because when using online services, learners can cut costs by working from their homes whilst they interact with their tutors, peers and administrators. They can receive feedback on marked assignments (marked online), exchange information more frequently and establish better ways of networking by harnessing appropriate technologies that address the needs of the learners.
4.5.7 Relevance of learners’ prior learning or previous qualification to LSP

When adult learners join the distance learning institution, they normally possess some previous learning or prior knowledge that carries the potential of making them accredited with the new university. However, learners usually feel some degree of uncertainty with regards the capacity of the university to offer degree programmes that match their existing or previous qualifications. This uncertainty seems to haunt learners’ memories from the day they join university to their day of exit. When asked to indicate to what extent the university met their expectations in terms of offering degree programmes that matched their previous qualifications, some learners said that they made best out of what was offered by the university. Some felt they were being short-changed because they got programmes that were not initially their choices. Others appreciated the guidance given by the university towards assisting the learner to choose a relevant programme. The following quotes illustrate these ideas.

*I wanted a degree in entrepreneurship because my interest was in managing commercial undertakings. Because the university did not offer that programme, I then resorted to taking Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting. In this regard, I felt short changed by the university.* (P6)

*I appreciate the guidance given by the Student Advisor towards assisting me to choose a degree programme that matches my career path. I am a politician and holding ordinary level passes plus a certificate in Agriculture. With these qualifications I thought I was going to take a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture. However, having been enlightened that I am a politician and that my career involves working with people in community development, I was then persuaded to take Bachelor of Social Sciences in Development Studies and I am really enjoying it.* (P5)
P1, P2, P3, P4 seemed to have indicated that they took advantage of their previous qualifications to choose relevant programmes and fortunately they found those programmes being offered by the university. “It could have been disastrous had we found our respective programmes of choice not offered by the university,” one of them (P4) commented. The following quotes are more evidence for such learners’ exclamations:

*Having qualified as a primary school teacher with a Diploma in Education (Primary), the next thing that I yearned to do was to obtain a Bachelor’s Degree in Early Childhood Development (BECD). When I applied for a place at the ZOU, it was a pleasure to be told that the programme was on offer. It really motivated me.* (P1)

*I was employed as a High School English teacher at a very big Mission High school. I was the only one without a degree though I was a qualified teacher. Before joining the programme, I had always felt humiliated when my colleagues who were graduates were asked to wear their gowns during certain school functions. Now that I enrolled in a programme of my dream and almost completing it now, I feel elated, courtesy of my previous qualification.* (P2)

*With my diploma in Agriculture and having been appointed as a Lands officer at the Provincial level, it was the university’s personnel who picked me up to enrol in the Bachelor of Science Degree in Agricultural Management (BSCAM) so that I could buttress practice with theory. I had done a great deal of practical and agricultural field work when I did my Diploma, so the learner support I desired was one that exposed me to various theoretical frameworks and technological skills that inform agricultural management. I found modules quite informative and the learning support I am currently experiencing, quite encouraging and motivating.* (P3)

The university should demonstrate its preparedness to assure learners, at whatever stage they are, that they will get relevant learner support that enable them to navigate through their programmes based on their previous qualifications. This would enhance smooth transitions in their academic success and career paths.
4.5.8 Language and communication

Participants were also asked to reveal their perceptions about how their language and communication, as an adult learner characteristic, enhanced success in their studies. The researcher’s expectations were met by some mixed feelings. Some participants complained that communication in the university was one way while others said it was two way. Others expressed reservations in the use of communication technologies and yet others dwelt on customer care etiquettes such as voice tone and use of various non-verbal cues. The following quotes illustrate learners’ views in this field:

*As an adult learner, I feel very much short changed if the bulk of the communication is one way, which is from the university or tutors to me the learner. I feel I am not given much room to initiate a communication, such as requesting for reading materials, or raising a query, or requesting for some adjustments or changes in some processes negatively affecting me.* (P5)

*Sometimes University personnel lack proper customer care etiquette as expressed by their non-verbal cues. Some of them don’t even look at you when talking to them face-to-face; others keep you waiting whilst they are busy with their phones, doing personal Whatsapp business.* (P2)

*Our tutors and administrators sometimes fail to understand our situations and backgrounds. You try to contact someone through a mobile phone which is the only technological tool available to me in my situation; my respondent demands that I use an e-mail instead, forgetting that I don’t have a computer, neither do I have internet connection in my area.* (P1)

When tutors and administrators were asked to confirm the learners’ sentiments about their concern on choosing to use a mobile phone instead of the computer, for instance, indeed, both tutors and administrators confirmed that they did not know all their learners’ technological potential and preparedness. They assumed the learners in question had the necessary technological background to respond in the manner as demanded.

The following quotes illustrate the tutors’ and administrators’ views in this regard:

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In distance education, we expect every learner, particularly these adult learners to be technologically equipped in order to effectively participate in the studies both synchronously and asynchronously. If they are not, then we have a problem. (AC 1)

Indeed our learners have challenges if they are not internet environmentally connected. Sometimes I am too busy to attend to their mobile calls there and then, and I expect that the respective learner puts across a query using an e-mail to which I can attend to later. But if the learner does not have internet, then a problem arises. (AD 2)

The same issues were raised by some members of the focus groups situated in both the Midlands and Manicaland provinces. The majority of the focus group members raised concerns about the network problems in their working environments and wondered how tutors could expect some work to be done within given deadlines and how administrators could change due dates overnight. Listen to what members in the focus groups said.

"Working within given deadlines is proper. But taking an example of myself, I work in Gokwe, Nembudziya area (an area in the Midlands Province) and I remember at one time falling sick due to malaria. I couldn’t meet an assignment deadline. I tried to communicate to my programme coordinator through my mobile phone but that failed because of network problems in my area. I then submitted my assignment later and it was treated as a late submission. What is that?" (the member now raising her voice in a harsh mood) (FGD 1)

"We get worried when our administrators send communications through SMS and those communications demand response overnight. For example, they change weekend school tutorial dates overnight to suit their own arrangements (not ours) and expect us to attend the tutorial. Some of us stay in Chimanimani district, far and down in the dark valleys (an area in Manicaland Province). ‘Eh—Ehh it’s true’, (some members in the same group interjecting). With network problems, how do they expect us to get the message overnight?" (FGD 2)

"Transfer from the dark valleys!" (one member in the same focus group jokingly shouted)
Pervading through the above comments is a message carried by learners to the learner support providers suggesting that they (university authorities) somehow do not understand them. Put bluntly, it might mean institutional service providers know very little about their learners. They know little about learners’ situational contexts, as well as their needs and expectations. No wonder why there is seemingly a mismatch between learners’ expectations and university expectations. Whilst it might be a mammoth task for university service providers to know every learner to the extent that only appropriate and effective LS is provided when demanded or expected, the minimum that this study advocates is a situation where service providers should be prepared to listen to what learners say. Service providers should be patient and flexible to adjust their learner support strategies to meet learners’ baseline expectations. Flexibility is the key that should guide the service providers towards maximising their support for them.

4.6 Research Question Number 2: Adult Learners’ Experiences and How They Influence LSP in ODL

Learners interact with various LSS on a day-to-day basis. Some of these interactions produce positive feelings and others negative feelings. The researcher, therefore, asked the participants to describe their own experiences when interacting with various LSS and what aspects they say are favourable or not favourable with regards enhancing effective LSP. Data were qualitatively generated using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. This information is important because it is the one that informs the adult educators about which areas of LSP require further attention.
Under this section, major themes that emerged from the data generated were categorised into LS elements that included administrative support services, academic support services, guidance and counselling services, family support services, peer support services, technological support services, technical support services, quality support services and financial support.

4.6.1 Experiences with Administrative LSS
A number of administrative issues were raised. Among those raised were those linked to:

- ineffective district learning centres (DLC’s)
- inconsistent distribution of teaching and learning materials
- management of registration processes
- management of weekend school tutorials
- management of assignments
- management of feedback systems
- unreliable information dissemination
- customer care issues
Ineffective district learning centres

The issue of learners experiencing difficulties with travelling to the Regional Campus to get access to certain services was raised by some participants. It was the learners’ contention that not many DLCs were fully equipped with the necessary technological infrastructure to enable learners to access relevant resources (Mbukusa, 2009). Learners felt there was need for opening up functional DLCs so that learners have ease of doing business. P1 who stays 198 kilometres from RC1 thought the university was making very little effort to reduce the (actual) physical distance between her place of residence and access to teaching and learning resources. She thought travelling to RC1 constrained the financial resources apart from time one takes to go and return from the RC1. This was also echoed by members of the FGD1 situated in RC2. To explain this scenario, participants had this to say:

As adult learners with so much pressure from different areas, we do not have much time to travel long distances to the Regional Campus to access resources. We wish if the University could open up functional District learning centres. For example, in my case, Mwenezi District, which is relatively near me, should be having a functional District learning Centre. (P1)

The same point was echoed by P4 who said:

Apart from being a learner, I look after an aged disabled father who wants my attention from time to time. Therefore, I wish university services were also available in Zaka District (her district) so that I could go there, do my university business and come back in the shortest time period. (P4)

Yes, that is very true; our district learning centre provides very few services. This makes me want to travel to the Regional campus to do things like registration. By the time I reach there sometimes it will be too late to do any meaningful business. (a member of the FGD1 responding to a comment from another member in the same group)
When the researcher followed up the same issue with members of the academic staff and administrators, he got the same sentiments pointing to the value of the DLCs, most of which were not yet functional and, therefore, not available to learners. A point they were highlighting was that apart from providing quick access to services for the learners, DLCs serve as conduits to fulfil the university’s mandate of taking university educational services to the doorstep of the learner. That is what learners expect.

_Inconsistent distribution of teaching and learning materials_

In ODL, learners depend on using the teaching and learning materials on their own more than what is done in traditional classes. For this reason, it is essential that distribution of teaching and learning materials to learners be done in a manner that ensures equity and consistency in making learners access sufficient and relevant resources on time (Petroman and Petroman, 2013). According to the researcher’s experience, the ZOU uses a number of teaching and learning resources. Chief among these is a course module which both the tutors and the learners believe becomes the course tutor. Once the learner is given the course module, he/she should be able to independently be able to navigate through his/her studies and be in a position to answer the assignment and examination questions. Reflecting positively on this, AC2 said:

_Once the learner receives his/her educational package at registration, amongst which will be the module, tutorial letter and assignment topics, he/she should be in a position to get started, because the module is just as good as the teacher, or even better because it is a product of subject specialists and experts drawn from all over the continents. (AC2)_
The researcher wanted to find out from the learners whether they viewed the module as important and they said:

*Yes, yes, I don’t know how I can proceed without the module. This is the reason why we experience disappointments and frustrations if we fail to get the module as is sometimes the case. When I get to registration and I don’t get one or two modules, I find it hard to get started.* (P3)

*My experience is that in some cases the university is not providing us with a full educational package at registration. This I mean getting all the modules and assignment questions. If there are any additional teaching and learning materials, these should be provided as well in addition to the course tutorial letters.* (P2)

Whilst some interviewees were focusing on the module distribution to learners, others focused their attention on the library as a teaching and learning unit. They lamented the experience of travelling long distances to access library teaching and learning resources that are normally housed in the provincial town. They wished if such library facilities could be spread throughout the DLCs for purposes of access, and thus, supporting a wider group of the learner population. For example, members in the FGD2 commented:

*Some of us come from places such as Chipinge (a district in Manicaland province) where it is equally difficult to travel to either Mutare or Masvingo for library services. Our experience with accessing library resources is that of having challenges in trying to access library facilities that are situated in the Provincial town only.* (FGD2)

Given the above participants’ contributions in this discussion, the researcher noted with concern that distribution of teaching and learning materials in the university under study could be erratic, haphazard and not consistently monitored. The situation made learners lose confidence as they battle to find their study trajectories in ODL. It therefore
demands that ODL institutions, for example, the ZOU, should embark on initiatives to mobilise and distribute resources based on technologically driven adult learner needs and on their situational contexts so that LSP becomes more meaningful and sustainable.

Management of registration processes

In ODL, registration is a critical process because that is when the learners are expected to receive their full educational packages that guide and support them throughout the semester. Generally, a full educational package should include the programme that the learner intends to pursue, the courses involved, the tutorial letter spelling out the course content, suggested teaching and learning materials, the assessment procedures and any other relevant information about the course. This then requires that the learner be fully informed about what is involved in the courses to be registered. On their part, learners should demonstrate their readiness and preparedness to pay required tuition fees and be able to provide the necessary dossiers required. In situations where either the university process or the learner preparedness is fraught with shortcomings, the learner normally gets disadvantaged. The following comments from the participants serve to illustrate this:

Registration can be a stressful period to a distance learner. I remember I was instructed to look for Mr.X (name supplied) to check and sign my completed registration form. I spent almost one hour trying to locate the office of this man because I was unfamiliar with the Campus environment. That was really a waste of my valuable time. (P1)

I also had a bad experience when I was told that I could not register all of my courses because I had insufficient funds. That was OK had I known that before. I blamed myself for learning at a distance because communication seemed to be a problem. (FGD1 member)
Another member from the same focus group added:

*In my case I blame the administrators because the offer letter we receive does not give us enough details of what is required at registration. Just imagine I failed to register because I had brought a driver’s licence instead of a birth certificate.* (FGD1 member)

The issue of learners not being consulted on registration deadlines received some mention in almost every interview. The learners did not understand why registration deadlines that coincided with their normal pay days could not be set. Such arrangements could save them travelling costs and could also enable them to have additional funds for their tuition fees. The response from P4 provides such insights:

*Imagine that registration deadlines are set at four days before our pay day. The majority of us are self-sponsored and rely on our salary for everything that we do. If only our authorities could seek our opinion, we could agree that the two dates coincide so that we have additional funds to avoid submitting insufficient funds.* (P4)

Emphasising the point made by P4, P5 had this to say:

*Our authorities should understand that it is important to involve students in every decision they make. By doing that, they give students confidence as they feel part and parcel of the decisions made.* (P5)

The above discourse mirrors the picture that Forrester, Motteram, Parkinson, and Slaouti (2004) paint about the distance learner at registration. Forrester et al. (2004) describe the learner at registration as one who is bewildered and overwhelmed with the requirements that surround the beginning of the semester. As such, ODL institutions should not lose sight of the fact that distance learners study whilst separated from the campus and therefore, the accuracy and timeliness of information provided becomes critical if they
(learners) are to navigate and be smoothly inducted into the new semester. Moreover, it is at registration that distance learners go through effective integration and adjustment with the university environment and conditions. Therefore careful management of learners at registration becomes paramount. For example, the issue of the offer letter mentioned by the participants can serve the purpose of furnishing learners with all the preliminary information that includes the programme and courses offered, the fees required, registration due dates among other important issues to ensure effective engagement with the learners. As Rahman (2006) points out, it is the module that initiates interactivity between the learner and the study environment. As such, it becomes difficult to imagine that a learner can get started without being supported by a full educational package, particularly modules.

Furthermore, there is no harm seeking learners’ opinions on issues that concern them even though AD1 asks: “How can an agreement with over 1000 learners be reached?” The response to this question may not necessarily be that of consulting each and every learner but it is assumed that trained adult education providers in ODL should have a basic knowledge of the circumstances surrounding their learners at every stage of their learning so as to avoid what Sampson (2003) suggests could be a mismatch between services provided and what adult learners need.
Management of weekend school tutorials

As confirmed by Tait (2003) that learners in distance education want support, it was also evident in this cohort of research participants that they wanted support obtained through participating at weekend school tutorials but had reservations regarding administrative issues. The bone of contention was that of the timing of the weekend school dates, whereby learners, as adult learners, felt they should be consulted with regards setting of the tutorial dates. This should be done in consideration of the time when learners are fully disposed to attend to these weekend school tutorials. Learners wished if weekend school tutorial dates and dates for assignment submission could properly be aligned with their monthly salary paydays so that as they travel to town for salary business, they are able to combine this with university business as well-the whole process becoming a one-stop shop. Regarding this issue, one document (D6) retrieved from the learners’ suggestion box read:

_We don’t know why as adult learners we are not consulted when certain decisions that affect us are made. Everybody is very much aware that our banks (from where we receive salaries) are situated in the Provincial capital towns in which the weekend school tutorials are situated. It therefore does not make much sense to peg a weekend school date on the 22nd when our payday is on the 29th of the same month. Or you could find that the deadline date for assignment submission could be on the 28th of that particular month. Why cause unnecessary pressure to learners?_ (D6)

Some learners appreciated the fact that the venues for the weekend school tutorials were in the provincial capital and as such they were more central and more accessible than whichever place. Yet others thought improvement could be done on venue organisational arrangements that facilitated access to tutorial rooms. They thought if proper directions were not given through signposting or labelling of tutorial rooms, then it would be
difficult to locate a particular room when operating at a big place such as a Polytechnic college. To illustrate these views, one member of the FGD2 commented:

Programme coordinators should be concerned about the time we waste looking for a tutorial room. We experience difficulties when locating tutorial rooms at a place like the Polytech if there are no directions, let alone room tags? Sometimes it goes to the extent where one becomes frustrated. (a member of the FGD2)

A pertinent issue was raised by P1 who queried why weekend school tutorials were not compulsory so that many learners would be obliged to attend. She thought it was at these weekend school tutorials that learners broke their monotonous experiences of isolation and loneliness through meeting peers and friends. However, this was not happening. A learner could spend the whole day studying alone. On this view P1 explained:

Sometimes it’s boring to come to a weekend school and I find that I am again alone without someone to talk to except the subject tutor. I think it is at these weekend school tutorials I should break the silence, the isolation and the loneliness as I expect to meet friends and colleagues. Why don’t you compel everyone to attend these tutorials so that a platform of meeting and socialising with friends is created? (P1)

When the researcher sought confirmation from the programme coordinators about whether the weekend school tutorials were mandatory or not, the academic staff explained that whilst these tutorials were very important, learners were not obliged to attend. In view of this affirmation, it would appear that the learners had mixed feelings on the relaxed policy with regards the weekend school tutorial attendance. It, therefore, calls for the reconsideration of what best benefits the adult learners, that is, whether to make weekend school tutorials compulsory or not compulsory. When probed further to
choose what could be a better option of the two strategies, both members of the academic staff agreed on the notion that: (as expressed by AC1)

*This is a typical case where we have to look upon the student as an adult learner who should be in charge and in control of his/her studies, hence, should exercise his/her choice of attending or not attending the tutorials. If the student decides not to come, then that is his/her problem. Otherwise the best that can be done is to make these weekend school tutorials as beneficial to the student as possible so as to encourage them to attend.* (AC1)

**Management of assignments**

Among other learner support administrative issues that came up in learner data was the issue of assignment management. Learners appreciated the submission process where service providers recorded all details properly including name of learner, pin number, programme and course, date of submission, name of person receiving and signature of one submitting. However, they were not happy about the collection procedures where no procedure was followed. Assignments were just put in one room without proper arrangements and learners could spend more time than necessary to look for an assignment. According to them it was time wasting. The following quotes illustrate participants’ views on this matter:

*Sir, time! time! time! Time is money for the adult learner. I am a politician and hence, have no time spending forty minutes searching for an assignment. Has the University run short of ideas? What about use of course pigeon-holes for quick identification and access of the assignments?* (P5 raising his voice)

*Uum--- the issue of assignment collection is a problem. No one seems to care to assist you. Imagine being in a room with hundreds of assignments and you are asked to look for an assignment without any idea of where to find it. We understand there is shortage of space for
that but it just requires staff to be more creative. Time is critical. (a member of FGD2)

Reflecting upon the same issue, the administrators showed empathy for the learners and commented: “We are looking into the whole issue, as you can see; there are those materials (pointing to a heap of planks) that we are going to use to make shelves and pigeon-holes for assignment storage. Everything will be fine in a few weeks.” (AD1)

As can be read from the above comments, the issue that learners, as adults, were concerned with was time. All they were asking was for the ZOU to value learner time by putting in place more effective LS structures that save time. Time saved could then be used by the learner to attend to other more pressing matters.

**Management of feedback activities**

Participants also raised administrative concerns regarding their experiences with the management of feedback from assignments and tutorial exercises. In many programmes of the institution under study, a course demands that the learner writes two assignments (assignment 1 and 2) as part of fulfilling course requirements to pass in that particular course. In this regard, when asked to comment on support regarding feedback from tutorials and marked assignments, participants were less than happy with the way feedback was administered. The crux of the matter centred on the turn-around period taken by an assignment from the marker to the writer. Worse still, some learners could
get to write the second assignment before they received feedback for the first assignment. This did not augur well with the majority of the participants considering that they viewed assignment feedback as a vital tutorial kit that spells out the strengths and weaknesses (relating to learners’ competencies in the previous work) to be used as a foundation for the next move. Let us hear what some participants said in this regard:

*We value feedback from the marked assignments because this is the one that gives us direction in terms of what we did right or where we went wrong. In the absence of the tutor, feedback becomes our teacher. However, if we do not get it on time, we as distance learners get lost, and end up relying on guess work.* (a member of FGD1)

When asked to comment on why feedback from marked assignments is not distributed on time, a member of the administrative staff had this to say:

*The fault lies with the registration processes that are sometimes not consistent with the initially scheduled dates. This means students may go on registering even after the deadline. May be this is done to cater for those with fees problems or other challenges. To some extent it’s healthy that we show patience and flexibility when dealing with adult learners but this should always be done without compromising standards.* (AD2)

The administrative staff captured it well that patience and flexibility should be exercised without compromising standards, but the question still remains; to what extent? It therefore calls for some further research in this area.

**Administrative experiences on information dissemination**

Due to the geographical dispersion of learners in distance education that makes it difficult for them to receive and disseminate information at expected times, information
dissemination becomes an important and critical factor that guides the success of distance adult learners. In this regard, participants expressed dissatisfaction on the nature information was administered in the institution. Asked why they experienced hardships with respect to administration of information dissemination, P5 stated:

Due to distance, we are experiencing some difficulties in getting access to synchronous message boards, chats, or e-mailing systems that make us receive information on time. Such information as one that raises awareness and understanding of the institution’s activities sometimes goes unnoticed because administration, as we should like to believe, is experiencing constraints when trying to put in place proper medium of communication that benefits all the students. (P5)

Views from FGD2 supported the above sentiments as expressed by the majority of members in the group. The place of information dissemination was looked at with high regard. Here is what a member of the FGD2 said:

It is adequate and proper management of information that guide us to act and implement what the University directs us to do and in turn what we want the university to do in terms of responding to our needs. But what we are experiencing now gives a picture of the administration having challenges in creating various platforms that allow us to engage with the university as much as we want. Take for example; some tutors are hesitant to participate on the Whatsapp chat groups which in our opinion are a very easy and a common conduit of information delivery and receiving. (FGD2)

When viewed from a distance, such experiences (as expressed by the participants above) paint a bleak picture on the university administrators as they also face challenges in enabling adult learners to experience maximum advantage of information channels used in the university. It is the experience of the researcher that most of the university’s information dissemination, that includes weekend school schedules, departmental calendars and diaries, important notices and even examination timetables, is mainly
channelled through the regional campus notice boards that give access to only those that happen to be visiting the regional campus at their own convenient times. Otherwise, the rest of the learners who do not visit the campus at required times tend to miss important information and consequently fail to perform, participate and complete given educational tasks as expected. However, the introduction of on-line services such as the use of myVista has brought some relief to those learners situated in internet connected environments.

**Customer care issues**

In ODL, distance learners are not just adult learners but they want to be viewed as such. What this means is that as learners approach the front office space, most of them become very sensitive about the way they are received, treated and serviced. Many of these learners might be having high statuses in society, for example, heads of institutions, high ranking officers, pastors or even chiefs. They expect to be given the same respect that they are given in the communities when they interface with the staff at regional campuses. Once they notice that they are not treated with respect, they raise eyebrows and sound alarm bells. Evidence to this emanated from document analysis retrieved from learners’ suggestion box.

*I am not happy about the way I am treated by some of your staff at reception. As you are aware, I am a pastor and I don’t expect not to be given appropriate attention and respect by those ‘girls’ you placed at the reception desk. I feel I am not adequately supported.* (D 13)

*I am a Head of a very big primary school and command a lot of respect from my subordinates. I am used to people greeting me first whilst they are standing up before we get on with any business. To my surprise, staff here expects me to ask them to serve me.* (D3)
The time we take to wait in the queue to receive service is too long. Sometimes no one seems to acknowledge our presence to the extent that we feel a sense of humiliation. (D10)

The message carried by the above sentiments is very clear. That is, the learners having the perception that the university personnel is not taking customer care relations seriously. Their experiences portray adults who want to be respected and acknowledged as they interact with university staff. They seem not to take blame in the failure of communication between them and university staff and in the breakdown of customer service delivery. However, what would be of concern to any researcher is whether or not university staff would be all to blame for this seeming breakdown of customer care service provision. Asked to comment on why the learners had such unfavourable perceptions on customer care administration, AC1 had this to say:

Yes, it could be true that students are receiving unfair treatment from the staff, particularly from non-academic staff who administer various service points at the regional campus. Such service points as the reception desk, the registration office, the module collection desk and accounts office are critical service centres in the university because they are the interface between the university and its clients and other stakeholders. Therefore they should be ushered by well experienced and well trained personnel. (AC1)

Whilst sentiments from the academic staff could be true, Regional administrators did not see it that way. When asked to comment, this is what AD2 said:

If students want quality service, they should approach the service delivery desks just as students and not wearing any ‘jacket’ and expecting some treatment related to a perceived status. No! That is wrong. The only official status we know (about our students) is that of one being a student. We cannot be expected to kneel down before one purporting to be a chief; or pastor, or salute a police officer or Member of Parliament. This does not mean that we
don’t respect them. We respect them as such and our respect towards them should not compromise the provision of quality service. (AD2)

What the administrators are saying could also be true in the sense that perhaps it is at orientation that learners should be told that the issue of quality service provision is a two-way process that depends on one who is providing it and the other who is receiving it.

4.6.2 Experiences with Academic LSS
Participants were also asked to narrate their experiences with regards the provision of academic LSS. A number of academic learner support issues were raised and these were grouped under the following sub-themes:

- experiences with orientation
- experiences with tutorial support
- experiences with library support
- experiences with use of module
- experiences with assignment and examination writing skills
- experiences with use of feedback
- experiences with on-line teaching
A detailed description of what transpired during the in-depth interviews and data generation is given in the following pages.

**Learners’ experiences with orientation**

As distance adult learners, some of whom could have left high school or college some time back, coming face-to-face with the reality of the university environment for the first time may provoke wild excitement and anxiety. That is the opportunity that is created by the orientation session for the new learners at the institution under study. Evidence emerging from the data revealed that learners had different experiences of their orientation about the university and the extent to which those experiences impacted on their confidence and motivation to persist with their studies. When probed to say more about their orientation experiences as distance adult learners, this is what emerged from FGDs:

> I had finished college five years before and trying to join the conventional university to do a degree programme had been a nightmare. It was during the orientation activity I learnt that one can afford to do a degree programme through distance learning. Initially I didn’t know what distance education was all about, worse, how I could study on my own without a teacher, or write assignments, use course modules and prepare myself for examinations. (FGD1)

> I was excited but at the same time apprehensive about the idea that I could do a university programme through distance. The support I got from the tutors especially the way they explained how tutorials are conducted, how I could take the responsibility of studying on my own, and the advice given on how I could balance work, study and family responsibilities, boosted my confidence and gave me hope that I could make it. (FGD2)

The major issue about orientation as deduced from learners’ experiences is that of orientation changing the mindset of the learner from that of one without knowledge of
what is going to happen to one who knows what is going to happen regarding his/her studies. Participants also reported having experienced feelings of fear and apprehension which of course disappeared the moment tutors set appropriate expectations for both learners and university. Delving into issues like how to do tutorials and how to get familiarity with assignment writing skills, effective study skills, and ODL delivery systems, tutors (during orientation) instil confidence and hope in the learners that make them persist in their studies. What, perhaps, needs to be improved at orientation as was pointed out by the participants is the management of time. Learners need more time so that they become familiar with everything they need to know before they plunge into deeper waters.

**Learners’ experiences with tutorial support**

The study also revealed diversified learner experiences in the manner tutorials are conducted in the sampled institution. Whilst tutorials are meant to give learners the opportunity to interact with others as well as the teaching and learning materials in order to increase understanding of topics or concepts not initially grasped (Mowes, 2005), participants thought more diagnosis needs to be done by the tutors in order to find out what level of understanding the individual learner is operating at. In this regard, P2 pointed out; “the tutor should first of all assess my level of understanding of issues to be learnt and identify the gap between what I know and what I should know. Once that gap has been established it should then form the foundation on which the concepts under scrutiny should be built.” This revelation bears relevance to Knowles (1984)
andragogical theory which emphasises that mature adults are ready to learn once their
prior knowledge of learnt material has been acknowledged. This means that whenever the
tutor begins from known and progresses to the unknown, motivation (rather than
boredom) dominates the interactions leading to a better and quicker understanding of the
learnt material.

Talking about the adult learners’ prior knowledge to be acknowledged, P5 pointed out:
“Some tutors want to take us as if we know nothing. We are not children. They need to
make use of our vast experiences.”

In some cases as P6 added: “How can the tutor read the module to us without putting
focus on areas of importance or on concepts purported to be difficult? This shows that
the majority of our tutors do not adequately prepare for these weekend school tutorials.”

“In fact,” as a member of the FGD2 tried to explain this point more explicitly: “Isn’t it
that tutorials are meant for the collaborative sharing of ideas? We enjoy exchange of
ideas amongst ourselves as colleagues, not just listening to the tutor.”

Whilst the notion of tutors acting as facilitators of learning sounded plausible to the
majority of members in FGD2, a different opinion rose from members in FGD1 who
seemed to argue that tutors are paid to teach and not being pretenders of facilitators of
learning. Evidence to this came from one of the members of FGD1 who shouted:

"tutors should not come to weekend school tutorials to play around and
waste our time under the guise that they are just facilitators. They
should teach and demonstrate that they know their subject matter. We
are adult learners but not all of us are capable of outright
independent learning. (a member of FGD1)"
The ideas emerging from the participants in the quoted discussion carry forward the debate in ODL on what exactly should happen in a tutorial. Should the support needed in a tutorial be generated from the tutor’s point of view or from the learner’s point of view? Questions can still be asked as to whether a tutorial should be a tutorial and not a lecture or put more bluntly, on whether tutors should be *facilitators* of learning or *lecturers*?

Deeply rooted in the learners’ experiences (as evidenced by their comments) when they participate in these tutorials is the notion consistent with Knowles (1984) and other adult educators that points in the direction that adult teaching and learning is all about helping learners to learn and to become more independent as they take full responsibilities of their studies. As such, adult learners should not be treated as children who need to be filled with information, as it were. Rather, what learners know (experience) should be acknowledged and taken aboard towards construction of new knowledge? This is in tandem with Vygotsky (1978) who argues that learning is a social process involving scaffolding and collaborative activities. Of course, this may not be true or effective in all cases. Taking the opposing views of some members in FGD1 who demanded that tutors should teach, it shows that in some cases, learners notice deficiencies in their tutors’ abilities and competencies to guide them effectively towards independent learning. In other words, tutors are judged as not well equipped with tutorial skills that help their learners advance their knowledge. Rather, they (tutors) choose to sit on the fence and prefer to adopt strategies that in the eyes of their learners tend to waste time. These
findings, therefore, call for adult learner institutions to intervene by way of retooling their tutors (through workshops and retraining) with best practices relating to how academic support should be provided in ODL tutorial sessions.

**Learners’ experiences with the use of the course module**

Data generated under the sub-theme learners’ *experiences in the use of the course module* revealed critical but positive feelings about how learners viewed their course modules in their studies. The majority of the participants commented and agreed with Lynch and Dembo’s (2004) observations on the usefulness of both the synchronous and asynchronous nature of the module, in that it can be carried home, or can be used in the bus, in the kitchen or everyplace anytime (Hawkridge and Wheeler, 2010) in the manner deemed fit by the user. This is what P1 said: “Even if the module could be considered as being outpaced by modern technological tools such as those based on on-line learning strategies, I still find the module user-friendly and a more flexible arrangement of interacting with the course content.” P4 went deeper when she added: “It gives me the opportunity to choose where and when to study considering that I have so many things that can interfere with my studies, for example, family, work or other social commitments.” When the researcher asked P5, the politician, about what he liked or did not like about the course module, P5 articulated issues related to his study skills and said:

*I am a politician and want to do things at my own pace. With the module, I can read forth and backwards, work on the questions given, and interact with the content by way of underlining important statements, inserting question marks on areas I judge not clear and those I wish further clarified in a tutorial or I wish I could discuss with my colleagues. However, I personally feel that the module should include practical demonstrations of model*
When the same issue (experiences with working with the module) was interrogated by both focus groups (FGD1 and FGD2), a plethora of opinions emerged some of which are captured in the following quotes:

At orientation, we are told that the module is our teacher. That is appreciated. However, I don’t feel academically supported if at registration I don’t get the module due to reasons best known by administrators. How do I proceed with working on my assignments without the module? (a member of FGD1)

We find the module most useful if complemented with say, some other strategies such as face-to-face tutoring, video conferencing, teleconferencing, web chats or some other two-way communication teaching and learning materials that bring in elements of dialogue and conversations. Apart from face-to-face tutoring, we find these other technological media not well developed in our university. (a member of FGD2)

Even if the University thinks it can ease the problem of shortage of modules by replacing it with some e-learning materials and other on-line strategies, we still need the printed media in the form of the module because of the challenges we face with electricity flows or lack of it and internet connectivity (or lack of it) in the remote areas we stay as distance learners. (a member of FGD2)

Critically analysing these findings, the study projects the extent to which the learners, as adults, value the use of the modules as print media. Learners appreciated the ease of doing their studies when using the course module, particularly considering its portability and mobility aspects, coupled with high interactivity even if used in areas where there are challenges of electricity and internet connectivity. However, since the module is the course content, they feel that it should form part of the study package available (without fail) right at registration, otherwise there is no way they can do their assignments and succeed in their studies. Furthermore, learners feel they could benefit much more if the
module was complemented by other digitalised technologies such as teleconferencing (aspects they say are not well developed in the sampled institution) that bring in elements of two-way conversation and dialogue. This is in agreement with Holmberg’s (1989) and Moore’s (1990) theories which provide that such strategies provide study pleasure, empathy and autonomous independent study, which are andragogical aspects that should characterise adult learners in ODL.

**Learners’ experiences with assignment writing**

Having left school for some time, adult learners may not find it easy to create a good piece of academic writing required during assignments. This was evidenced by participants’ responses when probed to describe their experiences when given work related to assignment writing. Many participants reported having a wide range of challenges that included lack of adequate time to prepare for the assignments, lack of proper guidance on how to structure the presentations, lack of language proficiency, difficulty in engaging critical thinking, aspects on referencing skills still confusing, internet surfing skills still rudimentary, inconsistent patterns of providing feedback and working under pressure to meet deadlines.

On lack of adequate time to prepare assignments, P1 commented: “Soon after registration, one never gets enough time to prepare any study work. Trying to balance work, family and study tasks, put me under a lot of pressure.” P4 added: “I never thought assignment writing could require such massive reading considering that in the first days,
you don’t know who to ask and where to get resource materials.” These comments suggest that learners need some guidance to enable them to come up with good written presentations. They recalled their experiences when they were in their first semester of their degree programmes with P3 lamenting: “I did not even know how to introduce a topic, let alone understand the issues involved in the topic. Sometimes I had very good ideas but could not organise and structure them into a coherent academic presentation. Even up to now I haven’t come to terms with some of these challenges.” Some participants reported issues involving lack of understanding of the given assignment topics due to poor English language proficiency and unfamiliarity with certain English terms. P2 admitted: “Very often I am marked down because of failure to answer the whole question. For example, given topics with task verbs such as ‘discuss,’ ‘evaluate,’ ‘justify,’ ‘assess,’ among other similar terms, I am still not sure about what should be covered.”

Some participants, particularly those engaged in FGDs, went further to mention serious challenges that were related to the constraints in the provision of high bandwidth internet services. In addition, they also lamented challenges faced in the provision of proper programmes to equip adult learners with some computer and other technical skills. One member in FGD1 commented: “Assignment writing requires critical thinking based on some literature evidence for purposes of adding academic rigour. However, without reliable internet services, and not so good internet surfing skills, one becomes redundant or even frustrated.” Another member interjected: “To me what you are talking about is still blurred. Our professor always talks about advantages of using good referencing, use
of several sources to support one’s ideas and avoiding plagiarism. I still find some challenges to meet what is required in all these terminologies.”

Participants in FGD2 revealed issues related to the value of feedback on assignment writing. One member in this group shouted: “How can we be expected to write good assignments when we don’t get feedback from marked assignments on time?” Another member added: “Yes, it is in feedback we get direction on what is expected by the tutor or on what is demanded by the question. If feedback from marked assignments is not availed, then we keep on holding drafts that will hardly develop into good pieces of academic work.”

Judging from the foregoing debate on the experiences of adult learners on assignment writing, it shows that learners were treating this issue of assignment writing very seriously. A number of challenges, some emanating from personal deficiencies and others emanating from the university’s incapacity to provide particular resources, were highlighted. On the surface, learners displayed a lack of academic literacy, for example, lack of language proficiency and lack of understanding of key terms in a given topic that would enable them to understand more deeply and reflect more critically about the issues involved. The learners little appreciated the administration for its inability to provide certain critical services such as reliable internet connectivity including an effective feedback system that promotes purposeful guidance towards producing of good assignments.
Learners’ experiences with feedback provision

Getting more curious about why participants were so much concerned about the importance of good feedback in assignment writing, the researcher probed further to find out exactly what academic benefits or challenges learners faced when interacting with feedback strategies from the tutors or the university administration in general. P3 had this to say: “As adult learners we want to know how we are getting along with our work. We therefore expect that we receive feedback as soon as possible whilst we still remember what we did.” In the same vein, P4 indicated: “With feedback I am supposed to know my strong and weak points, but more often than not, tutors give us scanty information and sometimes vague comments which we are not able to understand.” P6 noted how some tutors use ambiguous language exacerbated by illegible handwriting as she said: “Even if I may use double lenses, I still find it difficult to read what Mr. --- (Name supplied but later cautioned not to use names of people) write. Where I am able to read is where he sometimes uses simple and one word comments such as good, satisfactory, poor presentation or could have been better, but without giving further details.” As if that was not enough, P1 elaborated: “I like to be given a mark or symbol but a symbol without supportive written comments does not help me much.”

When the same issue was thrown to the FGD, learners continued to pour out their experiences that revealed some loopholes in the manner feedback was provided. Comments from FGDs included the following quotes:
We sometimes wonder whether the markers of our assignments ever read our work because the comments given sometimes don’t match the symbol or mark awarded. (one member from FGD2)

I feel feedback in the form of written comments alone is not enough. I want tutors to talk to us again about it when we meet during tutorials. (FGD1 member)

Gleaning through all these quotes, there is a lot that learners were expressing regarding academic support from given feedback? Findings revealed that feedback provided to learners is far less satisfactory than expected and, therefore, denying learners the opportunity to learn effectively since they would not know what was wrong or correct. Tutors give vague and insufficient feedback that fails to guide learners to confidently proceed with their work. As a way of intervention, learners indicated they wanted feedback that is carried over into tutorials as a form of talkback when they discuss their weaknesses and strengths while in a face-to-face situation with tutors. These findings corroborate with those of Chokwe (2015) that point out that feedback, in a form of talkback, is the most critical aspect of the teaching and learning process and without it, learning, especially of adult learners, is incomplete.

Learners’ experiences with library services

Regarding academic support were also revelations by learners who felt isolated since they did not get adequate library services. Participants expressed different views regarding how their information needs were met. Expressing the effects of distance from the institution, P4 asked: “How do you expect me to write good assignments when I stay
a 100 kilometres from the library resources?” Comment from P1 stated “We are not even aware about what kind of library resources the university offers because of distance.” Elaborating further about these experiences, members from the FGDs had the following quotes: “Even if I have the chance of getting into the library, I am frustrated by slow internet services, worsened by my lack of knowledge on using e-resources” (a member of the FGD2). “Of course,” another member of the same group chipped in, “sometimes we have challenges in using the electronic library resources and other digitalised data bases because of very little ICT knowledge on our part.”

The quoted utterances stress the varied challenges the participants faced when accessing library resources as distance adult learners. These challenges ranged from learners bearing high costs of travelling to the library centre to those relating to experiencing slow internet speed, as well as having very little technical knowledge to access e-resources and other electronic library services. What this shows is that the learners’ library information needs were not adequately provided for. The situation mirrors similar findings obtained by Owusu-Ansah and Bubuama (2015). The two authors reveal that there are very little technologically based interventions in many distance learning institutions because the full cost and complexity of providing quality library services to support distance adult learners tend to be underestimated. The same can be said with regard to the ZOU.
Learners’ experiences with online tutoring

The next learners’ concerns were those related to online tutoring. The majority of the participants expressed positive feelings towards the use of online services by supporting the view given by P5 who commented: “Online services such as those related to tutoring, registration, results publication and online communications are the best options for distance learners.” However, other participants were quick to point out that online services had their own dilemmas. As P1 pointed out: “I really yearn to benefit from the provision of online services provided by the university but the fact that there is no internet connectivity in the area I stay, makes me feel thrown out of the system.” P2 added: “I have a challenge in decoding the online services such as the course modules and other course materials. Maybe I need to do more and more practice in basic computer technical skills.” More serious issues were brought out by information drawn from learner feedback documents. The following two narrations support this claim:

Whilst the university encourages us to benefit from online services arraigned before us, the culprits are our lecturers who seem not to be familiar with the implementation of a wide variety of these online programmes and services. (Document 11)

In fact, our tutors haven’t changed their mindsets to get tuned to the use of online programmes. (Document 12)

The above sentiments were reinforced by one of the administrative officers (AD1) who said:

Before the university expects too much from the learners regarding the use of online services, it should ensure that its tutors are ready to embrace the use of these technologies. Very few of our tutors know how to do certain basics, for example, marking student assignments online. (AD1)
An analysis of these thoughts (expressed above) shows a trend in the ZOU of having tutors who find it difficult to adapt to the e-learning technological environment. To say they are resistant to the change could be too strong but what seems apparent is their lack of technical proficiency in the use of online technologies exacerbated by their little knowledge of the kind of technological support needed to assist their learners.

Regarding adult learners, as can be discerned from their experiences, their main concern was not about having proficiency in software engineering or to operate advanced computer programmes. Rather, it was about their frustrating lack of basic computer skills such as use of Microsoft Word, Excel or Power Point. Following this closely, the researcher, as a member of the university staff in the ZOU, is puzzled about the source of the problem because nearly every programme on offer has a basic computer skills introductory course. Maybe to enrich this basic computer course, there should be more emphasis and focus on hands-on approaches regarding computer use so as to enhance every learner’s knowledge on computer literacy regardless of one’s situational context. Familiarity with basic computer skills enhances learners’ proficiency in going about their academic business and in achieving academic success.

4.6.3. Other themes that emerged

*Learners’ experiences with Guidance and Counselling support services*
Due to distance between them and their tutors or institution, many distance adult learners face a number of challenges that range from having dilemmas in time management, balancing family, work and study to those related with fear of the unknown. Coupled with the fast developments in the use of ICTs, many learners also find themselves overwhelmed and, therefore, unable to cope with everyday technological changes. When this happens, the provision of LSS in the form of Guidance and Counselling becomes critical (Tapfumaneyi, 2013) Let us hear what the participants said about the theme regarding the provision of guidance and counselling services:

There are certain times I feel I want to share my experiences with someone, I normally get frustrated because I don’t easily get that person due to distance between me and that relevant person. Even if there could be some people around me, I may not feel the need to share with them. (P3)

As an adult learner, what I consider most important in my studies is getting immediate help once I get bogged down. To me, communication is very important particularly when it happens between me and the person I consider can give me help. (P5)

The issue to note here is that service that is unavailable becomes a barrier to distance adult learners (Mbukusa, 2009) and, therefore, guidance and counselling would be required to provide some interventions that assist the learners to understand situations and to cope with pending challenges arising from the changes in technology. Adult learners, like any human beings, and as said by P3 in the quote on page 213, want family and peer support for purposes of sharing life experiences. They want technical support to deal with study experiences. They want career guidance to deal with issues relating to fear of the unknown. Above all, they need psychosocial support to restore confidence and
self-esteem, as well as dealing with issues relating to stress and depression engendered by ill-health or bereavement.

Thus, as adult learners’ educational experiences increase, so does the need to provide appropriate and adequate guidance and counselling support services that equip learners with coping strategies that in turn assist them to live a healthy and satisfying life. The ZOU has a whole Unit (called Centre for Student Management) established to deal with the provision of Guidance and Counselling support services. However, the seeming manifestation of deficiencies in the provision of such services, as expressed and experienced by participants in the study, may point in the direction that due to so many learners enrolled in the university, not everyone may get the opportunity to receive the relevant and appropriate attention (on a one-to-one basis) that fosters a sense of building health and life skills in order to cope with some pending academic and psychosocial problems (Cole, 1995; Lambert et al., 2014).

*Learners’ experiences with technical support services*

The *technical* and *technological support services* emerged as sub-themes in their own right. Looking very closely at these two sub-themes, it appears they seemed to have formed the underlying source that precipitated most academic and administrative problems experienced by the adult learners who participated in this study. Because of this observation, there are related subtle issues that emerged and, therefore, need further analysis and discussion. For example, many participants expressed feelings of being
handicapped by a number of challenges related to the deficiencies in the technical support services that could have helped them solve specific problems encountered in their studies. Participants experienced challenges that comprised *lack of assignment and language proficiencies (P1 and P3); lack of knowledge in using e-resources (P5), and generally lack of basic computer technical skills (FGD1, FGD2)*. These technical aspects are vital in enabling the adult learners navigate through their studies and also in empowering them to become independent learners. As Lee (2003) observes, technical support services provide user-friendly assistance that enables adult learners to interact with others through, for example, the mobile phone, e-mails, face-to-face conferencing, WhatsApp and through other social or computer-based platforms. With this technical expertise, they are able to troubleshoot most of the problematic experiences they encounter as they interact with the phenomenon of LSP. This then requires that the university in turn provide the requisite technological environment that exposes the individual learners to various technical expertise intended to facilitate their teaching and learning.

*Learners’ experiences with technological support services*

Also embedded in the data generated by the participants, lay the notion that seemed to confirm the difference in definition between technical support services and technological support services. The technical support, as expressed by the participants, seemed to refer to technical tools that help learners solve specific intellectual problems that lie within the individual’s capacity to perform. For example, participants in the study complained about
their lack of ‘computer skills’ or ‘language proficiencies’ to demonstrate the weaknesses in the provision of technical support. Regarding technological support services, participants seemed to refer to those services provided from outside, mainly by institutional administration or tutors to form an environmental platform from which learners can draw and select appropriate technical resources to help them learn. For instance, participants complained about “facing challenges in the provision of adequate technological resources in the library; not being impressed about tutors; being frustrated by low internet bandwidth services provided by the institution, as well as being deeply incapacitated by lack of internet connectivity in the local areas or places of work.” What this means is that any institution meant to help adult learners to perform, should ensure that it provides a friendly and technologically driven environment that enables adult learners to select appropriate technologies suitable for their needs and one that eventually translates learners’ needs into learner success. To cater for diverse technological needs of learners, the university library should then act as a compensatory unit, well equipped to service less privileged learners situated in remote areas where technology-related pedagogical tools are hard to find.

**Learners’ experiences with family support services**

Issues relating to learners’ experiences with family and peer support also featured a great deal when learners described their demographic backgrounds in relation to how these factors affected their studies as adult learners (Section 4.4.1 page 149). With regards to experiences with family support services, evidence suggests that learners value family
support to the extent that it provides platform for sharing ideas, for sharing resources, and for mental stimulation. Most importantly, it is family that provides financial assistance that enables the learner to sufficiently procure resources that are necessary for navigating in technologically driven courses or programmes. For instance, in situations where these provisions are deficient, as in the case of P1, who is a single mother and P4, who is married to a ‘korokoza’, (refer to table 4.2 page 160) adult learners become stressed up due to their attention being divided between study and family problems. For example, P1 said: “I am generally stressed because I am struggling to pay fees.” and P4 added: “I am isolated and lack both peer and family support. My husband shows very little interest in my studies.”

In some cases, deficiencies in family support cause affected adult learners to become burdened by family responsibilities such that their studies are negatively interfered with. As evidence to this, P3 admitted: “Family commitments interfere with my weekend school tutorials.” P4 elaborated: “I also find it difficult to balance family commitment with study time.” Looking at these submissions, it is important to note that what is crucial for the service providers is not how to solve each and every family problem (because one may never be able to solve them) but to become aware of, and understand each individual problem. Understanding the problems (andragogical characteristics) allows the creation of a learning environment that supports and accommodates the individual challenges through providing guidance and counselling, or personalising the services provided, or providing flexible learning arrangements that reduce pressure and in the process attempt to satisfy the needs of the individual learner. Such evidence matches the
view held by Bryant (2013) who considers family support for both those who experience it and those who miss it, as a way of reducing workload and responsibilities at home, and also as a way of mitigating financial woes related to their education.

Learners’ experiences with peer support services

Issues relating to peer support also emerged in the process of data analysis. This was not a surprise since Gao (2012) asserts that it is peer support that adds value to a learning environment within which adult learners and tutors interface. Peer support encourages critical reflections and gives learners the opportunity to rub minds and dialogue in a pleasant and friendly atmosphere (Simpson, 2000). Indeed, this idea found space in many feedback reports submitted by learners through the suggestion box. One document demanded: “We need to be organised into ‘study groups’ so that we are able to share and compare notes” (D 4). True, it is important to organise learners into some form of small groups to encourage social interaction and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZOU, at its orientation of new learners, disseminates the idea of learners organising themselves into ‘study groups.’ Likewise, the majority of learners organise themselves into groups according to courses studied or according to home or work clusters. In some cases, the tutorial groups initiated by the course tutors during the beginning of the semester naturally becomes the study groups. But what exactly are the learners’ experiences during these study encounters? D 8 had this experience as it directed the following request to the Student Advisor: “---pliz (sic) sir, help me contact my group members because I enjoy doing group tasks since group discussions are very enriching
Another document (D 9) carried an appeal: “We are trying to meet as a group but it appears we are disorganised. I did not meet any of my group members. Please advise.” The same document continued: “I feel delighted to hear what my friends think about what I say and that makes me have a second opinion about the way I do my things.”

Armed with the above information, the researcher sought to find out about what members in the focus groups thought about peer groups. A member in FGD2 responded: “Yes, group discussions are important but you need to be organised and be disciplined first, otherwise it is a waste of time.” A member in FGD1 complemented: “We benefit most when we give each other, in advance, tasks to do or something to present so that when we meet, each group member has something to contribute.” Keen to probe more from the participants, the researcher got this from P1: “I have my confidence restored when I learn (during group reports) that I am not the only one having challenges in the tasks given.”

What has been demonstrated by the above narrations from participants is the need for institutions to guide their learners so that they organise themselves into effective small group discussions if peer support is to be of value to them. Peer group discussions, as suggested by many participants in the study create opportunities for collaborative interactions and dialogue that in turn build a supportive learning environment conducive for achieving academic success. Furthermore, when in groups, learners feel being part of a community of learners rather than studying in isolation (Lee 2003; Simpson, 2000). As
such, they share resources, feelings and emotions that give them hope and strength to remain engrossed in their studies.

*Learners’ experiences with quality assurance support services*

With the rise in competition for employment places now taking centre stage amongst most of the ODL graduates, learners in the ODL institutions are now increasingly demanding better quality educational provisions (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007). To this effect, both ODL education providers and learners must pay close attention to quality in terms of service delivery systems that consider changes in learners’ value definitions of their educational expectations (Darojat, Nilson, and Kaufman, 2015). It results in issues of quality assurance now becoming one of the biggest concerns for both the ODL institutions and learners.

As can be picked from the discussions on findings so far covered, learners raised a number of concerns on quality issues measured by the extent to which they were satisfied or not satisfied with the service delivery processes or the extent to which the services provided met their andragogical needs. Such concerns on quality issues raised by participants included those related to tutoring during weekend school tutorials, registration, teaching and learning materials distribution, feedback processes, management of learners’ affairs and information, access to library services, access to ICT, among other issues. The following quotes provide evidence in this field:
We are not pleased by tutors who come to tutorials not prepared. For example, those tutors who just come to read the module without being responsive to learners’ expectations spoil the quality of teaching expected in ODL. (a member of FGD2)

Our experience is that we don’t get a full educational package at registration. Very often we have one or two modules missing. (P5)

We are not happy at all about receiving assignment feedback that comes too late. We need feedback to check on gaps or even strengths highlighted in the previous assignment so that we know how to progress. (a member of FGD1).

As adult learners, it’s not as if we do not want to have quality on our assignments by getting them typed. Rather, we are let down by our very little knowledge in computer skills. (P2)

An analysis of the above data suggests that feelings of alienation and dejection were strongly evident in learners’ expression of their experiences with regards to quality in LSP, and yet all concerns on quality are meant to be responsive to the learners’ needs and interests. In areas where learners were dissatisfied, it means that quality was being compromised and hence, attention is required by the institutional administrators. Thus, in trying to check on how ODL institutions manage their quality issues, the researcher sought clarification from the academic staff of the ZOU, one of whom also acts as Regional Quality Assurance co-ordinator. The following was the response: “We have in-built mechanisms in the form of regular surveys that solicit tutor evaluations and learner feedback on many academic processes such as registration, tutoring, assignment management, examinations, among other academic and administrative processes” (AC1). Indeed the researcher, as one of the members of staff at Regional Campus 1 can confirm that such surveys and evaluations are done in line with Holmberg’s (1989) and Moore’s (1990) theories. The two theories view quality in LSP as one that should emphasise interaction and communication (between learners and service providers) in
order to promote learner engagement and effective participation. This means that observations drawn from learner feedback evaluation forms are then discussed in Academic Board meetings for purposes of effecting continuous improvement in policies, standards and procedures (Darojat et al., 2015) underpinning quality control, monitoring and compliance.

Just to verify why there were so many quality concerns (dissatisfaction) raised by learners considering that all these quality measures were (and are still) carried out in the ZOU, the researcher sought for learners’ perspectives. P4 responded: “Yes these surveys are carried out from time to time but what we don’t really see is the change. Maybe the service providers are facing monitoring and implementation challenges.” This response by P4 somehow covered the general perception of learners on quality issues in the institution under study based on the notion genuinely stated by Chiome (2012) that “there is nothing for them (learners) without them.” Learners felt they were not effectively involved or engaged in matters concerning their studies. If consultation was done, then it means their suggestions were not taken seriously. Learners felt that they were taken for granted. Yet, if quality standards were to be reached, there was reason for ODL institutions, the institution under study in particular, to acknowledge learners’ needs and consider their changing perceptions of quality standards.

**Learners’ experiences with financial support services**

The theme on learners’ experiences with financial support was a recurrent issue throughout data generation and analysis in this study. Learners considered financial
support as the biggest threat to their studies and they justified this position by saying that they were adult learners with so many responsibilities that divided their attention, and financial concerns consumed the biggest portion of this attention (Cercone, 2008). Challenges raised by some of the participants included, among others, cost of travelling to access services from the Regional Campus, purchasing study materials, cost of accessing information technologies, typing assignments, photocopying and binding, and the biggest of them all, payment of tuition fees. The fundamental issue raised by participants under study was that they were finding it difficult to cope with the ever escalating educational costs now experienced in distance institutions of higher learning across the globe (Bryant, 2013), worse in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. The following verbal quotes bear testimony to this view:

*I am a single parent looking after my child, a brother, and aged parents. Where do you think I get all that kind of money to pay for my tuition fees at once?* (P1)

*I just cannot afford costs of travelling, photocopying supplementary information and typing of my assignments. Eeh, this is too much considering that I am just a Civil Servant.* (P2)

*We are experiencing hardships in that we are expected to pay cash up front. Failure to raise the fees forces many of us to drop-out.* (a member of FGD1)

An analysis of the comments by the participants reveals an unfortunate situation experienced by the learners when it comes to raising tuition fees. The researcher’s experience with the ZOU reveals that at one stage the university tried to put in place strategies meant to mitigate learners’ challenges in fees payment. The measures included staggering, paying a certain percentage of the total fees and having the balance paid in instalments, working in partnership with some banks and lending financial institutions in
order to assist learners access the needed finances. All these measures were meant to cushion learners’ fees payment. However, it appears the strategies fell short of meeting learners’ expectations to the extent that they (learners) continued to demand for more relaxed arrangements on fees payment.

From the university point of view, the whole issue was (is) paradoxical as was explicitly stated by one of the administrative members “---the more fees payment arrangements are relaxed, the more learners get into fees arrears that collectively accumulate into huge debts. This is the reason why the university sometimes demand cash up front” (AD2). Picking it up from this view and whatever it is that should be done to ease fees problems, are calls for both parties (learners and university) to continue engaging in dialoguing in search for a solution. When asked in connection with solutions, members in the FGD1 suggested “allow us to learn even without full payment of fees but retain the results and certificates until one pays full fees.” Whilst this may be plausible, as reasoned out by P5 (a learner and Member of Parliament), it may not be the best option, as it ends up with learners falling into arrears and unprecedented debts, a situation that neither benefits the learners nor the university.

Considering that many governments across the globe have reduced or even stopped funding university education (Bryant, 2013; Nuwagaba, 2013), it now remains for the institutions themselves to find other means of funding their own institutions through improving diversified funding models and opportunities (Caleen, Holmberg, Neghina and
Owusu-Boapong, 2016). Some of these models might include, as suggested by one member of the academic staff in the study, “putting in place in-built fund raising mechanisms, carrying out income generating projects, for example, farming, engaging in research and consultancy, engaging alumni and establishing stakeholder partnerships or doing only the best out of the fees learners are paying” (AC1).

Simply put, what the learners are saying is that they need to be assisted in one way or the other in order for them to be able to support and fund their education. However, as revealed in the study findings, let it be noted that whatever funding is done by any ODL university, the ZOU in particular, the learners should be identified as ‘bona fide’ beneficiaries (Nuwagaba, 2013).

4.7 Research Question Number 3: What Learners Said They Wanted Done Regarding LSP in ODL

Question number three demanded that learners say precisely what they wanted done regarding LSP in ODL. The researcher reverted to the themes that emerged under question number 2 and probed learners further to hear what learners suggested could be done in order to guide effective provision of LSS. In this regard, section 4.7.1 outlines the sub-themes under the main theme: administrative support services and what learners said they wanted done in order to enhance LSP.
4.7.1 Administrative LSS and what learners said they wanted done to enhance LSP

*Ineffective district learning centres (DLC’s)*

When probed further to suggest what they really wanted done about the functionality of DLCs, some of the participants were optimistic that there was still room for innovation to make these learning centres become more user-friendly than ever before. They wanted these learning centres to provide as many services as possible so as to accommodate their diverse needs. Once an area has a designated learning centre, then it is supposed to be self-sufficient to cover all essential services in a manner that, at the end of the day, makes learners enjoy the benefits of studying at a distance. This is unlike a situation where a learning centre provides one service only, for example, *handling of assignments*, but relinquishes access to the other essential services to the main campus. P4 was rather disturbed by this position and she said:

> *What’s the point of having a DLC that provides one service only and I have to travel to the main campus for registration, receiving modules, and attending to weekend school tutorials. I want a DLC to be self-contained to cover all my needs.* (P4)

*Inconsistent distribution of teaching and learning resources*

Participants expressed mixed feelings about the distribution of teaching and learning resources particularly the modules. Whilst a few indicated that there was a big improvement in module availability and accessibility, the majority of the participants were still not having confidence in the capacity of the ZOU to provide a one-stop service delivery and provision. Learners said that they wanted to receive all their teaching and
learning materials once one had registered intended courses. Following this up, a member in the FGD1 put it this way: “I want to receive, not some but all my modules at registration. Receiving two modules and coming back to receive the other two after some time puts me at a very big disadvantage in terms of time and costs.” Another member in the same group expressed the same point but bringing in the idea of access to tutors. “I want to have easy access to my tutors. Why can’t the University consider appointing part-time tutors with whom we can interact in the vicinity of our DLCs?” Whilst this idea might sound far-fetched, it is the researcher’s opinion that it can be done. The university may deliberately appoint certain part-time tutors that are situated in the different remote DLCs (not only near the urban centre) and these may act as immediate mentors or access points for applicable subject areas linked to some learners in those remote areas, particularly where research or dissertation supervision is involved.

**Management of registration processes**

As expressed by Forrester, Motteram, Parkinson and Slaouti (2004), there is no time distance learners want full support and attention than at registration period. During registration, learners want to be heard and want to take with them a full educational package that will make them avoid a false start to the new semester’s demands. In the event that they face challenges, for example, fees shortages, learners want the administrators to feel compassionate about their pleas even if it means extending their registration deadlines. Meanwhile they would be looking for more finances to pay off their registration fees. Talking about negotiating registration deadlines, P1 said:
I want the authorities to understand my situation and background. I want them to have faith in me regarding my commitment to pay off my fees balance as soon as I get it. This will allow me to register, have my teaching and learning materials early and that ensures success in the semester’s examinations. (P1)

P6, who seemed not to be worried much about fees payment, appreciated the enhancement of registration on-line but expressed the following reservations: “Registration on-line is the way to go but sometimes we are frustrated by the system failing to download certain information regarding courses on offer, assignment topics, on-line texts, among other support items. More often than not, my area internet connectivity fails me.”

Whatever, the case, learners under study wanted access to all the information that could make them get started with their studies as soon as the semester began. They wanted the service providers to be ready to the dot in providing this support comprising availability of semester courses, assignment topics, teaching materials, weekend school schedules, examination timetables, and faculty or departmental diaries or calendars. Such provision is facilitated by putting in place effective communication technological platforms that enhance access to useful and relevant information to the learner’s learning package.

Management of weekend school tutorials

The management of weekend school tutorials is a critical activity in ODL that requires that advance planning and resource mobilisation be prioritised in order to make learners excited and eager to attend. However, in the studies carried out by Chabaya, Chadamoyo and Chiome (2011) and by Kurebwa (2014) on service delivery systems and focusing on aspects such as weekend school management, findings have been sceptical about the
extent to which administration of weekend school tutorials satisfy the adult distance learners. This has been mirrored in the current study as learners felt that more should be done if weekend school tutorials are to have maximum benefits to them. What seems to make weekend school tutorials a necessity is reflected in Tait’s (2000) observations that learners want such kind of support. This was re-affirmed by P5 who noted:

*I want the weekend school tutorials because they make me feel I am part of a community of learners. However, it is probably the organisation of such activities that need to be looked at in order to make them more attractive and exciting for anyone to attend.* (P5)

When probed further, P5 revealed issues to do with the timing of weekend school tutorials and said:

---*as adult learners with so many things to attend to, we want to be involved in deciding or at least to be consulted on when these weekend school tutorials should be conducted. What we mean is we do not wish to make drastic changes to the overall plan already in place, but we would prefer just a bit of adjustments and flexibility in setting dates that make us feel comfortable and having our needs safely accommodated.* (P5)

Concurring with P5 above, some participants namely P3, P4, and P1 added other dimensions pertaining to the general organisation of the weekend school venues that they also wanted looked at. P4 summarised what they said:

*Sometimes attendance to these tutorials is affected by lack of proper communication as the administration sometimes relies too heavily on notice board displays at the expense of other communication channels. For this reason, we want the opening up of more communication channels to ensure that we are well informed about the dates, time and availability of tutors, including details of the venue set up and tutorial rooms’ directions.* (P4)
Whilst the above comments might seem farfetched and beyond what ODL institutions might consider important, it is the researcher’s conviction that the demands are quite reasonable. They are also within reach because there is nothing strange about consulting the learners in matters that concern them as well as putting in place adequate and effective communication channels to inform the processes and administrative support strategies that direct weekend school operations.

**Management of assignments**

Participants also raised a number of issues regarding the management of assignments. Their concerns rest on the fact that assignments are a source of feedback from tutors and from their own work, hence, anything that interferes with assignment management also interferes with their learning. When asked to say what they wanted done to facilitate effective assignment management, participants, both learners and academic staff, were worried by the unreliable turn around period of marked assignments from tutors. When probed further to pin-point why in their opinion there was an unnecessary delay for the return of marked assignments from markers, AC1 responded; “I am not quite sure about the reason other than saying there is laxity in monitoring the movement of assignments particularly where it involves part-time tutors.” Participants also expressed dissatisfaction on the manner marked assignments were handled, that included time taken to retrieve marked assignments from data capture clerks and the way they were stored in readiness for dispatch. Despite frantic efforts made by administration to improve the situation, that includes making subject programme coordinators be fully responsible for
assignment management, still the situation, according to some learners, has not improved. Commenting on this matter, P1 argued:

...as long as there are no pigeon-holes to compartmentalise storage of assignments, management and distribution of such assignments may never be satisfactory. Therefore what we want is having a situation where resources are set aside for the improvement of storage and a quick access to marked assignments. (P1)

A seemingly better solution to all this came from P6 who brainstormed: “We want our institution to take the on-line marking route. This would minimise all this confusion of assignments getting lost, or stolen, or getting delayed to reach their destinations.”

**Management of feedback systems**

The issues related to management of feedback systems have been a common feature in the findings in this study. This demonstrates the significance and importance of feedback issues to adult learners studying at a distance. When asked to say exactly what their concerns were regarding management of feedback in the sampled institution, participants reiterated their concern about the need to receive marked assignments on time. As P4 noted, “We want a quick turn-around period of feedback in marked assignments.” P3 added:

*I want to have a look at what I did, where I went wrong and how my tutor suggests I should do it. This makes me feel contented and have confidence in what I do, considering that I will be alone most of the times.* (P3)
The implication to what P4 and P3 have said is that Faculty programme coordinators working in liaison with subject area assignment clerks should ensure that proper recording and dispatch lists are updated from time to time. Deadlines for the return of the assignments should clearly be communicated to the markers and if there are any delays, then follow-ups should be instituted and reminders sent to those concerned. Where problems still persist, these should be documented in academic board meetings and resolutions reached should be meaningfully communicated to the concerned learners. This practice, if properly managed, may result in some challenges related to feedback from marked assignments being mitigated (Chokwe, 2015).

Management of information dissemination processes

In their revelations earlier on, learners found management of information systems rather unreliable and inconsistent. When asked what they really wanted done regarding how the university should manage, for example, learner queries, a member of the FGD1 group responded: “We want the university to have effective and efficient call centres manned by knowledgeable and well trained call operators to avoid being transferred from one person to the other when we make calls.” Another member added:

...sometimes we will be seeking clarity on certain issues that perhaps could be causing confusion amongst learners. In that respect, we want administrators to open up various communication channels, for example, use of mobile phones, SMS, emailing, notice boards, or use of websites and platforms meant to facilitate communication for learners in diverse contexts. (a member of FGD1)
P1 noted the importance of learner helpdesks at DLCs. She commented: “If our DLC could have clearly operative helpdesk, it would reduce distance between us and the Regional Campus and we would have our issues sorted out with minimum cost and time.”

Participants in FGD2 discussed several issues concerned with fast and easy communication. One member from FGD2 commented that apart from feedback:

*We also want easy communication in areas regarding course content and its relevancy, pace, delivery problems and other instructional concerns. This is made possible by opening up weekend office hours, or doing learners a favour by allowing them to use a toll free number to communicate with tutors during designated telephone office hours in order for our concerns to be addressed.* (a member of FGD2)

Such kinds of ideas as expressed by some members of the FGD2 above, are quite noble since timely resolution of learners’ problems leads to amelioration of what could turn out to be learners’ grievances, that is, if learners queries and issues are not handled properly.

**Management of customer care issues**

With regards to customer care issues, learners generally expressed satisfaction with the way customer care issues were handled. However, there were subtle things they wanted done in order to improve quality in customer care. Learners wanted the university to treat them as adults. If this condition was met, then everything else would follow suit. The following quotes serve to illustrate this:
I want to be treated just as an adult. That’s all. (P5)

We want our tutors to give us a bit of some respect. Respecting each other builds positive relationships between learners and staff. (a member of FGD1)

As mothers with babies, we are happy with the way ZOU staff accommodates us at weekend school tutorials or workshops. This demonstrates great acceptance of who we are as adult learners. (Extract from D 7)

The bigger part of the above comments mirrors Knowles’ (1980) philosophy about adult learners’ andragogical characteristics and the way they learn. The philosophy focuses on adults wanting to be respected (Knowles, 1984) as well as being ready to use their vast experiences in finding solutions to their problems, including those that they encounter in their studies. They want to do something that is of immediate value to them and are self-motivated to do whatever they intend to do. As such, quality customer care is enhanced if aligned to these characteristics. As emphasised by Zawacki-Richter (2004), learners in distance education seem to be driven more by customer care support than those in conventional institutions.

4.7.2 Academic LSS and what learners said they wanted done to enhance LSP in ODL

Having listened to learners talking about their experiences regarding academic LSS, the researcher followed up this main theme (academic LSS) and sub-themes as given out in section 4.6.2 b page 198 and probed further to find out what learners really said they wanted done on each sub-theme in order to enhance LSP in ODL.
**Orientation**

B. Some of the participants expressed the need to have orientation and said that orientation was a critical period in their study lives. This is because orientation opens up learners’ eyes to see where they are going and where they are coming from. Learners get informed about ODL mode of delivery hence, they need more time to get exposed to a number of university practices as well as have more time to interact with tutors and friends. “As adult learners who would have left school for some period, we want the university to allow us more time to learn about the university and its ODL delivery mode and to give us more time to interact with our tutors and friends.” said one member of the FGD2 group.

**Tutorial support services**

When probed further to say exactly what they wanted done during tutorials, learners said that they wanted their tutors to acknowledge their wealth of experience and knowledge in order for them to relate and understand fully the new material. Tutors should not treat them as children. A member in the FGD1 confirmed: “Yes, we want our tutors to acknowledge what we know as a basis of what we are about to learn. This makes us feel confident and having a sense of maturity.” One member in the same group noted: “We want tutors to do more than just facilitating by creating more opportunities for us to view issues in ways that make a difference.”
What learners want is what Mezirow (1997) refers to as transformative learning. Transformative learning relies on the person’s frame of reference to define one’s life world. Any new learning material that comes within the person’s frame of reference is understood and interpreted better than something that is not. This is what adult learners crave for and it requires that tutors rise above their learners’ cognitive levels in order to capitalise on learners’ experiences. In the learners’ opinion, this is more than tutors just being facilitators.

**Library support services**

Distance adult learners deserve access to library and information services just like their on-campus counterparts (Sampson, 2003). As such, they find such services very critical in expanding their existing knowledge and experiences in order to make meaningful contributions to educational discourse (Owusu-Ansah and Bubuama, 2015). Participants in the study felt the same way. They demanded: “*We want weekend library hours to be extended (to evening hours) to increase access to information*” (D 6). P3 also noted: “*I stay far away from the Campus, and therefore the library should have diverse services to cater for diverse needs.*” Diverse services could mean that the library should provide services such as photocopying, reference and bibliographic services, printed texts, access to some e-learning resources, coupled with high internet bandwidth, among other relevant services. P6 acknowledged deficiencies in information literacy and IT skills and he requested: “*I need to have training in basic IT skills so that I enhance my information literacy.*” This is true considering that most adult learners come from backgrounds that
offer little or no information literacy. Information literacy is important because it enables learners to acquire abilities to locate and effectively use the library resources.

**Use of the module**

The academic value of the printed module was articulated by P5 in section 4.2.2 (b) page 204 and the need for access to it (module) at registration needs no emphasis. Learners under study want the module because it is user-friendly, portable and interactive. The researcher cross-checked P5’s view with those from the focus group interviews. A member in the FGD2 reiterated: “We want the printed module because of its potential to be used anywhere anytime, unlike other electronic technologies that require electricity and internet connectivity.” Other members in the same group also echoed the value of having guided responses (to given questions) included in the module. “Some of us have not yet come across what tutors consider to be a good answer to the assignment questions. Why not have just one or two model answers slotted in our modules. We will then use this to judge how far we need to go.” (a member of FGD2)

**Assignment writing**

In addition to the desire to have more time to prepare for the assignments, learners want guidance on how to interpret the topic, search for the relevant content, critically analyse issues, organise ideas, and articulate ideas in good English. Many learners lamented that they had no good language proficiency. D 5 stated: “We want training in language skills
and proficiency as well as guidance in information search and analysis.” The whole idea of good assignment writing is facilitated by learners having access to internet enabled environments. This was elaborated by P6 who said: “Wherever we are and if we are to do better in our assignments, we want access to good internet services and other e-resources for research and content building. We want our library to have such infrastructure.”

Use of feedback

Again, the issues of feedback and learners perceptions about it have been adequately dealt with in the preceding sections. However, the researcher still probed to let participants open up and freely say what they wanted done regarding feedback issues. The point repeated was the need to provide immediate feedback, particularly that from marked assignments, as well as feedback that is constructive, informative and enriching (Chokwe, 2015). Comments from P4 and P3, also noted in section 4.4.2 page 150, bear testimony to this. When asked to say exactly what he wanted done regarding feedback systems, P4 simply stated “I want quick feedback from marked assignments so that I can see my strengths and weaknesses before I embark on the next assignment.” P3 also echoed the same sentiments. She emphasised that she wanted to receive feedback on marked assignments well in advance. This was important because she could have adequate time to look at what she would have done, where she would have gone wrong and how her tutor had suggested about how she could have done the assignment. Considering these comments, it follows that administration should in turn avail
assignment feedback to adult learners well in time for them to reflect upon their work, upon the marker’s suggestions and the corrections to be done in order to enhance assignment writing.

**Use of online services**

Participants had no doubt in their minds that online tutoring was the way to go. During this era of technological advancement, there is no way a person can fully function without the use of technology in one way or the other, more so if one is an adult learner. Participants in the study were aware of this fact but they expressed some reservations on the use of online services in that for online services to be effective, they require technologically enabled environments and some technical competencies which, unfortunately, both learners and their tutors had very little knowledge of. For this reason, learners wanted the administration to put aside resources for the training of both staff and learners in basic computer skills. Learners wanted their tutors to be able to guide them in the application of various online skills that include abilities to register online, communicate through online marking, upload and download certain information online, submit and receive assignments and ability to use other various online platforms that facilitate their communication with tutors and administration. These appeals were more prominent in comments made by members in the focus group discussions. The following quotes bear testimony:

*We like to use online services as long as we operate in areas connected to electricity and internet services.* (a member of FGD1)
We want administration to improve access to online services including online tutoring. (a member of FGD2)

We hope Government will continue connecting electricity to our rural areas so that we also enjoy computer based online services. (a member of FGD2)

Both tutors and learners require training in basic ICT skills to enable us use online services with ease. (a member of FGD1)

Apart from administrative and academic services that were discussed in section 4.7 page 225, the researcher continued to interrogate the provision of other LSS that emerged as themes in their own right. Such themes are discussed in section 4.7.3 below.

4.7.3 What learners said they wanted done regarding provision of other support services

Guidance and Counselling services

Literature on adult education has describes adult learners as people characterised with multiple roles and responsibilities (Cercone, 2008). If these roles and responsibilities are not properly managed they can lead to stress and eventually interfere with the individual’s wellness. Guidance and Counselling then becomes a critical component of the adult learners’ support services in so far as it equips the adult learner with strategies to cope with wellness issues (Thomson and Porto, 2014). Adult learners want support in their efforts to balance between work and family responsibilities. They also want strategies to deal with various stresses engendered by lack of good health, pressure of work, lack of finances among other issues. Adult learner institutions such as the ZOU
should, therefore, create opportunities that provide counselling services and initiatives to deal with learners’ wellness.

**Technical support services**

Considering the overwhelming changes in ICT that the adult learners are currently experiencing, there is need that learners get the necessary skills to cope with such phenomenal advances in technology. Adult learners need such technical skills to access information from various ICT platforms, from library e-resources, from their peers and tutors and from university administration. As P6 indicated, “Technical support helps troubleshoot most of the technical problems I experience in my studies.” To this end, there is need that adult learners with deficiencies in technical support be trained in order to solve issues related to technical experiences.

**Technological support services**

As alluded to earlier on in the debate surrounding learner support services, technological support services offer a conducive environment from which adult learners can make relevant choices on the pedagogical technologies used towards facilitating their learning. An effective technological environment should meet diverse needs of adult learners as dictated by their study requirements. The need for such an environment was epitomised in the evidence that came from P2 who commented: “I want a technological environment that translates my needs into success.” Such technological environments embrace areas
that are connected to electricity grids, make possible availability and access to desktop computers, laptops, smart phones, library and e-resources, among other services, as well as access to personnel with technical expertise. Adult learners want to enjoy online services supported by sound and reliable internet infrastructure in order for them to effectively communicate and diminish the transactional distance (Moore, 1993).

**Family support services**

In a study carried out by Asbee et al. (1998) and cited by Simpson (2015), OUUK learners rated family and friends as giving the most fundamental support to their family members engaged in ODL studies. This is true if compared with what learners in this study said about the value of family in supporting them in their studies. Participants said they want family support in as far as sharing ideas and resources are concerned. In cases where family support is deficient, administrators should know such learners’ backgrounds so that they (administrators) are well informed in order to create further opportunities that support learners to function more effectively. Adult learners want and cherish that kind of knowledge and support from their administrators. P3 testifies: “I want administrators to know my family background so as to understand challenges I face.” Even though family support is generally non-academic, it is however, motivational in the sense that in times of hardships related to study issues; adult learners derive solace and enhanced wellness through psychosocial support provided by their family members.
Peer support services

Regarding issues related to building extended adult learner wellness; peer support also becomes critical in that it offers much for peer interactivity through various social media platforms such as Whatsapp, facebook, twitter and mobile telephoning. P4 provides evidence: “I want accessible interactive channels of communication with my peers for purposes of promoting good health.” With regards to academic issues, peers provide several ways of supporting each other. Such approaches as learner mentoring and self-help groups (Simpson, 2015), provide the relevant scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) that stimulates mental growth together with revitalising social and emotional development. One member in the FGD1 had this to say: “We want peer support because we get mental stimulation through sharing ideas.” Peer groups in the form of study groups also want guidance, or what may be called guided interaction, from their tutors in order for them to function properly. Another member in the FGD1 also noted: “We want our tutors to give us guidance and advice on how to organise ourselves into effective peer group discussions.”

Quality assurance support services

Whilst quality standards can be imposed from above, learners also want these quality measures to be viewed from what they consider to be quality. Just like beauty, quality lies in the eyes of the beholder. Learners measure quality by the extent to which services satisfy them. They want their needs to be met. To this end, P2 remarked: “We want to be satisfied with the services provided and to us this is quality.” P3 complemented: “We
want our needs to be acknowledged in line with our perceptions of quality standards.” Thus, in significant ways, learners want quality in terms of expecting their tutors to adequately prepare for tutorials; they want provision of the full study package at registration; they want feedback from queries and grievances provided in the shortest time possible, they want ease of doing business through being equipped with technical skills that facilitate access to various ICTs. This was reinforced by P2 on quality assurance issues: “We want technical skills that enhance access to teaching and learning resources.” Equipped with appropriate and relevant technical skills, learners can access teaching and learning materials with ease, enjoy feelings of pleasure and satisfaction, and ultimately attain study success.

Financial support services

Issues related to lack of financial resources to effectively support studies seem to be causing the most stressful feelings to learners. Learners did not hide their feelings by stating: “We want adequate financial resources to adequately reduce pressure and unnecessary stress that very often interfere with our studies” (P4). This confirms findings of a similar study carried out by Tapfumaneyi (2013) on challenges of learner counselling in ODL which showed that 60% of the ZOU adult learners need counselling in financial related issues. This can also be confirmed by the researcher whose experience in the Department of Centre for Student Management in the ZOU demonstrates that most of the problems learners present for counselling have something to do with finances that are too inadequate to comfortably and sustainably support their education. Learners
therefore want university authorities to address finance related issues through dialogue and purposeful engagement.

By dialogue, individual learners might mean that they want to be listened to when presenting fees related problems. Depending on each individual’s case, these adult learners expect flexibility and relaxation in the manner tuition fees are paid in order for them to complete their study programmes on time. Highlighting this point, D14 contained this comment: “It is not about how much fees is supposed to be paid, but about how that fees is supposed to be paid that is of biggest concern because at whatever stage we are in our studies, we need to balance fees payment and other family responsibilities.” Therefore, the fact that learners want financial support services in one way or another, as D 14 asserted, needs no emphasis.

4.8 Reflection
When reflecting deep into these debates on adult learner needs and characteristics and how adult learners want their needs to be considered in order to enhance the provision of LSS in an ODL context, one gets the impression that the demands are not farfetched. Suggestions given by participants in the study seem to carry weight. The point that should be highlighted is that there should be serious engagement and consultation between administration and learners so that decisions reached on whatever aspect affecting learners’ education, should be based on efforts meant to meet learners’ needs.
Shortcomings in the provision of various support services identified in the findings are not necessarily a result of, and not always a shortage of resources, but are a result of lack of commitment and lack of prioritising on the part of administration, (learners seem to imply that) on those issues that ensure full learner participation, involvement and engagement in activities that lead to their academic success and wellness. In recent years, as observed by Trowler (2010), learner engagement has become the focus of attention and source of agendas among distance education institutions positioned to enhance the provision of effective LSS. This kind of thinking had long been envisaged and well summarised by researchers such as Brindley (1995:8) who notes:

_Empower learners so that instead of quietly going away they can actively participate and communicate with the institution about how to do a better job to serve them._

4.9 Research Question Number 4: Andragogical Strategies Considered Most Appropriate in ODL

In order to address this issue, the researcher drew information from both the literature reviewed and participants’ data that emerged during the process of data generation and analysis. Information was categorised into two broad themes, (a) administrative andragogical strategies and (b) academic andragogical strategies with each main theme further broken down into sub-themes that turned out to be the specific andragogical strategies identified. The description below illustrates sub-themes denoting the administrative andragogical strategies that emerged from literature and from participants’ data and bear strong implications for enhancing LSP in ODL.
4.9.1 Implications for administrative andragogical strategies for enhancing LSP in ODL.

Drawing from the review of related literature and from what participants said with regard to andragogical strategies appropriate for LSP in ODL, the following administrative strategies extracted from Appendix G, pages 318-320, were indentified.

**Consulting and negotiating**

Consulting emerged as one of the biggest learners’ concern in terms of knowing who they are and what they want to happen if they are to benefit from the various LSS provided to them by the institution. Consulting or negotiating, from the learners’ perspective, means that before important decisions are reached and implemented, administrators have to find out from adult learners what they suggest should be done regarding the provision of support services if learners are to enjoy maximum benefits from that support. Consultations can also be extended to learners’ families, peers and other stakeholders in order to search for information on how best administration can provide service to those learners.

**Planning together with learners**

Just like in consulting, adult learners in the study want to be engaged in deciding on what, when and how certain activities are done to avoid conflict of interests. When institutions plan together with their learners, agree on what and how they intend to
achieve laid down objectives and pay more attention to meeting the needs of the learners, there is greater possibility that the educational targets for both learners and institution, will be met.

**Building relationships**

Building relationships is an important andragogical strategy that serves to establish rapport between learners and staff. Issues that relate to customer care provision are hinged on the nature of relationship prevailing between learners, institution and other stakeholders. According to participants in the study, building positive relationships comprises showing each other some respect as adults, and acknowledging each other’s contributions in order to constructively create innovative space for each member to develop. Such evidence on building relationships in relation to improving customer care were reported by participants in the study on page 214.

**Resource mobilising**

This is a strategy that ensures that all relevant resources, including library and course modules, are put in place to enable access to important resources that support learner teaching and learning activities and processes. In the study, learners talked at length about shortage of resources, such as shortage of technological resources, which undermine access to information, skills and knowledge. Therefore, resource mobilisation becomes a very crucial andragogical strategy that ensures that resources needed to
perform certain activities and to enable learners to access vital information; knowledge and skills are available and accessible.

**Capacity building**

Similar to resource mobilisation, capacity building in relation to learner support in ODL is a broader administrative, andragogical strategy that focuses on reducing or removing obstacles that interfere with adult learning. Proactively, capacity building develops and strengthens the institutional ability to provide a rich infrastructural environment that offers wide access, training, consultation as well as creating opportunities for study innovations and sustainability. In the study, participants requested for more functional DLCs, more space for tutorials, more library resources and more technical skills in order for them to independently solve their study problems, increase performance and ultimately achieve their educational goals. Fundamentally, to adult learners, capacity building is the provision of a wide range of services based on andragogical needs and meant to improve effectiveness and facilitation of their learning.

**Providing workshops and training to learners and staff**

In the study, participants expressed willingness, though with some reservations, towards embracing the idea of wholly switching over to the use of online services purported to be availed by the university administration. This is because adult learners on their part generally show deficiencies in the use of various technological resources and
infrastructure due to lack of requisite skills to operate certain digital devices. As such, university administration has to be aware of the fact that training of both learners and staff in the basic ICT skills becomes paramount and such support skills could enable all those involved to access and use various technological resources that support and facilitate the teaching and learning processes. To this end, constant researches or needs analysis assessments should be done in order to determine the skills capacity levels of the adult learners and members of staff so that appropriate workshops and training that provide matching competencies are designed.

**Effective communication**

In the study, participants raised concerns about the value of effective communication including one that assists in the provision of effective feedback. Effective communication with learners and amongst learners is a very critical strategy in ODL. Service providers need to put in place various information and communication technologies that mediate between the learner and the tutors or administrators in order to reduce the transactional distance (Moore, 1993). Use of information and media transmission technologies such as e-mail, social media platforms, mobile tele–communications or institutional web browsing should be key communication transmission strategies deliberately integrated into the whole adult teaching and learning system in order to inform both learners and service providers on various aspects pertaining to learners’ support needs.
Directing and organising

Directing and organising are key administrative, andragogical strategies that need to be prioritised by any service provider, especially one who deals with adult learners. Not all adult learners are capable of handling self-directed learning or independent study. Quite a number would still need to be directed in a number of ways and get organised into teams, groups or as individuals in order to fully access and use the support services provided by the institution. In the study, for example, learners appealed to their tutors for a better organisation of study groups that would ensure achievement of set academic tasks and collaborative learning.

Supervision and monitoring

In the study, participants lamented the lack of strict supervision and monitoring of marked assignments that caused delayed distribution of feedback to learners. In distance education, supervision and monitoring of movement of services and goods, especially assignments, examination materials, study materials such as printed media or electronic data, including movement and resolution of learner queries, need monitoring to avoid unnecessary delays or mismanagement by unscrupulous handlers. Like justice, information delayed is information denied.
Quality assuring of processes and procedures

As alluded to in the preceding paragraph, learners in the study called for supervision and monitoring of certain study processes and procedures to ensure efficacy. In the same vein, the same participants viewed quality assurance as a vital andragogical strategy in terms of ensuring that learners’ work and administrative processes and procedures meet set institutional objectives and standards. In the study, participants’ data revealed the need for support in the following, among other issues, learners’ assignments to be marked on time, quick return of effective feedback, expeditious solutions to queries and need for updating learners’ data. A learner support strategy that ensures quality assurance of processes and procedures, paves way for learner and institutional achievement of educational goals that ultimately form the basis for benchmarking educational outcomes and products. To this end, quality assurance becomes an administrative, andragogical support strategy in its own right.

Financing learners

Findings in the study have shown that financing learners is an andragogical strategy that should be incorporated in the administrative overall planning in order to satisfy learners’ financial needs through ameliorating challenges in the payment of tuition fees. As a strategy, the administrative service providers could design fees ordinances that attract higher learner enrolment and motivate them to complete their studies through deliberate consideration of equitable distribution of and access to financial resources. In the
findings, learners confirmed that they wanted “financial support in one way or the other.”

**Networking and team building**

In the study, participants wished they could fruitfully be connected to peers, family members, tutors, alumni and other stakeholders. To this end, networking in adult education becomes fundamental in increasing learners’ capacity to share ideas, exchange notes, and contribute relevant knowledge and skills that inform decision making. Knowles (1980) argues that adult learners have a reservoir of experiences. These experiences revolve around team building in the creation of knowledge and skills that in turn contribute towards the provision of solutions to educational and life problems. Many a times, ODL institutions, particularly the sampled institution, promote such developments through providing learners with support activities such as sports, debating competitions, industrial attachments, research collaboration and through other community and philanthropic engagements. As such, networking and team building become vital in many spheres that further enhance LSP to adult learners in ODL.

4.9.2 Implications for academic andragogical strategies for enhancing LSP in ODL

**Use of print media**

The current use of print media in the form of course modules has gone a long way in helping adult learners to learn whilst separated from the tutors and the institution in real time. Because of the synchronous and asynchronous nature of course modules, adult
learners enjoy commendable support in that they access relevant information even in contexts that are not technologically connected. In the study, learners appreciated the use of the module in that it provides interactive learning that allows them to move forth and backwards, ask questions, underline important information and synthesize various ideas from a cross-section of information sources. With the course module, adult learners can share ideas, give each other tasks and pace their studies according to their abilities. All these attributes (of the course module) make adult learning an enjoyable activity that motivates the learner to achieve given tasks as they (learners) construct their own knowledge through interaction with print, peers and tutors. The only disadvantage of learning through the module is cost, and that the information can easily become outdated due to content being outpaced by new technological ideas. This may necessitate that modules be revised now and again and in the process, high costs in writing and printing (the modules) are incurred.

**Online learning**

Participants in the study also indicated that they preferred online services as long as they operated in areas that were technologically enabled. Online services offer a number of advantages to adult learners, who, apart from experiencing non-contiguous communication (Perraton, 2000), also find themselves entangled in situations that conflict with work, family responsibilities and other commitments, and, consequently find themselves failing to get enough time for on-site learning. As such, online learning offers adult learners the opportunity to be in control of their learning, to look for
technological resources that suit their needs and to proceed with their studies at their own pace. With online services, learners can register, receive assignments and get their educational packages online as well as communicate with tutors and other learners in a very convenient way.

**Face-to-face tutoring**

Having spent the greater part of the time isolated from both their tutors and peers in an ODL context, adult learners need social interaction support. They need to meet their tutors in order to directly ask questions about issues not clearly understood. Learners want immediate feedback to questions raised and to problems that seek solutions. They also want to meet friends and share their experiences on a one-to-one basis. Face-to-face tutoring and learning offer such opportunities as they provide interface between the tutor and the learners. Whilst face-to-face learning has its own limitations in terms of costs of travelling and rigidity to adjust due to strict work schedules, adult learners, as revealed by participants in the study, feel they benefit more from online learning when it is complemented with face-to-face learning than when used alone.

**Peer learning**

Learners in the study noted that they needed peer support. Peer support, culminating into peer learning, provides an interactive environment that allows learners to work with other learners, to share ideas and experiences, and to share resources, skills and knowledge. As
adult learners they feel acknowledged and recognised if their vast experiences contribute towards enriching other people’s educational backgrounds and wellness. To this end, ODL institutions should deliberately integrate peer learning in adult learning programmes, whether this is formally organised by the tutors or informally by the learners themselves. This results in the promotion of social, interactive climate that allows adult learners to benefit from each other through collaboration and dialoguing.

**Small group discussions**

Peer learning emanates from well organised small group discussions that empower learners to acknowledge each other's diverse thinking and opinions. Relying on their wide experiences and prior knowledge in many topical issues, adult learners are in a position to contribute significantly through small group discussions and conversations. Holmberg (1989) and Moore (1990) value such conversations as they bring in both the psychological and social intercourse into the learning environment which cumulatively creates opportunities for adult learners to share ideas, skills and knowledge as they solve problems arising from their studies. Thus, apart from being a practical and convenient way when teaching large groups of learners, small groups discussion supports adult learning very well as it enables adult learners to realise their potential and the extent to which they can contribute knowledge in the academic world.
**Independent study**

Adult learners engaged in ODL find themselves in situations that render independent study more conveniently than any other form of learning. As Knowles (1980) asserts, adult learners are mature learners with well-developed self-concepts that empower them to make informed choices and decisions about what they want to learn. Given the power to choose what to learn, how to learn, and when to learn, adult learners find independent study more learner-centred and motivational than any other mode, hence, there are strong implications for institutions creating personalised learning environments that meet the diverse needs of individual learners.

**Computer-mediated learning**

Given the characteristics of adult learners that portray self-directed inquiry, it requires that adult education practitioners create an environment that allows adult learners to learn from their own experiences and from other sources of information. Such an environment attracts the use of computer mediated learning technologies that support the learner in a variety of ways. With computer mediated learning, adult learners can choose content according to how best it addresses their needs. They can move according to their pace as well as get immediate feedback through computer mediated responses from tutors and other peers. Such interaction by adult learners with computer mediated technologies provides implications of various motivational dimensions that propel academic achievements to greater heights.
**Orienting and induction**

One of the characteristics of adult learners is that they are oriented to learn those things that are of immediate value to them (Knowles, 1980). Adult learners need to know why they are learning something and of what benefit that learning brings to them. For this reason, they need to be supported in order to understand such issues through orientation and induction. ODL institutions, therefore, the ZOU included, should provide adult learners with orientation and induction activities that facilitate an understanding of issues such as the advantages of learning through ODL practices, the advantages of ODL delivery modes, the familiarisation with programmes, faculties and tutors, including institutional infrastructure, as well as the value of ODL products in the world economy. Such an orientation gives the learners the necessary confidence and motivation that support their decision of wanting to study through ODL. The researcher of this study can confirm that the ZOU values such support as they provide such orientation and induction to all new learners at the beginning of their first semester.

**Guidance and counselling**

As noted by Tapfumaneyi (2013), participants in the study also identified guidance and counselling as a critical approach to adult learners in so far as it equips them with skills that enable them to solve or cope with their study problems. Adult learners’ characteristics, particularly those that relate to multiple roles and responsibilities in society, interfere with their study experiences as they try to balance work, family responsibilities and study demands. As such, adult learners may suffer from various
intellectual and psycho-social traumas, which, if not properly managed, may lead to learners dropping out of their studies or even falling ill. This requires that adult service providers be ready to provide guidance and counselling services in order to help learners help themselves. The institution under study provides such service through Centre for Student Management (CSM) that, in turn, provides various guidance and counselling services to needy learners situated in each Regional campus.

**Research**

The adult learners’ propensity towards self-empowerment and self-directed learning based on their experiences and intrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1980) calls for the adult service providers to create space that allows the acquisition of new knowledge through research. Research using modern information technologies and e-learning library resources provides fertile ground for adults to explore new knowledge that further contributes to the sustainable development of the upcoming sciences and technologies that now form the basis for future educational and economic growth of countries across the globe.

**4.10 Reflection**

The revelation by participants in the study of their andragogical characteristics, their experiences with LSP, their expressions of what they want done, and how all these can inform the design of strategies that enhance LSP to adult learners studying with ODL
mode, cannot be underestimated by ODL institutions. Ignoring such information could lead to doing business in a haphazard manner or in a trial and error approach that does not maximise both the learners’ and the institutions’ efforts to benefit from the existing LSP in a given context. It may be argued by many ODL institutions, the ZOU included, that they have been using such andragogical learner support strategies since time immemorial but the question still remains: *Did such distance education systems have a deliberate integration of those learner support strategies that were well informed and guided by the knowledge of learners’ needs and characteristics?* Perhaps, further research might provide an answer to this question. However, for now, the researcher is convinced that this study has attempted to give a holistic picture of a conceptual learner support framework, based on the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics, which ODL institutions can use to enhance LSP to their learners. Such a learner support framework could serve the purpose of mitigating the escalating symptoms of learner attrition and unpredictable low retention rates that seem to characterise most ODL institutions across the globe, as cited in many parts of the review of literature in this study.

In order to simplify the conceptual understanding of a learner support framework that this study is proposing, a response to research question 5 summarises the debate by way of giving illustrations to that effect.
4.11 Research Question Number 5: To What Extent Can We Draw A LSF That Matches Adult Learner Needs And Characteristics In ODL?

Findings in the study unearthed four factors that are related to the enhancement of LSP in ODL. The four factors are: (a) learners’ andragogical characteristics and their needs, (b) learners’ experiences with access to LSS provided in ODL (c) the ODL context and its capacity to provide LSS and (d) the andragogical strategies that can be used to provide access to LSS. Considering these factors, a proposal for a learner support framework that can be used in ODL and by the ZOU in particular to enhance LSP to adult learners was suggested. Figure 1 below illustrates the proposed framework.

Figure 1 shows a broad framework that informs the design of an enhanced LSP in an ODL institution, the ZOU in particular. The framework draws information from the participants’ perceptions of the ideal LSP in ODL as addressed by the study research questions 1, 2, 3 and 4. As illustrated in figure 1 page 264, the framework comprises four critical components or input variables that proportionately or disproportionately interact with each other in any given ODL institution or context, resulting in the creation of a learner need- based outcome which, in this case, is the enhanced LSF. Find overleaf the proposed LSF that enhances LSP in ODL.
4.11.1 Proposed framework for LSP in ODL

The four components or factors that should be considered are: (a) learners’ andragogical needs and characteristics, (b) learners experiences with access to LSS, (c) institutional context and its capacity to provide LSS based on what learners want, (d) Andragogical learner support strategies facilitating access to LSP, and (e) ENHANCED LSP IN ODL (Perceived output).

FIG.1 Showing proposed broad framework for enhancing LSP in ODL

The four components or factors that should be considered are: (a) learners’ andragogical needs and characteristics, (b) learners experiences with access to LSS, (c) institutional context and its capacity to provide LSS based on what learners want, (d) Andragogical learner support strategies facilitating access to LSP, and (e) ENHANCED LSP IN ODL (Perceived output).
context and its capacity to provide LSS and (d) institutional andragogical strategies meant to facilitate access to LSP. To this end, the significance of the framework demands that adult education practitioners or service providers acknowledge and take cognisance of the relationships between or among the factors as they (practitioners) try to consider the optimum conditions that best maximise the achievement of learners’ educational goals. The section that follows explains how the identified variables interplay with each other in order to inform the design of an enhanced LSF.

*Learners’ andragogical characteristics and needs*

The andragogical characteristics of adult learners in ODL play a pivotal role in determining or influencing the manner learners should be assisted to navigate through their studies (Cercone, 2008). Apart from the biographical data comprising age, gender, marital status, number of dependants, geographical location, employment status, among other variables (see Appendix F, page 316-317), this study confirms Knowles (1980) identification of other adult learner characteristics that guide the structure and organisation of the manner adult learners should be supported in order to learn productively. To this end, this study, just like Knowles’ (1980), recognises six learner input variables, namely; the need to know, vast experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to life situations, intrinsic motivation, and a mature self-concept, all of which adult learners bring into the learning situations. What this means is that andragogical characteristics and needs influence the way learners interact with the LSS available, just in the same manner they influence the institution to personalise provision of certain
services, depending on the needs of learners. As such, adult education practitioners should seriously consider these variables in order to match provision of support services with the diverse learners’ andragogical needs and characteristics.

**Learners’ experiences with access to LSS**

As adult learners engage in their studies, their experiences, as revealed by participants in the study, are governed by their demographic statuses, that is, age, gender, and marital status, employment status, among other factors in the manner they (adult learners) interact with, and respond to LSS provided by an ODL institution. In this study, and depending on the individual’s demographic status, participants’ data revealed that adult learners have different experiences with regards access to the LSS provided by an institution; hence, it requires that service providers consider LSP from the perspective of the learners. Adult learners sometimes experience challenges in trying to access these services and depending on the institutional capacity to provide the needed resources, it requires that service providers craft strategies that create opportunities for learners to benefit from the learning situation. For instance, adult learners, who, because of age, may lag behind in technological skills, may need to look up to the institution to provide some basic training in computer skills. In the same vein, married learners, who may suffer from stress engendered by their marital responsibilities, may require that the institution provides guidance and counselling in order that they navigate well in their studies. All this would then be informed and guided by a well-crafted learner support framework as shown in figure 1 page 257.
Institutional context and its capacity to provide LSS

The institutional context is a very critical factor to a learner’s approach to studying. Depending on the institutional context, some learners may be motivated or de-motivated in their learning. For example, if, on one hand, the institutional context does not provide a conducive climate or environment in terms of its delivery modes, library resources, technological resources or suitable support staff, this may influence learners to dislike their studies, drop their studies or it may negatively affect the institution itself in its endeavours to produce quality graduates. On the other hand, even if the institutional context may have the capacity to provide a number of learner support resources, limitations may still creep in because of the adult learners’ prohibitive demographic factors coupled with their inadequate experiences and competencies in accessing the support services rendered.

The institutional context may also have the capacity of providing both administrative and academic services. As reported earlier on in this study, administrative services include providing educational packages, registration packages as well as the relevant technological infrastructure for use by learners. Academic services may include the provision of library services, online delivery modes, internet services, and assignment writing skills as well as various forms of feedback, among other services. However, all this provision has to be done in consideration of the learners’ experiences with the available support services and on what they want done and how. This knowledge will in
turn, build into crafting strategies that will assist both learners and the institutions achieve educational goals.

**Andragogical learner support strategies**

Having clearly understood the learners’ demographic needs and characteristics, their experiences with LSP and the institutional capacity to provide the resources, there is need to come up with strategies that sustain the provision of, and access to, these support services by learners and staff. In this study, participants’ voices expressed the need for the creation of opportunities that allow wider access to services provided. Learners yearned for opportunities that allow them to choose LSS that match their needs and characteristics. In essence, adult learners in ODL need learner-centred strategies that facilitate independent study, that allow them to move at their own pace and abilities, that take cognisance of their experiences and demographic characteristics; and strategies that maximise the advantages rendered by the institutional context. Findings in the study and as expressed by the participant indicate that strategies such as the use of course modules, online learning, computer mediated technologies, small group discussions, among other interactive strategies, would serve the purpose of providing learners at whatever level, with the necessary scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) in order to achieve their academic objectives.
4.11.2 Reflection
In light of the discussion on the need to use a learner support framework that guides LSP to adult learners, this study has so far demonstrated that there is a serious gap or missing link if ODL institutions, ZOU in particular, purport to provide LSS without the guidance of and without being informed by a general model of a learner support framework. In the absence of a learner support framework or in the absence of knowledge of the andragogical needs of adult learners and without the knowledge of their experiences with the existing LSP, there is no guarantee that ODL institutions could be seen as providing LSS that satisfy the needs of the adult learners. It is only when adult education service providers consider adult learners’ needs as a starting point, and the adult learners themselves are satisfied with what they do and are motivated to continue and complete their studies, that ODL institutions can claim to be providing LSS that can be considered to be doing justice to distance adult education.

4.12 Chapter Summary
The chapter aimed at addressing the main research question: “How can the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics enhance the provision of LSS in ODL?” The chapter attempted to address the research question through finding out from the research data who the adult learners are; what their experiences with LSS are; how an ODL institution such as the ZOU could respond to these learners’ experiences and what learner support strategies could be put in place in order to facilitate provision of, and access to LSS. The central issue that seemed entrenched in the findings was the need for ODL institutions, the ZOU included, to match the LSP with the learners’ andragogical needs.
and characteristics, their experiences, the institutional context and the appropriate strategies meant to facilitate teaching and learning of adult learners. In the event that there was a mismatch, learners cried foul, they felt undermined, not acknowledged and not benefitting from the educational system that was supposed to serve their needs and interests. The chapter ended by proposing a learner support framework (as illustrated in figure 1, page 262), that considered a number of factors whose ripple effects culminated in the enhancement of LSP in ODL.
CHAPTER V SUMMARY, CONCLUSION(S) AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the study focused on the analysis and interpretation of data with the aim of addressing the question: How can the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics enhance the provision of LSS in ODL with the ZOU as a case study? This chapter rounds off the debate by summarising the major findings that emerged from the study. Finally, it draws conclusions and recommendations from the findings.

5.2 Summary

5.2.1 Findings relating to Research Question Number 1: “How does the knowledge of learners’ demographic characteristics enhance LSP in ODL?”

*Gender as a factor*: The study revealed that gender sensitivity has meaning and significance in the individual’s biological and psychological disposition to act, hence, needs to be handled carefully if tutors are to assist adult learners. Whilst female multiple gender roles in the family or in society at large have the potential to negatively interfere with their studies (Kirkup, 1996), the study argued that male domineering and chauvinistic tendencies project them as people who are self-empowered to do things according to how they choose to do those things. That is, males purport to enjoy learner support experiences more than females.
**Age as a factor:** With regards to age related characteristics, the study unearthed that most adult learners in the ZOU fit very well into Knowles’ (1980) version of characteristics of mature adult learners who generally have the potential of being responsible and in control of their decisions. However, whilst age is just a number as observed by Bjorklund and Bee (2008), participants’ sentiments seemed to suggest that age limitations engendered by biological and psychological transformations be considered when providing LSS.

**Marital status as a factor:** Participants in the study lamented the impoverished backgrounds within their marital statuses. This means, as revealed in the study, marital status can interfere with the adult learners’ study if support from the spouse or other family members is not forthcoming.

**Relationship with dependents:** Participants in the study seemed to indicate that caring for children and aged relatives undoubtedly casts the biggest domestic pressures on the individual who is studying. The pressures become impediments in the distance learners’ lives because they (learners) get stressed as they battle to balance study, time and finances with caring for dependents (Jones, 2003). Learners’ stress can lead an ODL institution to experience low learner retention or high dropout rate.
Geographical location and distance from the regional campus: Participants in the study seemed to be concerned about the geographical separation between them and their tutors and institution. As such, adult learners experience a feeling of isolation due to separation from the institution, tutors and fellow learners (Moore, 2007). This makes them feel less prepared to appreciate the LS that their institutions provide in order for them to succeed in their studies.

Employment as a factor: Whilst any type of employment can have the potential to offer challenges to the distance learners in terms of how they can balance their study with work commitments (Musingafi et al., 2015) the study revealed that none of the participants opted for a position where one could feel better placed to study through ODL without being employed. Thus, the majority of the learners were comfortable with the hybrid type of learning experiences that allow distance learners to integrate studying with work obligations.

Relevance of learners’ prior learning or previous qualification to LSP

Learners in the ZOU felt short changed because they initially thought they were given programmes that did not match their previous qualifications. However, given the advice and required LS, they later felt comfortable and ended up enjoying their chosen programmes. Therefore, the learner’s previous qualifications, as noted by Knowles’ (1980) andragogical theory, has influence towards one’s disposition to choose a study programme and the nature of LS required.
**Language and communication**

The study revealed the way language and communication interfered with the learner’s study life. In the study, some learners noted that they faced a number of challenges if an ODL institution and the ZOU in particular relied on one-way communication. Some were not comfortable with using English during informal conversations, some were concerned about the personnel’s lack of proper customer care and etiquette, yet others felt that administrators did not understand them with regards their technological capacities to communicate (Musingafi, et al., 2015). Thus, in providing LSS, the service providers should consider the learners’ language and communication preferences so as to make learners benefit from the various study transactions that mediate between them and their tutors.

5.2.2 Findings relating to Research Question Number 2: “How does the knowledge of adult learners’ experiences influence LSP in ODL?”

Research question number two sought to find out about learners’ experiences with LSP and to what extent these experiences could inform the provision of LSS in ODL. Findings were categorised into the following broad themes: administrative LS experiences; academic LS experiences; guidance and counselling LS experiences; experiences with technical support services; experiences with technological support services, experiences with family support services; experiences with peer support services, experiences with quality assurance support services; and experiences with financial support services.
5.2.2.(i) Findings Regarding Administrative Learner Support Experiences

**Ineffective district learning centres:** In this study learners showed concern about having difficulties in travelling to RC1 to access resources hence they wished if the ZOU could operationalise functional DLC’s. Their experiences were similar to those observed by Mbukusa (2009) that in some cases, the provision of DLC’s in ODL do not have adequate technological infrastructure that can enable adult learners have ease of doing educational business.

**Inconsistent distribution of teaching and learning materials:** Whilst both learners and staff in the ZOU viewed the module as the most accessible learning resource, their experiences were that they sometimes did not get a full educational package at registration (Chadamoyo and Dumbu, 2014). They also faced challenges in accessing library resources which at the moment happen to be situated in provincial capitals only. The researcher, therefore, noted with concern that distribution of teaching and learning materials in the ZOU could be haphazard and not consistently monitored.

**Learners’ experiences with registration processes:** At registration learners were stressed due to lack of relevant information regarding what they were supposed to bring. They were also not sure about the courses they were supposed to register. To make matters worse, learners were disappointed because of failure to receive a full educational
package. Besides, learners said they were not consulted when administrators made decisions on registration deadlines.

Experiences with weekend school tutorials: As noted by Chabaya, Chadamoyo, and Chiome, (2011), learners in this study experienced challenges regarding timing and scheduling of weekend school tutorials. Dates for weekend school tutorials were not properly aligned with other activities that mainly included ‘dates for salary payments.’ Any activity done before or outside salary paydays caused pressure and unnecessary panic to the learners. Some learners experienced loneliness and isolation during weekend school tutorials when they expected to break the monotony by meeting friends and colleagues. They wished if attendance at weekend school tutorials could be made compulsory so as to create a platform that allowed peer collaborative interaction. However, there were mixed feelings on whether attendance at weekend school tutorials could be made compulsory or optional.

Experiences with management of marked assignments: In the study learners complained about time spent searching for marked assignments. They wished if the ZOU could value learner time by putting in place more effective assignment storage structures that facilitated retrieval and time saving.
Experiences with management of feedback activities: Chokwe (2015) notes that feedback is the most critical aspect in the teaching and learning of adult learners. Participants in the study observed the same. However, they were not happy about the administrative turn-around period of marked assignments. On delayed feedback, administrators shifted the blame to the registration processes that were not consistent with the initially scheduled dates.

Experiences with administration of information services: In this study, learners claimed that they were experiencing hardships with regards accessing vital information that raised awareness and understanding of the institution’s activities. The same observation was noted by Musingafi et al. (2015). Sometimes, such information went unnoticed because the university was also facing challenges when trying to put in place various communication platforms that benefited both learners and staff. The situation was worsened by some tutors who were hesitant or reluctant to participate on these platforms.

Experiences with customer care issues: In the study learners’ perceptions on customer care were that the ZOU was not taking customer care issues very seriously. Yet Zawacki-Richter (2004) argues that customer care support issues drive adult learner activities. Learners thought that there was a breakdown in the provision of customer care services. On the contrary, administrative staff thought that if learners wanted to receive quality customer care service, they could not expect to be treated beyond what a learner was supposed to be treated. Respect for the learner could not compromise quality service
delivery because quality service provision is a two-way process that depends on one who is providing it and the other who is receiving it (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007).

5.2.2. (ii) Findings Regarding Academic Learner Support Experiences

Learners’ experiences with orientation: The study revealed learners’ memories about the critical importance of orientation in that it is orientation that changes the mind-set of the learners from one without knowledge of what is going to happen to one who knows about what is going to happen regarding the studies. Learners also reported that every new learner portrays feelings of fear and apprehension about university studies. As such it would help if more time could be added to orientation sessions so that they (learners) have ample time to become familiar with everything they need to know about their studies before they could be plunged into the new semester’s serious business.

Learners’ experiences with tutorial support services: With regards to tutorial support, learners’ experiences were that during tutorials, tutors did not acknowledge learners’ vast experiences as advocated by Knowles (1980). Tutors were accused of not diagnosing learners’ level of understanding (to begin with) before they introduced a new topic. Instead, tutors chose to read the module and treat their learners as children without making them interact with new material through collaborative sharing and eliciting of ideas using constructivist approaches. The question on whether tutors should be facilitators or lecturers of adult learning was debated at length in the findings and some learners felt very strongly that tutors should teach and not just facilitate. Whilst this
notion can invite further debate the bottom line is that some tutors are judged as not being well equipped with andragogical tutorial skills that help adult learners (Hawkridge and Wheeler, 2010). Future research may then ask “Are tutors in ODL using andragogical skills?”

**Learners’ experiences with the use of the course module:** Learners felt that whilst the module, as print media, was being outpaced by more modern on-line technologies, they still believed that the module was their best tutor. The module was more user-friendly, had more flexible arrangements of interactivity with content and it could be used both synchronously and asynchronously (Dembo, 2004; Hawkridge and Wheeler, 2010). Therefore, the module should be made available at registration without fail. Learners, particularly in rural areas, preferred to use the printed module to other technologies that relied on electricity and internet connectivity that could be difficult to find in such areas.

**Learners’ experiences with assignment writing:** In this study, learners valued assignment writing very seriously. However, they felt that they were not getting enough learner support because they experienced a wide range of challenges. Challenges included lack of adequate time to prepare for assignments, lack of proper guidance on how to structure their presentations, lack of language proficiency on their part, lack of proper referencing skills, compounded by tutors who provided inconsistent patterns of feedback. Learners blamed the institution for failing to provide relevant basic computer
skills and other resources, such as, high bandwidth internet services that could enable them to effectively navigate through their studies.

**Learners’ experiences with feedback provision:** In the study, findings indicated that learners appreciated the value of feedback since it was from feedback that they became aware of their strengths and weaknesses in assignment writing. However, they blamed tutors who, more often than not, gave them scanty, vague, superficial and illegible feedback that did not purposefully guide them to do their work with confidence. Learners preferred quick feedback that was augmented with talkback given during face-to-face tutorials (Chokwe, 2015).

**Learners’ experiences with library services:** Owusu-Ansah and Bubuama (2015) note that adult learner institutions face a number of challenges in the provision of library services. Learners in the study experienced the same. Regarding experiences with library and information services, learners felt their needs were not adequately provided for because of the physical distance that lay between the majority of them and the regional campus library. Distance made it too costly for them to travel to the library to access the required information. Learners were also generally frustrated because of lack of e-learning skills and slow internet services as well as having very little technological know-how to access e-resources and other digital library services.

**Learners’ experiences with online tutoring:** Findings reveal that apart from having deficiencies in online service literacy, learners felt they were being let down by their
tutors who were finding it difficult to adapt to the e-learning technological environment. Tutors were yet to embrace the use of incoming technologies, for example, marking assignments online. As such, learners were not receiving the needed technical support that could enable them to adopt the online technological services such as receiving assignment feedback online. Learners that had the skills and were operating in a technologically enabled environment, thought that online services were the best options for distance adult learners (Perraton, 2000).

\textit{Learners’ experiences with Guidance and Counselling services:} As observed by Tapfumaneyi (2013), learners in the study found guidance and counselling services critical in the face of many dilemmas such as those related to balancing family, work and study; related to their inability to cope with ever-changing technologies and those related to feelings of psychosocial stress engendered by financial and communication barriers.

\textit{Learners’ experiences with family and peer support services:} On one hand, learners in the study appreciated the value of family and peer support (Gao, 2012; Tait, 2002)) because it provided a platform to share ideas, resources and for mental stimulation. On the other hand, deficiencies in such kinds of support experienced by the majority of the learners made them miss the necessary social interaction, collaboration, and social dialogue that Moore (2007) claims provides pleasure and mental stimulation to adult distance learners.
**Learners’ experiences with quality assurance support services:** Quality assurance support is measured by whether learners are satisfied or dissatisfied with the services rendered. As such, learners in the study felt undermined and their efforts compromised by the institution’s avoidance of consultation on matters that called for their contribution pertaining to value definition of quality and the extent to which they wanted their educational experiences met. To that end, learners in the study experienced deficiencies in the delivery of quality educational processes and this made them find it difficult to achieve their educational and quality expectations. Any support that did not satisfy their individual educational needs as adult learners was considered as quality assurance denied.

**Learners’ experiences with financial support services:** Cercone (2008) views financial concerns as the issues that consume the biggest portion of the adult learners’ attention. Findings in the study confirmed this view. With respect to financial support, findings indicated that learners in the study viewed lack of financial support as the biggest threat to their studies. Whilst the ZOU has tried to put measures that attempt to cushion learners’ financial needs, learners thought the measures were still not enough and hence, they called for more relaxed arrangements with regards to fees payment. As adult learners with so many responsibilities upon their shoulders, they felt their institution was not doing enough with respect to finding alternative ways of supporting and funding their education. This was at the backdrop of escalating educational costs and an unprecedented economic crisis then prevailing in Zimbabwe.
5.2.3 Findings relating to Research Question Number 3: “How do adult learners describe what they want regarding LSP in ODL?”

Research question number 3 sought to find out what learners said they wanted done in order for them to benefit from the LSP put in place by university administration. Findings were based on learners’ experiences with LSP. Data were categorised into two broad themes: (a) administrative needs, and (b) academic needs.

With respect to administrative learner support needs, findings revealed a number of pertinent issues. Gleaning through the findings, learners in the study expressed that they wanted quick access to educational services through a fair distribution and administration of functional DLCs. This was in response to the mandate of the ZOU of providing educational resources to whoever and wherever a person is. Learners wanted sufficient and relevant teaching and learning materials on time and this could be enhanced by opening up efficient communication channels and platforms through which their queries and concerns were addressed. Issues regarding decisions about, for example, weekend school dates, assignment submission and registration deadlines were also of concern to them.

Learners also required proper organisation in the manner their assignments were handled. They wanted a short turn-around period of marked assignments in order for them to benefit from quick feedback. They needed quick and informative feedback that was augmented with talkback (Chokwe, 2013) during tutorials and during small group
discussions. These processes could be facilitated by, where possible, adopting online services.

Above all, learners, as adults wanted their andragogical characteristics to be acknowledged and respected (Henscke, 2008) and this they argued would enhance customer care relations. In brief, they just wanted to be treated as adults although administrators argued that this would not, in any way, compromise learner-staff relationships and quality provision of services. As adult learners, they claimed that they were capable of making their own decisions and prioritising their preferences.

With regards to academic learner support needs, learners in the study wanted more orientation time for interaction and exposure to university practices before the commencement of the first semester. During tutorials, they wanted their tutors to go a gear up and do more than just facilitating. They wanted their tutors to acknowledge their experiences and their perceptions about how they view the world. They wanted a well-equipped library that catered for the diverse needs and one with high internet bandwidth that enhanced their computer literacy skills.

Apart from using some digital technologies, learners in the study still preferred to use the module because it is user-friendly, portable and highly interactive. They argued that no matter what it takes, the module should be readily available at registration. They demanded training in both basic computer skills and language proficiency so as to enhance their reading and writing skills.
With respect to other services (other than administrative or academic) learners in the study also indicated that they wanted a reliable and strong technological support infrastructure that translated their technical skills into ease of doing business. They also wanted family and peer support (Gao, 2012; Bryant, 2013) for purposes of sharing resources and for mental stimulation, as well as for purposes of promoting wellness and social interaction.

Learners viewed quality assurance support services as critical for them to acquire expected quality standards. They also wanted their financial needs to be supported through engaging in dialogue in matters pertaining to fees payment arrangements supported by sustainable institutional funding. On the whole, and confirming Tait’s (2002) assertion, learners in the study wanted support in every sphere of their education through ODL.

5.2.4 Findings with respect to Research Question Number 4: “How do adult learners describe andragogical strategies they consider most appropriate for academic success in ODL?”

Research question number 4 directly or indirectly sought to explore andragogical strategies that have strong implications for enhancing LSP in ODL. Data generated were again categorised into two broad themes: administrative and academic andragogical strategies.
A summary of administrative andragogical strategies that unfolded from both literature and participants’ data is given below:

(i) consulting and negotiating  (ii) planning together with learners

(iii) building relationships  (iv) mobilising resources

(v) capacity building  (vi) providing workshops and training

(vii) communication  (viii) directing and organising

(ix) supervising and monitoring  (x) quality assuring of processes

(xi) financing learners  (xii) networking and team building

Findings relating to academic andragogical strategies unfolded from both literature and research data. A summary of such academic andragogical strategies is given below.

(i) using print media  (ii) assessing and evaluating

(iii) online learning  (iv) face-to-face tutoring

(v) peer and collaborative learning  (vi) tele-conferencing

(vii) small group discussion  (viii) independent study

(ix) computer-mediated study  (x) orienting and inducting

(xi) guidance and counselling  (xii) library and research
5.2.5 Findings with respect to Research Question Number 5: “To what extent can an ODL institution provide a LSF that meets adult learner needs and characteristics?”

Research question number five explored information about factors that could be considered for informing the design of an enhanced LSF in ODL and in particular, in the ZOU. Findings, based on evidence in the study, indicate that four factors that can guide the formulation of a LSF emerged. These were based on the andragogical needs and characteristics of adult learners that participated in the study. A summary of such factors is given below:

(i) knowledge about the demographic and background information of adult learners in a given ODL context,

(ii) knowledge about adult learners’ experiences with LSP in a given context,

(iii) knowledge about the institutional context and its capacity to provide LSS, and

(iv) knowledge about andragogical strategies that support provision of LSS and adult learning.

5.3 Conclusions
The study’s aim was to demonstrate how education practitioners could use the knowledge of learners’ andragogical experiences to enhance the provision of LSS to adult learners in ODL. To this effect the study took the position that effective provision of LSS is one of the best ways in which those involved in ODL could demonstrate their commitment to
helping adult learners achieve their educational goals. Thus, the study concludes that only by listening to the learners’ voices and acknowledging their life experiences with the phenomenon of LSP in a given ODL context (in this case the ZOU) can a framework of a LSP be proposed.

Given this background, the main conclusions of this study revolve around five themes as follows:

(i) conclusions drawn from an analysis of the learners’ demographic characteristics,

(ii) conclusions drawn from an analysis of the learners’ experiences with administrative LSS,

(iii) conclusions drawn from an analysis of the learners’ experiences with academic LSS,

(iv) conclusions drawn from an analysis of the proposed andragogical strategies, and

(v) conclusions drawn from an analysis of the proposed LSF.

5.3.1 Conclusions drawn from an analysis of the learners’ demographic characteristics and how they inform LSP.
In the study, learners confirmed findings by Kirkup (1996) and expressed personal barriers engendered by demographic characteristics namely, gender, age, marital status, employment, educational background, and distance from the institution, among other
variables. Due to these factors, learners situated in remote areas found it difficult to access certain educational resources (Mbukusa, 2009). Because of their ages, they ended up falling behind valuable technological skills developments. What female learners needed in terms of time of study and access to resources was different from what male adult learners wanted (Kirkup, 1996). Other demographic characteristics, for instance, the marital or employment variables, affected adult learners differently with respect to the nature of the support they (adult learners) got from family members or from employment, respectively.

Through listening to the learners’ voices, the study concludes that learners studying with ODL expect service providers to treat them as adults. They want to be understood and to be recognised as people living with multiple societal roles and responsibilities as they try to juggle home, work and study (Cercone, 2008). The study, therefore, argues that it is vital to know who these adult learners are, and what their demographic and contextual variables are if ODL institutions want to positively respond to their needs instead of, maybe, just regarding technology as the first consideration. Above all, apart from having been previously denied access to this type of university education (Pfukwa and Matipano, 2006), these adult learners feel that their greatest barrier to accessing higher distance education is the failure by ODL institutions (and indeed the ZOU) to acknowledge and recognise learners’ andragogical characteristics and needs. This results in the ODL institutions not being in a position to match provision of LSS with adult learner needs (COL, 1995).
5.3.2 Conclusions drawn from an analysis of the learners’ experiences with administrative LSP

The study acknowledges Taylor and Kroth’s (2009) position that regards learners’ experiences as the richest resource available upon which education facilitators can rely on as they help adult learners become open-minded towards sharing experiences with others, including service providers. Indeed, the study interrogated learners’ experiences with the phenomenon of LSP in the ZOU. Findings unearthed the practice of providing services ODL institutions consider appropriate for adult learners instead of what learners believe are their needs and interests. However, while learners in the study appreciate administrative efforts made by the ZOU regarding accessing services, the study concludes that more should be done. For example, ODL institutions should make DLCs more functional. Administrators should become more consistent in the distribution of teaching and learning resources, as well as in improving management of registration processes, weekend school tutorials, assignment handling and feedback systems. Furthermore, the learners’ expression of dissatisfaction in a number of administrative LS areas could be an indication of lack of meaningful consultation taking place between the learners and institutional administrators. Lack of consultation causes administrators not to prioritise those activities that ensure full learner participation, involvement and engagement in ways that lead learners to achieve academic success and wellness. This study therefore, argues, in the same manner Trowler (2010) argues, that ODL institutions should seriously consider effective engagement and consultation with their learners so
that decisions reached on whatever aspect affecting adult learning should be based on efforts that meet learners’ andragogical needs.

5.3.3 Conclusions drawn from an analysis of learners’ experiences with academic LSP

Drawing from the learners’ narration of their experiences with academic LSS, the study also draws a number of conclusions under this section.

With regard to orientation, the study concludes that learners value orientation activities rendered to every new learner in the university. However, there are indications that ODL institutions, for example, the ZOU, are not availing adequate time for new learners to get familiar with the new educational environment in order to dispel their fears and apprehension of what is to come in future.

As for tutorials, the study concludes that learners appreciate tutors who diagnose their problems on a personal basis. Adult learners like tutors who go beyond facilitation. For example, adult learners want tutors who acknowledge learners’ prior knowledge as pivotal and critical in knowledge building (Knowles, 1984). They also want tutors who create opportunities for collaborative learning because as adult learners, they want an environment etched by social interaction and social construction, both of which are aspects underpinned by an andragogical, interprevist philosophy.
Adult learners in the study also submitted that they had different academic appetites and therefore wanted to be treated differently. They also wanted the provision of LSS that relate to the teaching technologies, to the local and even to individual needs. This is the reason why LS providers are expected to prioritise creating PKSs and PLEs (Manganelo, Falsetti, Spalazzi and Leo, 2013) in order to accommodate the individual differences of adult learners. Nevertheless, the study argues that it is not the location, social or economic factors that should determine access to equitable distribution of LSS. Rather, it is the choice and relevance of technology to the individual learning needs that are of importance. For instance, some learners prefer use of print media such as the course module to other technologies. Others want online services and yet others want a combination of these services concocted with dialogical, face-to-face, two-way interactions that give both tutors and learners the chance to learn from each other. The study therefore concludes that academic service providers should create a ‘cafeteria’ of the teaching and learning technologies from which learners can choose what is appropriate and relevant to them.

5.3.4 Conclusions drawn from analysing LS strategies and their implications to LSP
The study concludes that any ODL institution, the ZOU included, whose goal is to achieve learners’ academic success, should follow Price and Kirkwood’s (2008) advice and, indeed, as revealed in this study. Such an institution should strive to have a deliberate crafting of administrative andragogical strategies that benefit and meet adult learners’ expectations (Knowles, 1980). For this reason, there is need for such institutions to consult and negotiate with learners. ODL institutions need to plan and involve learners
in decision making. They need to communicate, mobilise resources, supervise and monitor the nature of learning, as well as quality assure the teaching and learning processes to ensure maintenance of set standards.

In no uncertain terms, participants in the study expressed the need to use cost-cutting academic andragogical strategies that speed up access to LSS. This study therefore, concludes that learners want to use online services and other computer-mediated learning strategies. They want peer and collaborative learning (Tait, 2002) through use of small group discussions (Moore, 2007) that prop up independent learning. They want to be oriented and inducted as well as being provided with guidance and counselling services. Learners, like industrialists, want ease of doing business through mediation of various communication technologies that account for the transactional distance between them and their institution (Moore, 2007).

5.3.5 Conclusions drawn from an analysis of proposed LSF

In view of the themes that emerged in the debate on LSP, the study concludes by putting on the table a proposal of a LSF that places the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics as central towards enhancing the design of an effective LSP in ODL institutions, and in particular, the ZOU. Permeating through the data and discussions on LSP, there are four main factors or themes that emerged as fundamental pillars for a LSF that this study proposes. The four factors are: (i) the learner’s background and demographic characteristics (presage factors), (ii) the learner’s experiences with the
phenomenon of LSP in a given context, (iii) the context and capacity of the institution to respond to the learner’s needs, (iv) andragogical LS strategies that positively respond to a lone learner or group of learners (Thorpe, 2003). This study is, therefore, convinced that it is vital to consider these four andragogical factors as a point of departure if the goal of adult education practitioners is to enhance and develop a LSF that ensures the attainment of adult learners’ educational success. However, this study takes the position, also noted by Dzakira (2005), that this proposed framework is not meant to be prescriptive for every context, but it strives to sensitise and stimulate thought and dialogue for future adult education practitioners and researchers in their quest to continue enhancing LSP in ODL.

5.4 Recommendations

In light of the conclusions, the study raises a number of recommendations. Recommendations are divided into two parts: those relating to enhancing LSP in ODL and those relating to further research.

5.4.1 For enhancing LSP in ODL

- ODL institutions should seriously interrogate changes in learners’ demographic characteristics so that they (institutions) become aware of the support needed to meet the learners’ expectations. In essence, ODL should be designed to ensure compatibility with the diverse demographic characteristics of adult learners and what resources need to be availed to meet their needs.
• Adult education service providers should take note of the gender differences of adult learners, for example, between what male and female learners say they want so that appropriate services compatible with such differences are rendered. This is in recognition of the fact that because of gender differences, some learners may become more sophisticated, or more demanding or more diversified than others, hence, require more flexible arrangements and more personalised service environments than others.

• The ODL institutions should acknowledge, not underestimate the role played by family support and peer support in assisting adult learners attain academic goals.

• Whilst employment cushions the adult learner in supporting the provision of services, ODL institutions should do more by using cost-cutting strategies such as online services in order to reduce pressure on individual financial income.

• Considering that many governments across the globe have remarkably reduced funding in higher education, ODL institutions, particularly the ZOU, should find other means of funding their own institutions through improving diversified funding models and opportunities (as suggested by participants under study). These include, but not limited to, putting in place in-built fund raising mechanisms, carrying out income generating projects, such as farming, engaging in research and consultancies or engaging alumni and stakeholder partnerships. It is also important to note that whatever funding is sourced by an institution, learners should be prioritised as ‘bona fide’ beneficiaries.
• ODL institutions, the ZOU included, are expected to value the role of DLCs in facilitating access to resources for learners in remote areas. DLCs serve as conduits for fulfilling the mandate of taking university’s educational services to the doorstep of the learner and, therefore, should be made functional with multi-service dimensions.

• ODL service providers should ensure that learners receive their full academic educational packages at registration, for example, the course module, including an equitable and speedy distribution of teaching and learning resources, so that they are able to catch up with, and meet personal work targets and scheduled administrative deadlines.

• Adult education service providers, particularly those in the ZOU, should continue supporting their learners in terms of equipping them with meaningful practical skills; knowledge, competencies, including language proficiencies and basic computer literacy skills that in turn make learners enjoy academic LS experiences such as in assignment writing.

• In order to motivate adult independent learning, ODL institutions should provide learners with quick, informative, feedback (augmented with talkback) through proper management of learner queries, marked assignments and weekend school tutorials mediated by various information and communication technologies.

• Weekend school tutorials should include at least one mandatory attendance so that adult learners experience the advantages of group interactions and
collaborative learning and networking, which, in turn, are aspects that mitigate loneliness and isolation of adult learners studying in the context of ODL.

- While this study has concluded that provision of online services is the way to go, it is also vital for the ODL institutions to continue providing the printed course module (at least for the time being) in order to support learners situated in technologically disadvantaged areas, for example, remote areas without electricity and internet connectivity.

- In ODL the library and information services should be decentralised and act as a compensatory unit, well equipped to service less privileged learners situated in remote areas where technology–related pedagogical tools are hard to find.

- One way of mitigating deficiencies in LSP is for ODL institutions, the ZOU in particular, to intervene by way of retooling their tutors through workshops and retraining in best practices of how to provide LSS to adult learners studying in the context of ODL. In a broader sense, the training of tutors of adult learners should be done within an overall framework for making them have an awareness, understanding and knowledge of the andragogical skills and strategies that inform the provision of LSS to the benefit all learners.

- In order to ensure a wider access to relevant technologies, ODL institutions should provide a friendlier and technologically driven environment that allows adult learners to choose from a ‘cafeteria’ of appropriate technologies suitable for their needs and one that eventually translates their needs into success.
• Whilst some ODL institutions, for example, the ZOU, have made tremendous strides in providing quality service, more should be done in terms of putting in place a formidable quality service infrastructure that embodies relevant resources, be they administrative or academic, as well as ensuring a prevalence of utility tools for measurement, assessment and accreditation of both learners and institutional processes.

• In order to enhance effective communication and customer care services, there should be serious engagement and consultation between learners and administration so that decisions reached on whatever aspect affecting LSP should be based on meeting learners’ andragogical needs, thus avoiding a mismatch between what learners say they want and what the institution purports is providing.

• As for policy makers in ODL institutions, there is need to rethink about the provision of LSS in terms of making it integrated into the whole ODL curriculum planning and implementation instead of leaving it as an appendage to other ODL teaching and learning programmes, as is the case now.

• Finally, the study recommends that as a matter of policy, ODL institutions should be guided by a LSF that places the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics of adult learners as central and as a starting point towards enhancing LSP in order to achieve both learners’ educational goals and institutional success.
5.4.2 For future research

- The importance of paying more attention to the adult learners’ voices as they describe their andragogical needs and characteristics against the backdrop of changes in the technological landscape and how best this knowledge can be used to provide LSS that meet adult learner needs.

- How technology can be used to provide wider access to LSS by less privileged members of the communities, for example, those with special needs.

- It would be interesting to find out whether players in given ODL contexts are using andragogical strategies in their effort to provide educational services to adult learners studying in those ODL contexts.

- What is it that adult learners in ODL really want? Is it tutoring or lecturing?

- Issues of integrating LSP within the framework of the whole ODL curriculum and implementation should be further explored.

- Continue testing the impact of the proposed framework in this study on informing LSP using different cohorts of adult learners drawn from different ODL contexts.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A1: Letter to the Registrar seeking permission to carry out research in the ZOU.

Zimbabwe Open University
Box 1210
Masvingo
16 April 2015
The Registrar
Zimbabwe Open University
Box 1210
Masvingo
Dear Sir

Re: Permission to carry out a research study in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU): Patrick Chadamoyo: P1354897R: D/June/13/16.01

I write to seek permission to carry out a qualitative case study research thesis entitled “Andragogical Implications for enhancing Learner Support Provision in Open and Distance Learning. A case for the Zimbabwe Open University.”

The thesis focuses on finding out what students say they want regarding learner support provision in the Zimbabwe Open University. This leads to generation of data that adequately inform ZOU adult education practitioners about formulation of appropriate learner support strategies that best meet the needs of adult learners, consequently increasing student motivation, retention, and achievement of student academic and institutional goals.

A purposive sample of 6 returning 4th year students across faculties, 2 Regional Programme Coordinators and 2 administrative staff at Masvingo Region, as well as 2 discussion focus groups, one from Midlands Region and the other one from Manicaland Region, will participate in in-depth interviews which will be conducted between June and November 2015. Results of the research study will benefit the ZOU in establishing a comprehensive and enhanced learner support framework that ensures student success and university growth.

With this background, I therefore kindly ask you to grant me permission to conduct this research in your institution, the Zimbabwe Open University.

Thank you

Patrick Chadamoyo
APPENDIX A2

Letter from Registrar granting permission to carry out the research study in the ZOU

MEMORANDUM
TO Prof. P. Chadamoyo REF: NC14/1
FROM Registrar EXT: 236
DATE 22 April 2015
RE PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT A RESEARCH STUDY IN THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY (ZOU): PHD STUDENT: PATRICK CHADAMOYO: P1354897R: ID/JUN/13/16/01
Reference
'A' Your letter dated 20 April 2015.

We acknowledge, with appreciation, receipt of reference ‘A’ above.

We are kindly advising you that the request to carry out research in the University has been granted. Upon completion kindly submit a copy of your research to the Registrar’s Office.
Thank you
APPENDIX B

An “aide memoire” or interview agenda for ZOU students participants in the study

1. How do you describe your characteristics as an adult learner of the Zimbabwe Open University?

2. How do you describe your experiences with learner support provision at the ZOU?

3. What are your needs with regards learner support provision at the ZOU? In other words, what do you want done in order for you to access learner support services that will enhance your chances of succeeding in your studies?

4. What learner support strategies do you think are most appropriate for you to succeed in your studies at the ZOU?

5. What elements of a learner support framework would be suitable for ZOU as an open and distance learning institution?
APPENDIX C:

An “aide memoire” or interview agenda for ZOU staff participants in the study

1. How do you describe your characteristics as adult learners of the ZOU?

2. How do you describe your experiences with students’ learner support provision at the ZOU?

3. What do you think are your students’ needs with regards learner support provision at the ZOU?

4. How is ZOU responding to students’ needs and characteristics regarding learner support provision at ZOU?

5. What andragogical learner support strategies do you think are most appropriate for your students’ success?

6. What learner support elements can ZOU incorporate in a framework guiding learner support provision to its students?
APPENDIX D

Statement of informed written consent to all participants in the study
(To be signed by all participants)

Hello ---------(title and name of participant)

My name is Patrick Chadamoyo, a Doctoral student carrying out a research study on adult learner experiences with learner support provision in the Zimbabwe Open University. The title of my research is “Andragogical implications for enhancing learner support provision in Open and Distance Learning: A case for the Zimbabwe Open University

You have been purposively selected and therefore invited to participate in this research. As stated earlier on in my introduction, the purpose of the study is to investigate adult learner needs and characteristics and to what extent these can enhance the design and provision of more appropriate learner support services in open and distance learning and in particular the ZOU.

If you decide to participate, your participation will be strictly voluntary with your name and all identifying information disguised in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Also please note that you are free to withdraw from participating at any stage of the research study without any harm or cost or any negative action laid against you. You are also not obligated to answer every question but you are encouraged to ask where you do not understand. Please note that certain parts or in some cases the whole of this interview will be video or audio-taped, in addition to photographing specific incidents, but you will be allowed to read or listen to all transcriptions to check authenticity and trustworthiness of what you will have said during the interview, hence your consent in this regard is also requested.

Please express your consent by signing or not signing this form.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Participant:--Full Name-----------------------------------Signature--------------Date---

Researcher: Full Name-----------------------------------Signature--------------Date-
### APPENDIX E: WORKING SCHEDULE AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE AND TIME</th>
<th>DATA SOURCE</th>
<th>LOCATION OF INTERVIEW</th>
<th>METHOD OF DATA GENERATION</th>
<th>DATA STORAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6/6/15; 1200 hrs</td>
<td>P1- a female primary school teacher doing BECD</td>
<td>At her workplace at a primary school in Chingwizi-Mwenezi District</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20/6/15 1030 hrs</td>
<td>P5-A male politician and business man doing BSC Dev, Studies</td>
<td>At his home at a farm in Gutu District</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23/6/15 1415 hrs</td>
<td>AC1- An Associate Professor and Regional Programme coordinator- Commerce and Law.</td>
<td>In his office at the workplace at Masvingo Regional Centre</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph; observation notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/7/15 1030 hrs</td>
<td>P2- A male high school teacher doing BA in English and Communication</td>
<td>In his office at his workplace- a Mission High school 15 km from Masvingo Regional Centre</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13/7/15 0830 hrs</td>
<td>AD1-A female Regional Administrator</td>
<td>In her office at the Regional Centre</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph; observation notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17/7/15 0830 hrs</td>
<td>P3- A male Agritex officer doing BSC Agriculture</td>
<td>In his office at his workplace</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31/7/15 1115 hrs</td>
<td>P4- A female nurse doing BSC in Nursing Science</td>
<td>In her office at her workplace at a rural clinic in Zaka District</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17/8/15 1345 hrs</td>
<td>FGD1- Focus group discussion in Midlands Region</td>
<td>At a lodge near the City of Gweru</td>
<td>Focus group discussion</td>
<td>Researcher’s notes; video-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21/8/15 1130 hrs</td>
<td>P5- A single female working as a Bank teller at ZB Bank</td>
<td>In her office at her workplace at ZB Bank in Masvingo city</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28/8/15 1400 hrs</td>
<td>AD2- A female Registry clerk at the Regional Centre</td>
<td>In her office at the Regional Centre</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Researcher’s notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/9/15 0830 hrs</td>
<td>AC2-An Associate Professor and Regional Programme Coordinator - Arts and Education</td>
<td>In his office at the Regional Centre</td>
<td>Unstructured interview guided by ‘aide memoire’</td>
<td>Field notes; audio-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18/9/15 1400 hrs</td>
<td>FGD2- Focus group discussion in Manicaland Regional Office</td>
<td>In the boardroom at Manicaland Regional Office</td>
<td>Focus group discussion</td>
<td>Researcher’s notes; video-tape; photograph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**APPENDIX F:**

DEMOGRAPHIC (andragogical) CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS (P1-P6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>P6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td>Single mother</td>
<td>Happily married</td>
<td>Married to a primary school teacher who is also studying with ZOU;</td>
<td>Married to a ‘korokoza’, one who is doing self job ie selling and buying second and clothes.</td>
<td>Married to a wife doing merchandising</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of dependants</strong></td>
<td>1 child; aged parents; a brother going to school</td>
<td>2 children, one aged 6 months and the other one aged 3 years.</td>
<td>3 children, one of them doing her first degree with Great Zimbabwe University</td>
<td>2 children; looks after her aged father (widower)</td>
<td>5 children, 2 boys and 3 girls, 2 are employed and the last born is doing her first degree</td>
<td>None; instead has supportive parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geographical location</strong></td>
<td>Chingwizi area in Mwenezi District; a newly resettled area due to displacement by dam construction</td>
<td>Stays at a Mission high school along the high way to Harare in Masvingo District</td>
<td>Dwells in a high density urban location within Masvingo city</td>
<td>Dwell at a rural clinic in Zaka District</td>
<td>Situated at a farm in Gutu District</td>
<td>Stays in a leafy suburb within Masvingo city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distance from Masvingo Regional Centre</strong></td>
<td>298 km south of the Regional Centre</td>
<td>15 km north of the Regional Centre</td>
<td>1 km from the Regional Centre</td>
<td>125 km south of the Regional Centre</td>
<td>97km from Masvingo Regional Centre</td>
<td>Half a km from the Regional Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment status</strong></td>
<td>A primary school teacher</td>
<td>A high school English teacher</td>
<td>An Agritex officer at a Provincial</td>
<td>A state-registered nurse</td>
<td>A politician and Member of Parliament for Gutu West</td>
<td>A bank teller employed by ZB Bank in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree programme with ZOU</strong></td>
<td>BED in Early Childhood Development</td>
<td>BA in English and Communication</td>
<td>BSC Agriculture</td>
<td>BSC Nursing Science</td>
<td>BSC Development Studies</td>
<td>BCOM Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous Qualification</strong></td>
<td>Ordinary Level plus a Diploma in Education (Primary)</td>
<td>Advanced level plus a Diploma in Education (Secondary)</td>
<td>Ordinary level plus Diploma in Agriculture</td>
<td>Ordinary level plus Diploma in Nursing</td>
<td>Ordinary level plus Certificate in Agriculture</td>
<td>Advanced level plus National Certificate in Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>Mainly ChiVhenda and English</td>
<td>ChiShona and English</td>
<td>ChiShona and English</td>
<td>ChiShona and English</td>
<td>ChiShona and English</td>
<td>ChiShona and English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td>Seventh Adventist</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Apostolic Faith in Zimbabwe (AFM)</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ)</td>
<td>Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication channels</strong></td>
<td>Uses cell phone, SMS, e-mail</td>
<td>Uses cell phone, SMS, e-mail</td>
<td>Uses cell phone, SMS</td>
<td>Uses cell phone, SMS</td>
<td>Uses cell phone and SMS</td>
<td>Uses cell phone, SMS, e-mail, Whatsapp etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transport</strong></td>
<td>From the main road, travels 120km on dusty road to reach her school and residence; uses public transport</td>
<td>Owns his own car</td>
<td>Uses his own car</td>
<td>Uses public transport</td>
<td>Uses his own car and other public means of transport</td>
<td>Uses public transport</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX G:

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS BASED ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

**SOURCE:** Transcriptions from interviews based on field notes, audio tapes and video tapes (Data from students’ participants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Andragogical characteristics</th>
<th>Experiences with learner support</th>
<th>Andragogical needs ie. What do you want done?</th>
<th>Emerging themes</th>
<th>Andragogical strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>A single mother aged 33, teaches at a primary school 287 km from Regional Centre and doing BECD programme</td>
<td>I like modules but did not get all of them at registration; rarely visits the library due to cost; it was difficult to get marked assignments on time; I only attended the first weekend school of the second semester; generally stressed because I am struggling to pay fees; network is a problem; Regional Centre very far, I wish it was in Chiredzi town</td>
<td>Should get full study package at registration; I appreciate SMS messages though network is a problem in my area; Regional Programme Coordinator should communicate with me regularly not just to remind me about deadlines; I want to get marked assignments early so that I can evaluate myself; I need more flexible fees payment arrangements, cash upfront is too harsh for me.</td>
<td>Administrative support; technical support; technological support; tutor support; academic support; communication support; psychosocial support; financial support and guidance.</td>
<td>Quick distribution of and access to, teaching and learning materials; providing quick feedback; assessing students’ work; training in self-learning skills; provide financial guidance; provide counselling; develop study centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>A male high school teacher; married with 2 children; teaches at a high school 15 km from the Regional Centre; Doing BAECs programme; wife also works at the same school; has internet connectivity; owns a car</td>
<td>I enjoy using internet; I find library assistance helpful in providing websites; weekend schools are important because we meet colleagues; I also enjoy group discussions with my friends; but I don’t get assignment feedback on time; sometimes tutors are not well prepared with some simply reading the module instead of explaining issues.</td>
<td>Thoroughly prepared tutorials with tutors who identify gaps; I want to regularly communicate with my tutors; it appears some part-time tutors do not have e-mails; I wanted to register on-line but had problems with the system; After paying full fees I want full registration package to minimise travelling;</td>
<td>Tutorial support; tutor support; Administrative support; library support; peer support</td>
<td>Internet searching skills; use of library skills; provide effective weekend school tutorials; peer and collaborative learning; provide e-learning resources; group discussion; providing quick feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>A male Agritex officer currently doing BSC Agriculture; married to a primary school teacher; has 3 children one of them also doing her first degree with GZU; stays in an urban location and well connected to internet services</td>
<td>I have easy access to library facilities but sometimes find no relevant books and resource materials; finds e-mail and SMS messages valuable in communicating with tutors; not happy with feedback from tutors and from marked assignments; work commitments interferes with weekend school tutorials; workload rather too heavy to adequately prepare for exams. My research supervisor is not easily accessible.</td>
<td>I want to be connected to more websites with more relevant materials; part-time tutors should be well connected to internet services to facilitate communication; library should provide fast internet services; I want to be involved in deciding important deadline dates; I want to be connected to relevant peers and alumni</td>
<td>Academic support; tutorial support; administrative support; library support; psycho-social support; peer support</td>
<td>Provide adequate reading materials; train part-time tutors; provide efficient internet connectivity; consulting students and involve them in decision-making; provide networking; build relationships; providing adequate research supervision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>A female state registered nurse, married to a “korokoza”, looks after 2 children and an aged father; stays at a rural clinic 125 km from the Regional Centre; doing BSC Nursing Science, mostly doing night duty and finds this too difficult to balance work and study.</td>
<td>I am isolated and lack both peer and family support. My husband shows very little interest in my studies; I face financial problems and I rarely visit the library. I dropped out in semester 2 of my 2nd year due to ill-health; Had problems in rejoining because regulations were not in my favour; I have problems in using the computer though I work at a clinic.</td>
<td>I want to be connected to colleagues doing the same programme; I want guidance and counselling on how to handle my husband; Fees payment should be flexible. I want to be trained in computer skills so that I am able to type my assignments; Orientation should stress on explaining regulations that affect students; I want to get quick responses to my query.</td>
<td>Peer support; guidance and counselling support; academic support on study skills; computer skills training; informative orientation; administrative support; technical support.</td>
<td>Peer learning; guidance and counselling; facilitating learning; computer based learning; study skills development; technological infrastructure development; psychosocial counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>A male politician aged 49; Stays at his farm 97 km from the Regional Centre; Married to a wife who does merchandising; has five children with one still doing her first degree; Doing BSc Development Studies; As a</td>
<td>Finds Regional Programme Coordinator very helpful in keeping me informed about the goings –on at college; I have problems visiting the library during midweek, I find weekends much better; I have internet connectivity</td>
<td>I want a personal tutor who I can dialogue with at personal level; Library times should be extended to cover late hours during weekends; I should get a full study package at registration (once I get a full package then I don’t find weekend schools very helpful to</td>
<td>Personal tutoring; administrative support; feedback support; library support; academic support; technical support;</td>
<td>Personal tutoring; dialogue; providing effective communication; providing effective library facilities; providing effective administrative and academic support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A single female student aged 23. Stays with her own parents in a leafy suburb of Masvingo town; doing BCOM Acc. And works as a bank teller at ZB Bank in Masvingo town; Visits library regularly but I am frustrated with electricity disruption; library internet bandwidth very small; I feel comfortable with e-learning packages and on-line services; interested with face-to-face interactions with tutors but tutors not readily available; Some tutors do not want to be contacted after hours; Sometimes we are given assignments before proper induction; feedback from marked assignments comes rather too late; revision exercises including model answers is very little; I have problems with my research supervisor, it appears she lacks direction. I want to be exposed to advanced internet searching skills using a variety of websites; I need interactions with tutors through on-line communication services; registration package particularly modules should be 100% adequate; I need proper induction at orientation, particularly on how to write assignments; I need fast internet services. Sometimes I need peer support or getting experience from some ZOU graduates (alumni); why not introduce tele-conferencing or video-conferring, sometimes it’s nice to go over certain concepts through video replays at your own free time;
APPENDIX H:

SUMMARY OF CORROBORATED DATA FROM VARIOUS DATA SOURCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA SOURCE</th>
<th>STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES WITH LSP</th>
<th>WHAT STUDENTS WANT DONE</th>
<th>UNIVERSITY RESPONSE (administration)</th>
<th>UNIVERSITY RESPONSE (academic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured in-depth interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I

OBSERVATION CHECKLISTS OF LEARNERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH LSP
(Evidence obtained from both direct and participant observation of students’ day-
to-day interactions with learner support services at Masvingo Region)

1. What common (andragogical) characteristics are students saying affect their access to LSP in the ZOU?
   (I) Common characteristics
   (II) Uncommon characteristics

2. What are students’ common experiences with LSP?
   (I) Common experiences
   (II) Uncommon experiences

3. Is there a connection among the experiences of the participants?

4. Is there an explanation for the connection?

5. Any surprises in the data generated?

6. How is the university responding to students’ learner support needs?
   (I) Through academic staff
   (II) Through administrative staff

7. Are tutors using andragogical learner support strategies in interacting with adult learners in the ZOU?

8. What andragogical learner support strategies are
   (i) Commonly used
   (ii) Not commonly used
   (iii) Should be used in the ZOU?
### APPENDIX J

**Matrix showing what to record during observation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Recorded Data</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preliminaries: Description of physical settings</td>
<td>Time, date, place, theme, pseudo names, context</td>
<td>Researcher records anything related to the site of data collection, ambiance and other relevant information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural demographic characteristics</td>
<td>Class, ethnicity, age, gender, language, appearance, cultural settings, behaviours, body language, moods</td>
<td>Record demographic characteristics as well as social and emotional dispositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner support experiences</td>
<td>Occupational activities, study activities, interactive teaching and learning activities, interactions among participants etc.</td>
<td>Record what the observed person is doing at the time of observation; sort out regular and irregular activities, common and uncommon activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner support materials</td>
<td>Frequency of most used materials; interactions with teaching and learning materials e.g. books, mobile phones, lap tops, computers, people etc</td>
<td>Record the type and nature of materials interacted with; types of communication and how much time is spent on each activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of interactions</td>
<td>For example, talking, reading, typing, seeking help from others, or providing help to others</td>
<td>Record possible reasons for those interactive activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived challenges faced by the participant</td>
<td>Related to isolation, no electricity, no internet, lack of group activity, difficult in accessing teaching and study materials</td>
<td>Record anything that seems not to be available but could have been useful to the participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source for provisions</td>
<td>Personal or provided by institution or by others</td>
<td>Record whether material used is personal or provided by institution, tutors, peers, or family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of ethical considerations</td>
<td>For example, anonymous identification of participants, relationships, confidentiality, practising reciprocity etc</td>
<td>Record identified ethical issues as a reminder of adherence to ethical and legal issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX K

#### DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: ISSUES RAISED THROUGH DOCUMENTS RETRIEVED FROM LEARNERS’ SUGGESTION BOX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOCUMENT</th>
<th>ISSUES RAISED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>Turn-around time for marked assignments is too long. How can we write assignment 2 before we receive feedback from first assignment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2</td>
<td>May we have more revision question papers. (BED Management, intake 18?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3</td>
<td>I am a Head of a very big school and command a lot of respect from subordinates. I am used to people greeting me first whilst they are standing up before we get on with business. Tommy surprise, staff here expects me to ask them to serve me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4</td>
<td>We need to be organised into study groups so that we are able to share and compare notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D5</td>
<td>We want training in language skills and proficiency as well as getting guidance in information search and analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D6</td>
<td>We want weekend library hours to be extended to 10 o’clock in the evening to increase access to information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D7</td>
<td>As mothers with babies, we are happy with the way ZOU staff accommodates us at weekend school tutorials or workshops. This demonstrates great acceptance of who we are as adult learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D8</td>
<td>Plz (sic) sir helps me contact my members because I enjoy doing group tasks since group discussions are very enriching and motivating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D9</td>
<td>We are trying to meet as a group but it appears we are disorganised. I did not meet any of my group members. Please advise. I feel delighted to hear what my friends think about what I say and that makes me have a second opinion about the way I do my things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D10</td>
<td>The time we take to wait in the queue to receive service is too long. Sometimes none seems to acknowledge our presence to the extent that we feel a sense of humiliation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D11</td>
<td>Whilst the University expects us to benefit from online services arraigned before us, the culprits are our lecturers who seem not to be familiar with the implementation of a wide variety of these online programmes and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D12</td>
<td>In fact our tutors haven’t changed their mindsets to get tuned to the use of online programmes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D13</td>
<td>I am not happy about the way I am treated by some of staff at reception. As you are aware, I am a pastor and I don’t expect not to be given appropriate attention and respect by those ‘girls’ you placed at the reception desk. I feel I am not adequately supported.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D14</td>
<td>It is not about how much fees are supposed to be paid, but about how that fees is supposed to be paid. That is the biggest concern because at whatever level we are in our studies, we need to balance fees payment and other family responsibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L: THE PILOT STUDY

TOPIC: ANDRAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ENHANCING LEARNER SUPPORT PROVISION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A case of the Zimbabwe Open University

1. Background to the problem

The area of LSP to adult learners has received growing attention due to many adult learners failing to complete their education programmes due to ODL institutions failing to provide appropriate and adequate LSS to their learners. In the past, little attention has been paid to studying the issues faced by adult learners and their experiences with LSP at their study institutions, particularly in ODL institutions. To this end, the researcher planned to conduct a pilot study in order to pre-test the processes with regard to understanding issues related to LSP to adult learners in ODL institutions across the globe, using the ZOU as a case study.

2. The statement of the problem

The aim of the pilot study was to address the main research question: How can the knowledge of andragogical needs and characteristics enhance the design and provision of LSS in ODL using one ODL institution in Zimbabwe as a case study?

3. Rationale for the pilot study

The rationale for carrying out the pilot study was:-

(a) to see if the research methods could be effective

(b) to pre-test the unstructured in-depth interview protocol

(c) to discover other protocol issues and difficulties and see if they could be modified or resolved before the main project began.

4. The sample

The sample comprised two adult learners, one male and one female, both purposively selected from RC2 and RC3 respectively, of the ZOU. Both learners were in the final year of completing their studies and were believed to be very well versed with the experiences of LSP in the ZOU. Maximum variation was used to select the study sites of the participants, that is, one at RC2 was from a rural set up and the other one at RC3 was from an urban set up.
4.1 Research assistants

During the study, the researcher found appropriate time for interacting with the research assistants. Two research assistants were recruited, one from RC2 and the other one from RC3. Both assistants were lecturers; working as Student Advisors in their respective Regional Campuses. They were familiar with the study population which comprised adult learners of the ZOU. They were also well experienced with the provision of LSS in ODL. Taking advantage of these attributes, the only duty of the researcher was to ensure that they fully understood the study protocol, including study goals and information about how to conduct unstructured in-depth interviews. A number of agreements were made between the researcher and the assistants with regard to how data generation was going to be recorded during observation and interview sessions. In addition, the researcher also ensured that that the assistants fully understood the legal and ethical issues binding the study, particularly instructions for handling issues like confidentiality.

5. The research method

The pilot study used an interpretive qualitative case study method that generated data from the participants through unstructured in-depth interviewing and observation methods. Interviews were on on-on-one basis and about half an hour long. At the end of each interview, a member check was made by playing audio recordings of the interviews in order to establish credibility.

6. Data generation and analysis process

Data was generated during the month of March 2015. The researcher used an ‘aide memoir’ to phrase the unstructured interview questions. The following questions were asked.

- What are your andragogical needs and characteristics and how do these affect your studies?
- What are your experiences with LSP in ZOU?
- Describe what you want done in order to improve LSP in the ZOU?
- What LS strategies are most appropriate for you

After interviewing, the researcher triangulated data generated from the two participants (Patton, 2001) and through observation and interviewing. The researcher summarised what the participants had said and requested verification and amendments.
7. Lessons learnt from the pilot study

- The interview time of 30 minutes was rather short. The interview sessions took slightly longer than 30 minutes.

- The ‘what’ questions asked did not allow participants to open up as much as they wanted. Participants just gave as much as what was asked in the question.

- The data generated was diversified according to the context of the participant. For example, whilst participant in the rural area was concerned about lack of electricity as the main challenge in using ICT, the participant in the urban area was worried about the internet bandwidth.

- In terms of the pilot study, the two participants actively participated in the interview. Obtaining consent form and to tape-record was not a problem.

- The data generated helped the researcher to realise what his preconceptions and biases were toward an adult learner.

- Based on experiences from the pilot interviews, the interview questions for the main study were modified to be broad enough for interviewees to narrate their experiences.

- As the main research tool, the researcher learnt what questions to ask and how to ask interviewees.

8. Results

- The interview time was extended to 45 minutes in the main study.

- Research sites were increased into three to include a semi-urban semi-rural site in order to increase variation and allow triangulation.

- The ‘what’ questions were changed to ‘how’ questions to allow express their views more openly.

- The research instruments were increased from two to four to allow more triangulation of data.

9. Conclusion

The pilot study caused the researcher to be aware of diversities in adult learners’ experiences of LSP in ODL. Receiving feedback and reading transcriptions
helped in the modification of interview questions and time taken for each interview session. On the whole, implementing a pilot study with clear aim and statement of problem ended up with the researcher achieving rigour and trustworthiness in the main study and in qualitative research.