# Effectiveness of Block-Release (Part-Time) Education: A Case Study of the Faculty of Education at Africa University

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**ABSTRACT**

This research study was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Block- Release (Part-Time) education programme offered at Africa University in Zimbabwe. The main research question guiding the study was: How is the block- release (part- time) education programme offered at Africa University organised? A mixed method research design was employed to explore participants' views on the programme. The target population was the 2011, 2012 and 2013 intakes from which 100 research participants were conveniently sampled for the questionnaire survey. Data were generated through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the programme co-ordinator and school administrators. The major findings from the study were that programme participants were impressed by programme organisation in respect of design of courses and provision of information on course objectives, lecturers' performance was reported to be favourable in respect of content mastery, ability to deliver, ability to relate course material to circumstances, motivation of learners and attitude to students. The findings also showed that programme participants were impressed by the quantity of learning material and level of difficulty of work done. Some participants however showed an unfavourable impression on registration arrangements and perfunctory use of assessment forms applied by some educators. Few respondents were however impressed by the lecturers' level of accessibility to students outside class. Based on these findings, it was recommended that the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education through ZIMCHE should streamline guidelines on implementation of such Block-Release programmes. Programme coordinators should more closely monitor and supervise the performance of programme staff and encourage them to acquire some skills in tutorship.

**Keywords:** Effectiveness, Block-Release (Part-Time) Education, case study, Faculty of Education, Africa University, Zimbabwe.

## INTRODUCTION

This research was set up to evaluate the effectiveness of the Block- Release (Part-Time) education programme offered at Africa University in Zimbabwe. Effectiveness is critical in any educational intervention (Woodley and Kirkwood, 1986; Lockee, Moore and Burton, 2001). Nabris (2000) defines effectiveness as a measure of the degree to which a programme achieves its established objectives. The process also reveals how far education programme activities address the concerns of the programme planners, managers, sponsors, implementers and educatees (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994; Lockee, Moore and Burton, 2001).The criteria against which effectiveness of education initiatives are measured include the governance and leadership of the programme activities; the quality of student instructional programmes and services; quality and quantity of physical and technological resources; qualification, experience and commitment of programme educators plus pattern of assessment of learners' performance and progress (The Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2003). The quality of the programme product and the extent to which it produces the desired impact is also a strong indicator of effectiveness of the Block Release (Part-time) programme (Casley and Kumar, 1997; Jody and Ray, 2004).

Mpofu and Muller (2009) say that block- release (part-time) education embraces elements of the conventional traditional classroom education and aspects of the distance mode of learning. In the conventional traditional classroom education, learners are exposed to intensive teaching – learning within a prescribed study block after which the education assumes a distance learning mode. In the distance education mode, the interaction between the educator and the learner is facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical or organised appointment (Saiff, 2005; Simpson, 2002; University of Florida, 2003). Sumner (2000) stresses that during the off - campus learning mode, students manage their studies and do course assignments as part of the study programme. In the block – release (part-time) programme under study, off campus learning activities of students were also assessed. Programme participants come to campus for lecturer directed learning during designated days of the vacation school period after which they withdraw to their work places or homes. In the periods between the study blocks, they cover some course content and do course assignments while at their work places or homes. They interact with their teachers through e-mail, cell phone or by appointment. Studies carried out in South Africa, Malawi and United Kingdom have shown that the programme has become increasely popular (Aluko, 2009; Hau-Yoon, 2000; Ingirige and Goulding, 2009). It has been observed that there exists no significant differences the performance of its products and individuals who study through the traditional classroom setting (Burgess and Russell, 2003; Russell, 2000).

To establish the effectiveness the block Release (part-time) education programme offered at Africa University, issues explored included how the block – release (part- time) education programme offered was organised, the students' level of satisfaction with lecturers' performance in the programme, quality and quantity of learning materials used, the system of assessment of learners' performance used by lecturers and the teacher products' perceived professional development following completion of the programme. In the block – release (part-time) programme at AU Programme participants come to campus for lecturer directed learning during designated days of the vacation school period after which they withdraw to their work places or homes. In the periods between the study blocks, they cover some course content and do course assignments while at their work places or homes. They interact with their teachers through e-mail, cell phone or by appointment. The researcher was keen to find out if this pedagogic approach produced a teacher product that was sufficiently skilled to teach and raise student performance in the school.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem being explored in this study is that of effectiveness of the block-release (part-time) education tuition offered at Africa University. Most academicians have been skeptical of this pedagogical approach in the provision of adequate professional development to participants. Educationists say block – release (part-time) education has been widely accepted as an alternative to the fulltime conventional classroom system. This teaching paradigm permits individuals who are unable to learn through the conventional fulltime system to acquire education and training. Harrington and Reason (2003) contend that this teaching approach draws credit for its consistency in addressing instructional delivery and fulfillment of course design. The issue has been a subject of great concern and heated debate. Effectiveness evaluation has become an indispensable component of educational programme management for quality assurance. Africa University offers the block-release (part-time) education tuition. In the knowledge of the writer, no evaluation research on the effectiveness of this block – release (part -time) education programme has been done. At the same time, little research has involved consideration of the programme product and its impact in programme effectiveness evaluation.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study was guided by the following research questions:

### Main Research Question

1. How is the block- release (part- time) education programme offered at Africa University organised?

### Sub-Research Questions

2.1. What is the level of satisfaction of students with lecturers' performance in the block- release (part- time) education programme?

3.2 What is the quality and quantity of learning material used in the block – release (part- time) education programme?

4.3 How do the lecturers assess learners' performance in the block- release (part- time) education programme?

5.4 What is the programme teacher products' perceived professional development following their engagement in the block- release (part- time) education programme offered at Africa University?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The major focus of the study was the effectiveness of the Block-Release programme offered at Africa University. The effectiveness evaluation of the education initiative can be traced to the work of Coleman and Jencks whose major concern was to establish the extent to which education efforts addressed the intended goals in the education fraternity (MacDonald, 1991). They analysed the factors that influence teaching - learning programmes and their work stirred further research on effectiveness evaluation of education programmes in United States and United Kingdom and later on at global level (Goldstein and Woodhouse, 2000). Effectiveness evaluation of education initiatives is in line with Drecker's Law of effectiveness. Drecker's law of effectiveness says that in project or programme operations, it is more important 'to do the right thing' than to do things right. This relates to the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency. Effectiveness evaluation is a way of gauging the relevance of a particular programme initiative. All efforts of programme implementers to ensure fulfillment of the programme vision and mission that are revealed through the extent of achievement of   outcomes.

A programme can be effective without being efficient. The programme systems and processes instituted may yield the desired outcomes without optimum application of the available resources. A programme can also be efficient without being effective. In education programmes, meanwhile efficiency is necessary, programme managers pursue mission driven programme operations. This makes evaluation a crucial process in the block- release (part-time) education to establish effectiveness (Lewis, 2003). Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) say that early research on effectiveness of education programmes revealed significance of individual student factors, the importance of the learning level, role of teachers, learning condition and the wider context of learning. Effectiveness of block – release (part-time) education can be examined from this perspective. The indicators for effectiveness include level of programme organization, educator performance, quality and quantity of learning material, assessment of students' performance and performance of products. It has been imperative to identify indicators for programme effectiveness (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions-CRAG, 2001).

The level of effectiveness of the block – release (part – time) education initiative can be shown through the effectiveness of management of the programme. Effective management of a programme largely contributes to programme effectiveness (Robbin and Coulter, 2002). Market research should be done to ensure that relevant competitive programmes are established on the student market (University of South Florida, 2009). The student market has individuals of different learning needs which if not identified, programme enrolment will be low. Educational programmes must also meet expected standards dictated by professional bodies. There is need for appropriate management structures to be in place to ensure efficient administration of the programme activities (Hellman, 2003). The establishment of a management team composed of individuals with streamlined duties makes the programme management most effective. The necessary infrastructure should be available to sustain the education programme activities (Carty, 1999). These include classrooms, internet, library facility and other relevant structures. Education programme initiatives that start with adequate infrastructure create conducive learning atmosphere and attract large clientele. Learners should receive adequate support in order to get through their studies. As clients, they have different needs (Thorpe, 2002). The support can be in form of guidance and counseling, information provision, pastoral and academic help. The support boosts the students' confidence and self- esteem (Tait, 2003; Simpson, 2000). Provision of this service reduces the student dropout rate.

Furthermore, the education programme should be sufficiently costed to ensure that operations are sustainable (Rumble, 2009). Consideration should be made of investment to establish the materials, infrastructure, related support structure and running costs.  Costing promotes efficient use of resources (Hulman, 2000). There is also need to create an appropriate tuition fee structure for the programme. Quality assurance and approval processes also require particular consideration.  Programme activities should be in line with the standards of University's internal quality assurance mechanisms and international standards (Jones, Morgan and Turner, 2002). Adequate consultation should be made to

ensure that programmes conform to the expectations of external professional bodies that control such programmes. Curriculum design and delivery are also critical in making an education initiative effective (Stuart and Kunji, 2000). Course learning out comes should be clearly laid out and course content be competently delivered (Quarshie, 2003). Appropriate assessment procedures should be followed (Hunsaker, 2004; Lewis, 2003). Human resource capacity the programme management should recruit qualified, experienced and competent educators to handle the teaching - learning situation (Kasambira, 1993). The education programme cannot however effectively operate without a programme co-ordinator.

The level of effectiveness of the block – release (part – time) education programme is can also be judged on the basis of educators' performance. The educator should be determined, diligent, dependable, focused and disciplined (Price, 2004). He or she must be someone who first identifies the educatees' learning styles and then adapt instruction that matches the individuals' preferences (Kemp, 2002). In the block-release (part-time) education programme, the dropout rate may also be used to determine the effectiveness of the educator. According to Schifter (2004), the educator's performance must meet the instructional requirements of the educatees. In effective instruction, content is organized into themes which are broken down into sub – topics and tasks that support group discussions, activities and assignments (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Simpson (2000) indicates that the effective lecturer recognises the importance of providing the student with sufficient pedagogical support and boosting the students' sense of confidence and self-esteem. The University of South Florida (2009) says a competent lecturer assesses and evaluates the performance and progress of the students throughout the development and implementation of the study programme. He or she is known to possess command of the theoretical subject content, understanding of learner behaviour and a repertoire of teaching skills (Fraser, Loubster and Van Roody, 1992; St. Philip's College, 2005). He or she should vary teaching methods to avoid monotony among educatees.

The quality and quantity of learning material also act as an indicator of effectiveness of the block-release (part-time) education. Each course may have its own unique learning materials. The key resource in the block – release (part-time) education programme at the study centre is the library. According to Smith (2000), the library is important for academic research in which individuals review literature on topics, theme or concepts of particular interest. Buchanan (2000) says the use of the library enhances independent study and development of research skills among students. Libraries provide documents, historical images, documents, audio recordings, photographs and film clips (Library of Congress, 2000). This benefits students during the classroom mode of teaching – learning and when they are on 'release' and continue with their studies. With the advent of technological developments, some institutions have established the Distance Learning Library Services (DLLS) to assist learners to access library information while off campus (University of Louisville, 2000). Institutions that offer distance education in part or in full need to become proficient in the technology skills required for DLLS. This library system is learner friendly for students involved in studies while they are off campus. DLLS has since its inception served several distance education learners integrated to its information systems and resources.

Modules can also be used as very effective teaching – learning material (Aluko, 2009). A module can be described as a document written by an expert or experts on themes of a particular course following the course objectives. However, use of inadequate, inappropriate and obsolete materials make people look down offered education programmes (Kunje, Lewin and Stuart, 2003). In technical and vocation education, workshops and the relevant equipment become necessary learning materials. Such materials are required in courses as woodwork, construction, mechanics, cartering, clothing technology to mention a few. These courses can also be offered in the distance education of learning (Mbuibee, 2007). Science subjects require laboratory facilities and the related equipment. Instructional audio cassettes, slides, video cassettes, radios, television sets, television and satellite transmission facilities are also useful for educational purpose (Saif, 2005).

According to Shepard (2000), the main aims of assessment in education include determination of the degree to which intended learning outcomes of a course are achieved and provision of feedback to the educatees on their learning. The phenomenon also motives learners to do appropriate work (Cohen, 2008; Hunsaker, 2004). Race (2002) points out that the relationship that exists between assessment and learning outcomes is inseparable. Use of variety of assessment instruments makes the assessment process more purposeful in education (Brown, 2001). In the block release (part-time) education

programme, assessment instruments can be in the form of assignments, in class tests, term papers, viva, practicum and examinations. According to Knight (2000) assignments or tests can be include complex essays, multiple choice, selected response/checklists and selected response/simple match. In all cases, the student has to engage memory, recall, comprehension and higher order cognitive skills. This indicates the contribution of assessment to effectiveness of teaching - learning programmes. In the block release education programme assignments are however used as the main assessment tool.

The level of effectiveness of the block – release (part – time) education initiative can also be shown through demonstration of professional competence by participants at their work place.  Teachers go on manpower development leave to improve on their skills to handle the didactic situation. It is hoped that after completing their studies, the teachers will more effectively perform their duties in the schools. Government of Zimbabwe (2000) says that the performance of all teachers in the schools is controlled by stipulations the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and teachers are expected to highly perform.  Teacher performance has been found wanting in some schools as shown by 0% pass rate in national examinations. This has been a cause for concern among the various stake holders in education.  Hoy and Miskel (2001) point out that teacher need to sufficiently equip the learners with required knowledge and skills. The block – release (part – time) programme gives school teachers a chance to upgrade their job knowledge and skills, keep abreast with current developments in their subject areas, boosts their confidence and ability to teach. It is hoped that the acquired capabilities will be translated into effective teaching-learning and pupils' education success (Hulle, Browner, Grangy, Hearst and Newman, 2001).An effective  product of the block – release(part-time) programme interacts with learners, workmates, parents and his superiors and demonstrates respect, accessibility and expertise (Hargreaves, 1994). He or she commits much of his or her attention and resources to the teaching - learning activity of the educatees (Donaldson, 2001; Texas State Board of Educator Certification, 2002). A competent teacher carefully monitors the performance of the learners and examines the results on the teaching - learning exercise (Maki, 2002).

## METHODS AND SETTING

A mixed method research design which 'mixed' quantitative and qualitative approaches at stages of instrument development, data collection and analysis in the study was employed in this study in order to elicit participants' views on the level of effectiveness of the block – release (part – time) education initiative offered at Africa University. The approach allowed use of the strengths of both the quantitative and qualitative approaches and minimised their shortfalls which yielded a better research product. The rationale for mixing the methods is that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods can adequately evaluate the effectiveness of the block release (part- time) programme offered at Africa University. The questionnaire and interviews were used as data collection methods.

The questionnaire technique was applied to source data from teachers involved in the block – release (part –time) education programme as the actual beneficiaries of the programme. The instrument was administered to one hundred practising school teachers involved in the block-release (part-time) programme offered at Africa University.  Of these respondents, 17 were male and 17 female programme participants of 2011 intake. Of the remaining 66 respondents, 33 were male and the other 33 female programme participants of 2012 and 2013 intakes. The participants studied various different programmes at the university. Of all the participants, 5% had post graduate qualifications and the rest were undergraduates. The data variables generated included organisation of the block – release (part – time) education programme, lecturers' performance in the programme, quality and quantity of learning materials used in the programme assessment forms in the programme and the self- perceived professional development among teachers involved in programme.

The sample of school Heads for interviews was made up of  administrators of  schools A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H and L. The researcher was unable to access the school administrators of J, K and L. At the schools where products of the Africa University Block Release part-time programme taught, one in-depth face to face interview was carried out with school Heads or his or their representative. It was critical to gather the impressions of the school heads on performance of products of the Africa University Block Release part-time programme. The data variables generated in the interviews included the teachers' mastery of subject matter and confidence in teaching the subject matter since engaging in the block – release (part – time) education programme at Africa University school administrators they would recommend the teacher to be upgraded to teach high levels. The second

interview was held with the coordinator of the block-release (part-time) education programme. The interview captured data on degree study programmes available, organization of the programme, educators' performance, issues related to assessment of students' performance and challenges encountered in the effectuation of the programme. The choice of the coordinator for an interview was ideal because it was imperative to get his perceptions on how the programme was organized and ran. In the next section, results of the study are shown.

## PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Data used to evaluate effectiveness of the Block Release (part-time) programme offered at Africa University was collected through the questionnaire survey and interviews. The results of the questionnaire were presented as summarized raw data and presented using bar graphs and that collected through interviews were in narrative. The results of the different research instruments were combined.

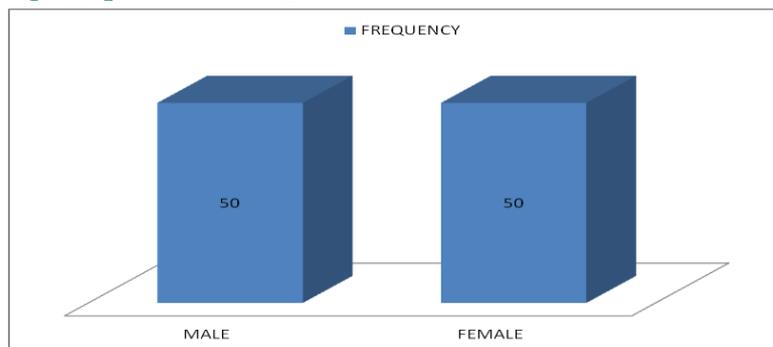### Teacher Gender, Age, Experience and Qualifications



**Figure1.** *Gender distribution of respondents*

Figure 1 shows that there was a balanced sex distribution among respondents. Fifty were male and 50 were female.

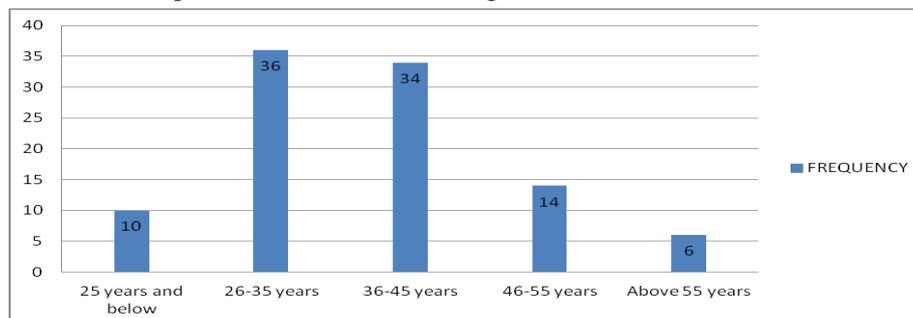The age distribution of respondents is indicated on figure 2.



**Figure2.** *Age distribution of respondents*

Figure 2 shows that a significant number of participants in the programme, 36 were in the 26 – 35 age range while 34 were in the 36 – 45 age category. Participants below 25years were 26. Six of the participants were above 55years of age.

The professional qualifications of respondents are indicated in figure 3 below.
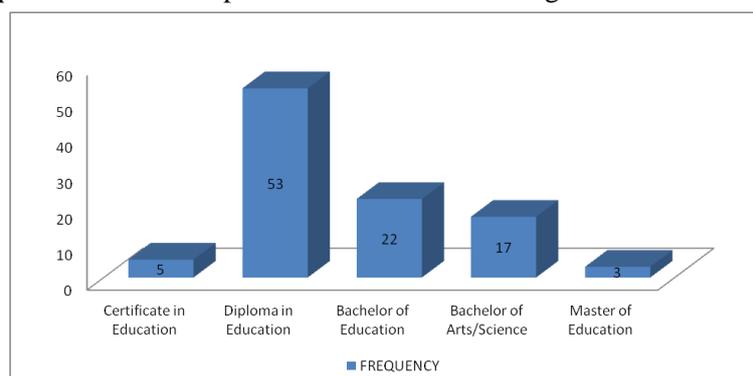


**Figure3.** *Professional qualifications of respondents*

Figure 3shows that a marginal majority of respondents in the programme (53) were teachers in possession of Diploma in education. Participants in possession of Master of education degree and certificate were 5 and 3 respectively.
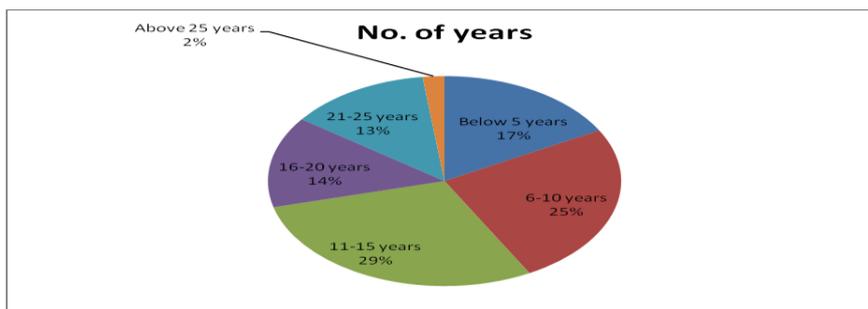


**Figure4.** *Teaching experience of respondents*

A significant number of respondents, 29 had teaching experience in the 11-15 years category while 25 fell in the 6-10years category. Participants with teaching experience of below 20years were 17(Figure 4).

**Organisation of the Block- Release (Part – Time) Programme offered at Africa University**

The impressions of respondents on organisation of the Block- Release (Part – Time) Programme offered at Africa University are shown on figure 5 below.
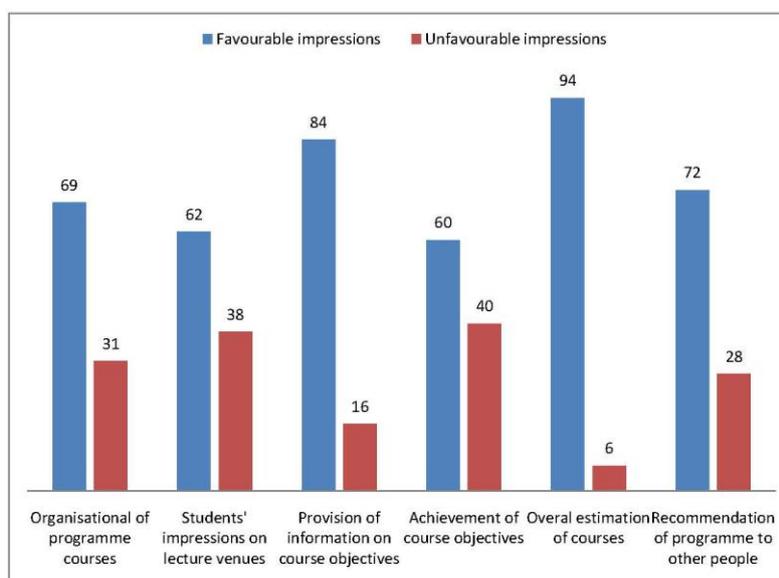


**Figure5.** *Students' impressions on Organisation of the Block- Release (Part – Time) Programme*

Figure 5 above shows that an overwhelming majority of respondents (94) in the sample indicated favourable impressions on overall estimation of courses done while a sizeable number of respondents (38) showed negative impressions on the situation on the lecture venues. In an interview with the programme co-ordinator, it was revealed that the programme lacked an infrastructure of its own and availability of lecture rooms was a big challenge. When the conventional programme was open, some teaching – learning sessions were held at Hartzell High School which is located about a kilometre away and students had to walk from Africa University main campus to Hartzell High school and back for lectures. This simultaneous occurrence of the conventional and Block-Release (Part-Time) programme had also resulted in student accommodation crisis. Block-Release (Part-Time) programme students had to seek accommodation at the dormitories at Hartzell High School and Hartzell Central Primary school.

**Lecturers' Performance in the Block Release (Part-Time) Education Programme at Africa University**

The impressions of respondents on lectures' performance in the Block- Release (Part – Time) Programme offered at Africa University were shown on figure 6 below.
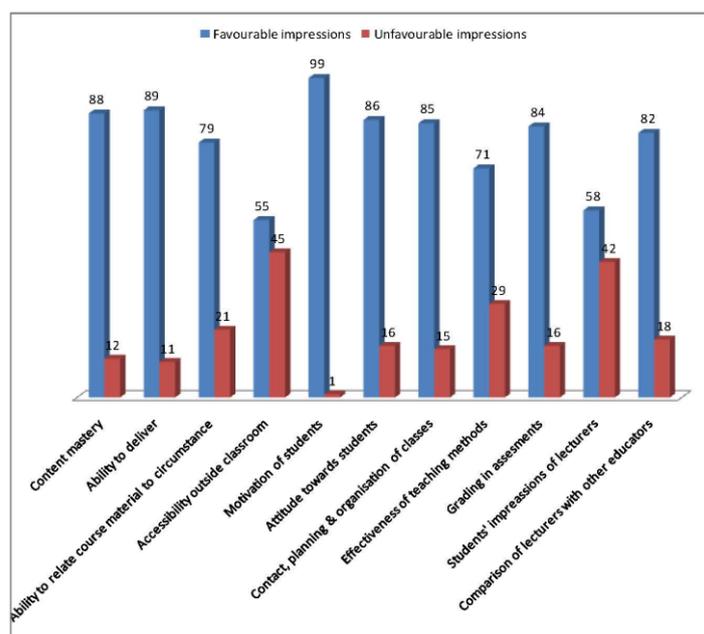
**Figure6.** *Students' impressions on lecturers' performance*

Figure 6 indicates that an overwhelming majority of respondents (98) showed favourable impressions on lecturer motivation of students. A sizeable number (42) showed unfavourable impressions on accessibility of lecturers outside the classroom. In an interview with the programme coordinator, it was revealed that the programme recruited only educators with a minimum of Masters' Degree qualifications to lecture in the programme. The Masters' Degree qualifications needed to be in the relevant study area offered. Lectureship experience in the study courses was also regarded as a necessary requirement. However, no staff development workshop was done to prepare staff members on how to handle the Block - Release (Part - Time) programme. Educators were also demotivated by delays in payment of their teaching allowances. Adequate supervision of performance of staff was difficult to effect as the co-ordinator of the programme was always on a busy schedule.

**Quality and Quantity of Learning Materials in the Block Release (Part-Time) Education Programme at Africa University**

The impressions of respondents on quality and quantity of learning materials in the Block Release (part-time) education programme are indicated in figure 7 below.
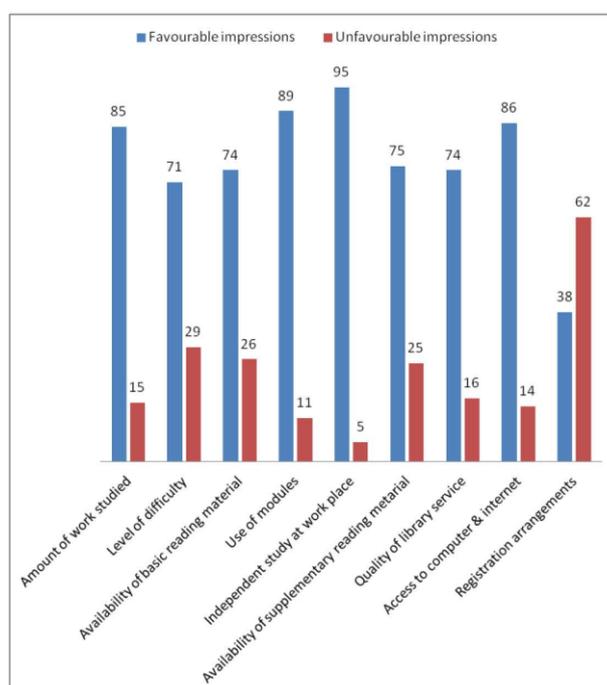


**Figure7.** *Students' impressions on quality and quantity of learning materials*

Figure 7 shows that an overwhelming majority of respondents (92) did independent study while at their work place after the study block. A marginal majority (62) indicated unfavourable impressions on registration arrangements for their courses. In an interview with the programme co-ordinator, it was revealed that the Block release (part-time) students had access to the University library which was well equipped in terms of the latest books, journals and news- papers. The students also had access to the internet. The university did not however provide any printed module materials to students as basis of course study.

**Student Assessments in the Block Release (part-time) Education Programme at Africa University**

The impressions of respondents on student assessments in the Block Release (part-time) education programme are shown on figure 8.
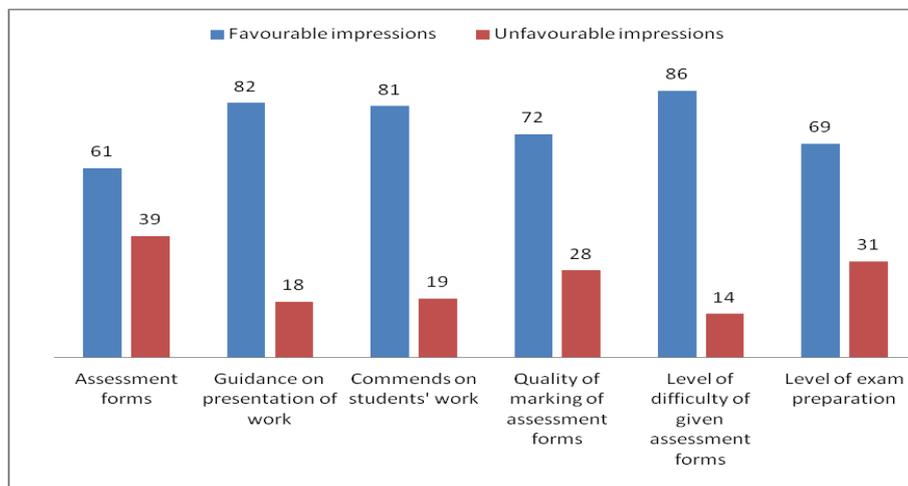


**Figure8.** *Students' impressions on assessments in the programme*

Figure 8 shows that a large majority of respondents (86) showed favourable impressions on level of difficulty of given assessment forms and only a marginal majority (61) showed favourable impressions on use of the assessment forms. In an interview, the programme coordinator confirmed that there were assessment forms common to all courses and others that applied to particular courses. For example all students did assignments and wrote examinations at the end of each semester. Practical assessment forms in study areas that involved practicals for example Agriculture, Computer Studies and Science could also include practical tests. Where appropriate, lecturers gave in-class tests. Students wrote a dissertation or project towards the end of their degree programmes. The viva voce was only organised for the final year students studying the Masters' Degree progamme in Education Leadership, Management and Development.

**Self-Perceived Professional Development among Programme Participants of the Block Release(Part-Time)Education Programme at Africa University**

The impressions of participants on their self-perceived professional development are indicated on figure 9 below.
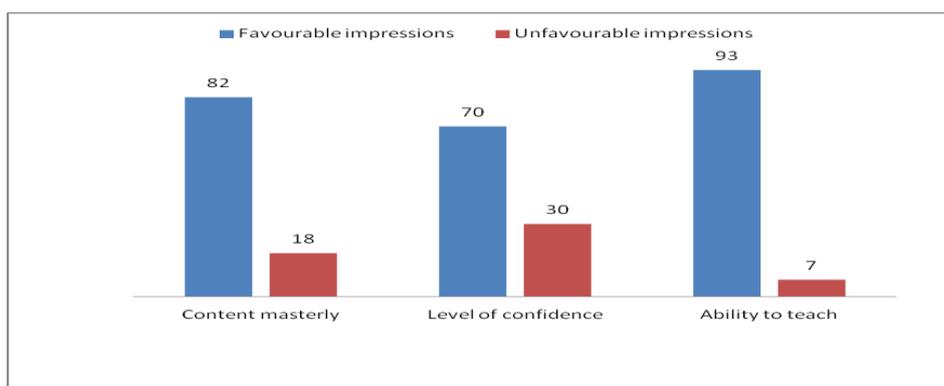


**Figure9.** *Self-Perceived Professional Development among programme participants*

Figure 9 indicates that an overwhelming majority of respondents (93) in the sample improved in the ability to teach pupils. A large majority (82) showed improvement in content mastery. Most school administrators confirmed in interviews that the Block Release (part-time) programme transformed the teachers in a significant way. The participants improved mastery of content and developed high confidence and self-esteem. Some teachers now showed interest to teach academic subjects they did in their degree programmes. The school administrators expressed the hope that the interest and academic maturity would enhance their teaching effectiveness and promote the school pass rate.

## DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The research findings revealed that the Block Release (part-time) programme offered at Africa University was largely effective. It vibrancy was however reduced some factors. The results are in concurrence with observations some of scholars in the review of related literature.

### Gender, Age, and Qualifications and Experience of Block Release (Part-Time) Participants

This research revealed that gender, age, experience and qualifications of Block Release (part-time) participants influenced effectiveness of Block Release(part-time) programme. The balanced sex distribution of the respondents could mean availability of equal opportunity for students of both sexes in the programme. It was noted that there was an overwhelming majority of respondents, 96 who were above 25 years of age. This could be an indicator of the maturity level of students in the programme. Although programme participants had family and work commitments during their studies, they were able to cope with the demands of the programme. This is consistent with the views of University of Florida(2003) that students of block release programmes are known to be emotionally stable, conforming and self-directed. It can be argued that the professional qualifications of participants added to them scholarly determination in their study of courses. It was also noted that (53) respondents were teachers in possession of Diploma in education. Master of education degree and certificate in education registered a response rate of only 5 which and 3 respectively which implied a high recognition of the value of the programme professional development and preparedness to work hard.

### Organisation of the Block- Release (Part–Time) Programme in the Block Release (Part-Time) Education Programme at Africa University

One major finding of the study was that the block release (part - time) programme was to a large extent effectively organised. An overwhelming majority of respondents (94) indicated favourable impressions on overall estimation of courses done. This finding is consistent with the observation of Robbin and Coulter (2002) who say that effective management of a programme contributes largely towards attainment of learning outcomes. This could mean a high level of effectiveness of the block-release (part-time) Programme. This finding however conflicts with the observations of Bidarra and Dias (2003) who point out that in education initiatives that involve distance education, the distance education strategy cannot be ignored for accomplishment of learning outcomes. Effective distance education strategy assists students when separated from the educator and there are competing work and family commitments (Howsen and Lile, 2008).Warker and Webb (2001) report that what the educatee requires when separated from the educator by distance is adequate academic support, technological help and sound guidance. This could strongly suggest inadequacies in the distance education component of the block- release (part –time) programme offered by the Faculty of Education at Africa University.

It also emerged that teachers involved in the block- release (part – time) programme participants liked the lecture venues. Only 38 respondents out of 100 showed negative impressions on the situation on the lecture venues. This was a very surprising finding given the challenges the programme managers faced in securing conducive teaching – learning rooms. The crisis on teaching – learning venues was confirmed by the coordinator of the programme. In an in- depth  face to face interview with the writer, he revealed that lecture venues were a big challenge especially when the university was open to the conventional study programme while at the same time the block- release (part-time) programme was on. The majority of the programme participants were forced to use classrooms at Hartzell High School which is one kilometre away from the Africa University campus. In some cases, educatees had to move from Africa University campus to Hartzell or vice versa for lectures during teaching- learning session. This scenario could mean compromised teaching – learning effectiveness**.** Hellman (2003) says that block- release education programmes require reliable infrastructure that is well equipped so that an efficient educator - educatee communication is sustained.

Another finding of this study was that learners were kept informed of the courses they did. Eight four percent of the research subjects indicated that programme participants were provided information course objectives and a majority of 69 respondents showed positive impressions on organisation of their programme courses. This observation is in line with the perception of Cohen (2008) and Hunsaker (2004) that it is a sound organisational strategy to keep learners aware of course objectives. It keeps them focused and raises their level of concentration. Bell and Cowie (2001) and Shepard (2000) concur and stress that educators should clearly inform learners the chief objectives of courses they intend to cover as it gives them guidance on how to study and enables them to do self-assessment which enhances their understanding.

It emerged that course objectives were partly achieved. The results revealed that a significant number of research subjects 40 out of 100 registered negative impressions on achievement of course objectives in the programme. Said differently, meanwhile the programme managers worked hard and designed instructional programmes, sourced material resources and secured the teaching staff, there could have been some challenges in the coverage of course material which compromised the effectiveness of the programme. In support, Mpofu and Muller (2009) assert that during the study block, learners experienced intensive teaching – learning. It is not surprising that in some cases, intended course material was not fully covered or that some educators irregularly attended their lectures. Yolke (2005) points out that it is the duty of the coordinator to oversee and supervise the activities of the block release programme. The co-ordinator of the programme confirmed that it was not easy to adequately supervise the programme activities. As assistant Dean of the Faculty, his daily schedule was always a very busy one. Harrison and Reasons (2005) advises that it is not unusual for such education interventions to experience such challenges.

The results of the study also revealed that despite the organisational challenges, the courses were worthwhile. Seventy two respondents indicated that they would recommend to that other school teachers who desired to achieve professional development join the programme. Harrison and Reasons (2005) report that student evaluation has become a recognised effective and suitable way of finding out to what extent education initiatives are in the best interest of the learners. The stated finding hence strongly suggests some student satisfaction with the tuition that students received. This cannot be ignored as an indication of effectiveness of programme organisation. This impression was supported by the revelation that programme participants recommended the programme to their colleagues.

## Lecturers' Performance in the Block Release (Part-Time) Education Programme at Africa University

In addition, the results indicated that the educators' knowledge and ability to deliver course material was above average. A large majority of 88 research subjects indicated positive impressions on lecturers' content mastery and the same number of respondents revealed the educators' ability to deliver content in the programme courses. The programme coordinator revealed that the programme recruited only educators with a minimum of Masters' Degree qualifications to lecture in the programme. The Masters' Degree qualifications needed to be in the relevant study area offered. Lectureship experience in the study courses was also regarded as a necessary requirement. These findings agree with the observation of Hoy and Miskel (2001) who point out that educators need to sufficiently equip the learners with required knowledge and skills. There is a high possibility that teachers who have high job knowledge and skills have high confidence and ability to teach (Browner, Hearst Grangy, Hulle and Newman, 2001). Price (2004) concurs and says that effective educators first identify the educatees' learning styles and then adapt instruction that matches with the individuals' needs and preferences. This could be true of the contribution of the educators of the programme in question which means and attainment of intended learning outcomes. O'Lawrence (2007) and McGreal (2002) however dispute these findings. These scholars argue that the findings generalise for both the on-campus and distance education modes which should not be the case. Whenever distance education is employed, the educator should play the correct educational role that is that of tutor. Simpson (2000) indicates that in circumstances of distance learning, students get sufficient pedagogical support in the form of guidance so that they reach their own understanding of course material. This boosts their sense of confidence and self-esteem (University of South Florida, 2009). All this shows that it is likely that the block – release (part-time) programme offered at Africa University has some weaknesses in its practices since it has a distance education component.

Furthermore, it emerged that the lecturers motivated learners during the teaching-learning process. An overwhelming majority of respondents (97) indicated a high level of student motivation during coverage of courses in the programme. This is in agreement with the perception of Kyriakides (2003). This scholar highlights that application of strategies that match the student learning styles greatly motivates educatees. He adds that when educators create a relaxed, warm and welcoming environment for active learning, effective educator – educatee interaction is promoted. This is likely to promote effective teaching- learning. The finding however conflicts with the view of Cobbs (2001) who says there is need to acknowledge the difference in academic behavior between the conventional students and distance learners. The latter are intrinsically motivated. It is widely accepted that distance education learners are of mature age, self- disciplined, self-motivated, compulsive and emotionally stable and can manage their studies (Coheen, 2008). In line with these views, one could be correct to say the students of the block release (part-time) programme at Africa University were likely to benefit from both lecturer motivation efforts and their personal attributes which enhances achievement of learning outcomes. Their characteristics fit that described.

With a response 70 respondents registering positive impressions on effectiveness of lecturers teaching methods, the educators' strategies of content delivery may be said to have been effective. This is in line with the observation of Kemp (2007) who indicates that exposing the learner to a variety of teaching methods enables him or her to easily comprehend course material which enhances attainment of learning outcomes. The finding here is however discrepant with the educator practice recommended for distance education circumstances. St. Philip's College (2005) says in such circumstances the student requires tutorship. The educator acts as to facilitator, instructor, coach or mentor. Application of this strategy during the distance education component was likely to raise the level of programme effectiveness. It was also evident from the results that the lecturers related the course material to other fields or real life and encouraged student participation. This is consistent to the findings of Duminy, Steyn, Dreyer and Dobie (1998). Such methods of material delivery boosts student understanding of course material. It is one way educators can apply to cater for individuals' learning styles. The students of the block release (part-time) programme were likely to benefit during the on-campus teaching – learning sessions. The distance education strategy guides the learner in independent study which develops him or her into an effective thinker.

The research results also showed that programme educators conducted, planned, and organised classes in an appropriate way. This was confirmed by a large majority response rate of 84 obtained in the study on this aspect of lectures' performance. This finding is consistent with the views of Murphy, Warker and Webb (2001) who recognise a lecturer role as one of research and structuring of content then delivering it learners. It is pertinent to make competent decisions in planning and preparation of the education tasks. Donaldson (2001) actually stresses that in lectureship the educator has to show ability to prioritise, set goals and objectives and efficiently organise work activities to make students learn the course content. The indicated finding was also consistent with the observations of Fung and Carr (2000) and McGreal (2002) who considered planning and organisation as paramount for tutorial sessions. All this strongly suggest effective instructional programmes in the education initiative in question.

In addition, it was established that the lecturers showed a positive attitude towards students. This was confirmed by a large majority response rate of 85 obtained in the study on this aspect of lecturers' performance. This finding is however discrepant with the views of Dobbs(2005) when he remarks that programme effectiveness is sometimes hampered by behaviour of some educators who negatively view the quality of programme courses, instruction and products. This was not the case with the programme under focus. However 43 respondents registered negative impressions on accessibility of lecturers outside the classroom. This could mean that in the block release (part-time) programme offered at Africa University limited access of educators by learners outside the class was a cause for concern. It is consistent with the observation of Wills (2001) who says that some educators limit their service in the education programmes if insufficiently rewarded for their service and under supported by the existing infrastructure. This could be true of the block- release (part-time) programme offered at Africa University. The programme co-ordinator confirmed delayed payment of lecturers' allowances as discouraging and limited infrastructure as disturbing. This latter finding could account for dislike among some learners to be taught by the same lecturers. One other finding was that they were effective teachers despite latter observation. This could suggest that programme management

recruited skilled and experienced educators which was instrumental in effective teaching – learning activities. This finding is consistent with the view of the programme coordinator who remarked that the programme management only recruited suitably qualified and experienced staff. It could be an indication of student satisfaction on their ability to deliver.

Out of 100 respondents, 83 respondents registered positive impressions on the lecturers' level of fairness in grading students' work. This was in line with the findings of Hans (2001) and Nott (2000).These scholars observed that a fair marker consistently refers to a prepared set of criteria and judges each script on its own merit. The educator has to be accurate and thorough and allocate marks accordingly (Huggins, Hartley and Skelton, 2001; Race, 2001). This is likely to be true of the lecturers' marking in the block-release (part-time) programme at Africa University which raises the likelihood of teaching-learning effectiveness and student satisfaction.

The study results indicated that the amount of work studied was adequate. This is consistent with the observation of Aggarwal and Bento (2000) and University of South Florida (2009). The two sources indicate that effectiveness in coverage of subject material and delivery largely depends on planning of one's work as an educator. This statement cannot be disputed as the educator considers amount of material, needed resources and available time in his or her scheme. This could be the reason for coverage of high amount of work.  The intended work was covered. Mpofu and Muller (2009) say that the Block -Release programme exposes the learner to intensive coverage of work which makes the finding under consideration an obvious result. It should however be noted that the latter issue is likely to be the cause for student failure to cope with the level of difficulty of the material which has been another finding of the research. The revelation that students made  coverage of some study material and worked on assignments could mean that the off campus study period was a very busy one which enhanced attainment of learning outcomes.

## Quality and Quantity of Learning Materials in the Block Release (Part-Time) Education Programme at Africa University

Seventy-four respondents indicated positive impressions on availability of basic material for the programme courses. This could mean that students were exposed to sufficient basic reading material was available for the courses done. Eight nine respondents showed that modules were used in the courses that students did. This was a surprising result. Aluko (2009) says a module is a document written by an expert or experts on themes of a particular course following the course objectives. It acts as a guide to students in their study, educators in their tutorials and examiners in designing examination questions. They are high quality study documents which are updated periodically to ensure that the content is in line with contemporary ideas (Kangai and Bukalinga, 2011). Use of printed material as basic material is a characteristic of distance education (Aluko, 2009).

Furthermore, the findings revealed that 74 respondents registered positive impressions on the quality of library service offered to students in the programme. This could mean enhancement of teaching - learning process. This finding agrees with the observation of Smith (2000) who indicates that the chief resource of information in the block release (part-time) is the library. The programme participants use the library for academic research on assigned work and independent study (Buchanan, 2000; Linden, 2000). The learners are forced to do extensive library research to find literature that is used to respond to the assignment topic. In the process, they develop a variety of skills that include research skills, analytic skills, communication skills, critical awareness, independent judgment and problem solving skills(Taylor,2000). It is also the library that acted as source of supplementary information. However, this finding is discrepant to observation of University of Louisville (2000). It says that after the on-campus intensive teaching - learning activity, students disperse to their respective work places or home areas. They may find it difficult to access the library material in the absence of the Learning Library Services (DLLS). This compromises programme effectiveness.

It was also revealed that 86 research subjects showed that students had access to computers and the Internet. This implies enhancement of effectiveness of the block release programme.  Dillon, Gunawardena and Parker (1992) highlight that the most serious challenge facing libraries was that whilst institutions have the desire to keep in pace with the new technology, there was lack of the capacity to adjust. The poor library technology and resources impede educational effectiveness. However, this has not been the case with learners in the education initiative in question. There is the possibility that students easily accessed information during the on-campus and off-campus

components of the programme which promoted achievement of learning out comes. There may be a few individuals who were unable to use the ICT based tools despite having done the computer based course (HIT-100).

The study results also showed that the times of meeting lecturers were suitable. This is consistent with the findings of Simpson (2000) that time- tabling and scheduling of learners' sessions are necessary to regulate and monitor the learning. The finding could be a pointer at orderly effective execution of the block- release (part-time) programme. The finding is however discrepant with the distance education component of the programme in which learners do independent study.

In terms of registration arrangements, it was however revealed that a significant number of research subjects (38) were not satisfied with the registration arrangements of their programme. This could mean that programme participants experienced challenges to get registered for the courses at the beginning of each semester. This was indeed a disturbing finding. An individual is regarded a bona fide student after paying the required fees and after completing and signing the registration form after which he or she can access the library and other facilities. For achievement of learning outcomes, a student does not require academic support and counseling alone. Non- instructional support such as registration is also particularly important (Simpson, 2000; Tait, 2003).

**Student Assessments in the Block Release (Part-Time) Education Programme at Africa University**

The study established that the educators applied a variety of instruments to assess the learners' performance. Sixty-one of the respondents indicated that lecturers used different assessment forms. The programme coordinator confirmed an interview that there were assessment forms common to all courses and others that applied to particular courses. This finding is in line with the observation of Brown (2001) that application of a variety of assessment instruments makes the assessment process more purposeful. According to Knight (2000) in all cases, the student has to engage memory, recall, comprehension and higher order cognitive skills. Cohen (2008) and Hunsaker (2004) regard assessment as very useful teaching – learning process that provides feedback to the students on their learning.   In the block release (part-time) programme under focus, assessment instruments used included assignments, in class tests, term papers, viva, practicum and examinations. The likelihood of a comprehensive measurement of learners' performance and focused teaching- learning is high. It promotes programme effectiveness.

It is however evident that a few respondents in this sample showed reservations on the effectiveness of assessment forms employed. This is not a surprising observation at all. Cohen (2008) comments that in some cases educators implement assessment efforts without any clear vision. Under such circumstances learners wonder what learning benefits they derive from the exercise (Bell and Cowie, 2001). There could be some lecturers in the block- release (part-time) programme who make assessment efforts perfunctorily which compromises achievement of learning outcomes.

The study showed that 82 respondents indicated that the programme participants received guidance on how to present responses and provide answers in assessments. Such skills are of great importance to the student because questions force the learners to do extensive research in response to the given topic (Buchanan, 2000; Linden, 2000). Taylor (2000) highlights that guidance enables the learner to develop a variety of skills such as analytic skills, communication skills, critical awareness, independent judgment and problem solving skills. It cannot be denied that if given appropriate guidance on how to interpret a given question, research for the expected information and lay out the material, one has to think and make meaning out of available material. The point here is that with various pieces of advice and direction on how to present and respond to questions from educators, it is likely that learners attained some skills which meant achievement of learning out comes.

The study also revealed that 86 respondents showed that the instruments used in assessment of learners' performance were challenging.  This gives the impression that lecturers set over - demanding tasks.  Assessment is meant to enhance educational effectiveness and hence the assessment instrument design requires careful thought and skill (Bridges, Cooper, Evanson, Haines, Jenkins, Scurry, Woolf and York, 2002). Maclellen (2001) adds that the demands of a good assignment topic or test should be derived from concepts of the course and cover a fairly broad area of subject content.   In the programme under consideration, the possibility that students were overwhelmed by the demands of assigned work is quite high.

This finding however conflicts with the observation of scholars like Howsen and Lile (2008); Kemp (2002) and many other proponents of distance education. They show confidence and conviction that students of distance education have age maturity, a sense of purpose, self- motivation, self- discipline and self-management which rules out the likelihood of them being overwhelmed by demands of assessment forms. The students in the block-release (part time) programme at Africa University bore such attributes.. This gives this issue reasonable ground to be considered for future research

Apart from findings raised so far, it was evident from the results that the quality of the lecturers' marking was of above moderate rating. Seventy-two study participants indicated this trend. This could suggest comprehensive assessment of student performance in the block - release (part-time) programme. Huggins, Hartley and Skelton (2001) say the marker has to verify information raised by the learner. He or she is expected to be thorough and prompt (Gibb and Simpson, 2002). There is also need to maintain a high degree of objectivity (Race, 2001). In essays, one should consider learners' sound divergent views.

With a response rate of 81, it was evident that the lecturers' comments on marked work were encouraging. This is in consistence with the observations of Koul (2000) who writes that comments are a very useful method of educator - learner communication. Effective lecturers make their comments meaningful and constructive which makes assignments effective tools of student learning. The finding strongly suggests that learners in the programme have benefited in their studies through assessment feedback provided by lecturers which enhances attainment of learning outcomes.

Sixty-nine programme participants in this sample also indicated an above moderate rate of preparation for final semester examination. This is consistent to the findings of Maclellen (2001) and Yorke (2001). These authorities insist that there is need for sufficient preparation for examinations which are given as a test of students' capacity and knowledge. The preparation may be lecturer assisted or a product of students' effort. In the latter case, learners meet in groups and brainstorm on possible exam questions. This is likely to be true in the present sample which would mean a high level of effectiveness in teaching – learning. In actual fact, exam preparations should begin with student course work. According to Cook (2001) it has been observed that a learner's final mark is closely related with the number of assignments he or she has done. In the programme under focus, this observation needs to be followed up in future research.

**Self-Perceived Professional Development among Programme Participants**

It emerged that 82 respondents in this sample improved in their content mastery, 93 on ability to deliver and 70 on confidence during execution of professional duty at their work place. This is consistent with the observation of Eraut (2000) who remarks that manpower development improves teachers' competencies in handling didactic processes. In in-depth face to face interviews with school administrators, most school Heads expressed satisfaction at the improved performance of their teachers engaged in the Block Release (Part Time) programme offered at Africa University. Hoy and Miskel (2001) stress that teachers need to sufficiently equip the learners with required knowledge and skills.

It has been observed that school authorities associate the level of teacher performance with effectiveness of programmes that trained them. The low pass rate has been the main challenge in Zimbabwean education and government considers teacher professional development as the appropriate remedy to the situation. The block release (part-time) programme has started to upgrade the qualification of teachers in schools. There is a strong indication that the products' acquired capabilities were translated into effective pupil teaching-learning which acts as tangible evidence of programme effectiveness.

Sibanda cited in The Teachers' Voice in Zimbabwe (2006) however echoes a different view. This authority asserts that in schools, individuals' improved effectiveness and efficiency in performance of duty largely depends on school managers' use of motivators. This could be true since motivation is as an urge that initiates and directs behavior within an individual and today schools offer financial incentives. The can be an exciting block – release (part-time) programme was effectively in organised.

## CONCLUSIONS

It has been established that the block- release (part- time) education programme offered at Africa University was a viable education initiative. To a large extent it is effectively organised which has enhanced attainment of learning goals. Some factors however reduced the vibrancy of the programme. Learners have not received adequate support during the distance education component of the programme.

The students' level of satisfaction with lecturers' performance in the programme has been reasonably high but disturbed by limited accessibility of the educators outside class during the on – campus conventional classes. The educators lack tutorship skills instrumental in guiding learners when separated from the educators during the distance education component of the programme.

The quality and quantity of learning materials used in the block- release (part- time) education programme were largely relevant and adequate for conventional education. Materials that boost students' learning when off- campus are limited. It was also clear that the system of assessment of learners' performance used by lecturers in the block- release (part- time) education programme was largely comprehensive. The system was however weakened by some educators who perfunctorily applied the assessment instruments due to little commitment to performance of duty.

The programme participants demonstrated improved competencies in their schools as a result their engagement in the block- release (part- time) education programme offered at Africa University. In other words, the programme is largely effective in promoting teacher professional development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It was indicated at the beginning of the study that the results would be important to a number of stakeholders that include Members of Parliament, Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Faculties of Education at Universities, Block- Release (Part- Time) education Coordinators, Block-Release (Part-Time) programme educators and practising teachers in schools.

Members for of Parliament can use them to generate convincing views in parliamentary debates on accessibility of quality university education. In other words, the results of this project could serve as an informed basis on which government policy on the block- release (part- time) education can be based.

The block-release (part-time) education falls under the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education and the main concern of this ministry has been the establishment of viable programmes. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development through the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) can now cascade into universities streamlined guidelines on implementation of block- release (part-time) education programmes.

Faculties of Education at Universities may use the results of this study to put in place relevant block-release (part-time) programmes. They gain knowledge on how to more effectively implement such programmes so that learning outcomes are achieved.

Programme co-ordinators may use the results to improve efficiency in managing similar programmes at their institutions. They should more closely monitor and supervise the performance of programme staff in the various courses of the programme to ensure a higher level of effectiveness in performance or duty.

They also need to collaborate with the Dean of the Faculty of Education and organise seminars to train staff on how to handle the teaching – learning programme in the block release (part- time) programme. The educators should acquire some skills in tutorship. The co-odinators also need to ensure that learner receive adequate support in terms of information, technological help, guidance and counseling, registration and library. It is important for them to ensure that the relevant infrastructure is available to sustain student learning and interaction in distance learning circumstances. Learners should be provided with sufficient appropriate lecture venues and accommodation during the study block residential period.

Educators in the block- release (part - time) education programme should show more dedication to their professional duties and adopt a positive attitude towards learners. They should acquire some tutorship skills. Learners and individuals intending to join the programme should be well informed on programmes they join and show preparedness to work hard. They need to acquire skills in the use of the electronic technology of communication.

Fellow researchers can further research on what influences performance of block-release (part-time) students more, considering external and intrinsic factors. Further research can also be carried out to determine the relationship between the number of assignments and tests done in formal assessment and the final performance by students.

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