

Comparative analysis of distance and conventional education: Focus on Access to Education at the University of Zambia

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Abstract

Student Record System (SRS) in the University of Zambia remains an untapped source of rich data for understanding the University's contribution to human resource development. Using a recently rediscovered methodology, unobtrusive method, this paper attempted to demonstrate the qualitative use of data for gaining insights into the University's experience. The study attempted to answer the question: "to what extent does the distance learning mode contribute to human resource development in comparison to the regular study mode at the University of Zambia?" To answer this question we examined an SRS database and traced the six year record, from 2006 to 2011, using a non reactive research approach at the University of Zambia. Emerging from this study is a rapid growing DE student population trend. The level of access to university education shows that there were more students under the DE than the conventional study modes. The findings of this study could serve as a catalyst in the decision making process regarding resource allocation, responsive learner support system designing and relevant policy formulation and implementation in favour of DE students.

Keywords: distance education; conventional education; unobtrusive; University of Zambia; student record system

Introduction

This study compared distance education and conventional education levels of access to education at the University of Zambia. The purpose was to investigate and to compare the impact of distance and conventional education in terms of access.

The University of Zambia (UNZA) established its distance education Unit in 1966, the year of its inception (Siaciwena and Lubinda, 2008). Since then, distance education has played its historical role of contributing to the development of human resources and has helped to address the issues of inequalities in higher education provision in Zambia. Key areas of human resource development include: enhancement of teacher quality in the school system; training of information managers and librarians; training of personnel in social sciences; upgrading of teacher trainers and education administrators; training of teachers for children with special education needs; training of adult educators and community development workers. Most recently, the University has added new fields of study via the distance learning mode such as: training of nursing staff; training of laboratory diagnostics experts; heard health managers; sports administrators and environmental educators.

Much as there has been noticeable increase in the number of programmes offered through the distance learning mode, there has been no attempt to compare levels of access to education at the University of Zambia in relation to the mode of study, that is distance and conventional. Potentially, in the absence of such vital information, the decision making process regarding resource allocation, responsive system designing, relevant policy formulation, become a night mare. This is the gap that the study sought to bridge. It was hoped that through this study, the University could reposition itself as a leader not only in the country but also in the sub-region in the provision of distance education.

Context of the study

One of the recommendations of the Lockwood Commission, whose report in 1963 led to the establishment of the University of Zambia, was that degree programmes should be available by distance study to suitably qualified candidates who might not be in a position to attend the University on full-time basis. The University set about implementing this recommendation at once and hence from the outset it has offered some degree programmes by distance teaching (Siaciwena, 1988).

Chifwepa (2006), observes that an autonomous Department of Correspondence Studies was established in 1966 to coordinate distance learning courses, which were launched in March, 1967 offered by various Schools. In 1975 the Department of Correspondence Studies became part of the Centre for Continuing Education (C.C.E.), which was established by merging into one body the Department of Extra-Mural Studies (established in 1966), the Department of Correspondence Studies (established in 1966) and the Institute of Education (established in 1967). In 1994 the Centre for Continuing Education was dissolved and the Directorate of Distance Education was created. Following the approval of the expansion project by the University of Zambia Human Resource and Infrastructure Committee, the Directorate was later transformed into the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) in July, 2009.

Under the old structure, the organization, administration and coordination of distance learning courses is the responsibility of the Institute of Distance Education, but all tuition is

given by members of academic staff of the various Schools of study. Members of staff of the Schools offering courses by distance teaching prepare all study materials and assignments in accordance with approved course outlines, (Siaciwena, 2007). This is, however, likely to change in the next few years because, following the attainment of a semi-autonomous status, the IDE has been allowed to recruit its own academic and support staff.

Methodology

In order to compare levels of access to education at the University of Zambia in relation to the distance and conventional modes of study, we adopted an unobtrusive method with a focus on Student Record System. According to Rathje (1979) and Babbie (1989), an unobtrusive approach studies the actual rather than reported behaviour. This approach could be repeated and it is non-disruptive and non-reactive, easily accessible, inexpensive and a good source of longitudinal data.

In addition, Unobtrusive research methods offer a strong critique of positivism, the concept that truths can be determined about the social world by scientific measurement. They instead belong to the epistemological theory of interpretivism which is that the social sciences are fundamentally different from natural sciences; therefore, requiring researchers to reject empiricism and grasp subjective meaning of social action (Bryman, 2004). In terms of ontological considerations, unobtrusive methods fit into the constructionism theory whereby social phenomena and their meanings are continually accomplished and revised by social actors (Bryman, 2004).

The unobtrusive approach is well suited for this particular study as it relied on archival data sources from the Student Record System, which could be extrapolated into longitudinal data in a non-reactive and non-disruptive environment. This is consistent with the founder of the unobtrusive method, Webb et al. (1966) who argue that unobtrusive are presumed to avoid the problems caused by the researcher's presence. In addition, unobtrusive methods, because they do not disrupt others, are easily repeatable. This enabled re-checking of findings and allowed questions of reliability and validity to be re-examined by others.

In carrying out this study, we used a student record system to build trend analysis comparing students' level of access to education in distance learning and conventional learning modes over a period of 6 years in 6 purposively selected programmes, which are available to both the conventional and the distance education students. The elicited information was cross checked by inside informants to avoid the usual emic/etic problems. This means that interpretation of physical traces or observations may be from the point of view of the stranger, or outsider (etic) and, therefore, may fail to grasp important in-group meanings (emic).

Research Findings

Emerging from this study are the following findings as represented by a series of graphs below. Each graph is later discussed in detail to appreciate the significance of distance learning study mode's contribution in the development of human resource when compared to the conventional study mode within the University of Zambia.

Figure 1: Bachelor of Library and Information Studies

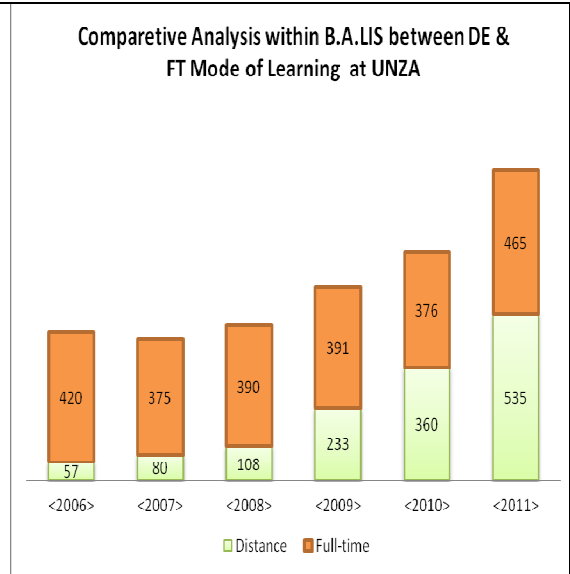
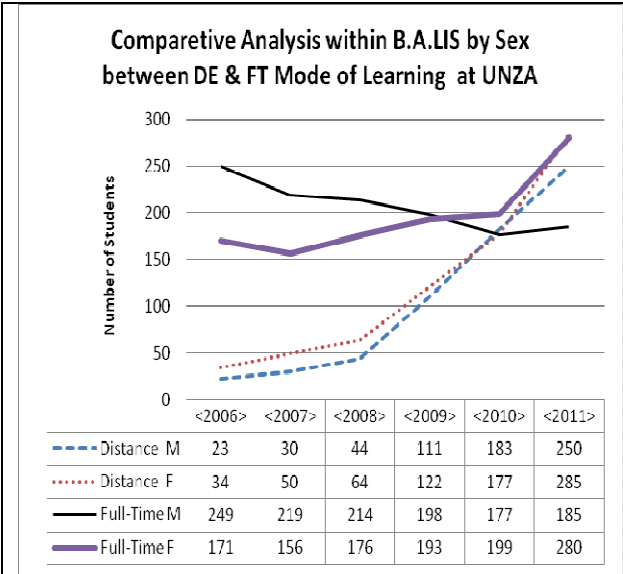


Figure 1 above shows an upswing increase among distance learning students compared to the conventional students over time. DE Female students have consistently outstripped their male counterparts under the distance learning mode and higher than their female counterparts under the conventional study mode.

DE student population has steadily risen from being the minority to being the majority by 13% when compared to their conventional students counterparts in the 2011 academic year.

Source: (UNZA, 2012)

Figure 2: Bachelor of Arts (NQS)

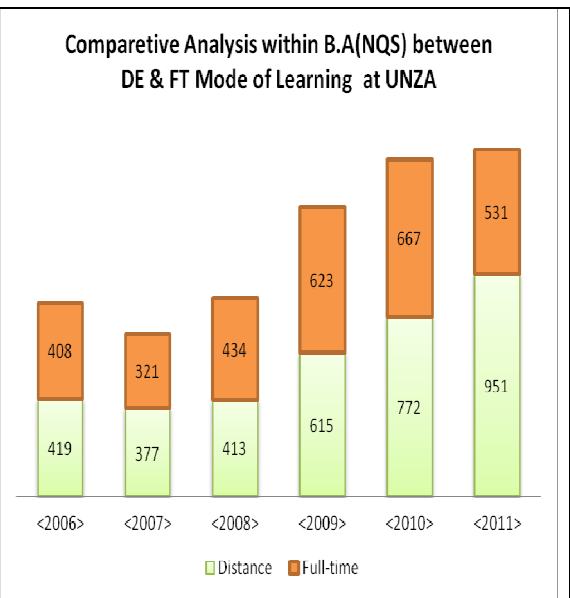
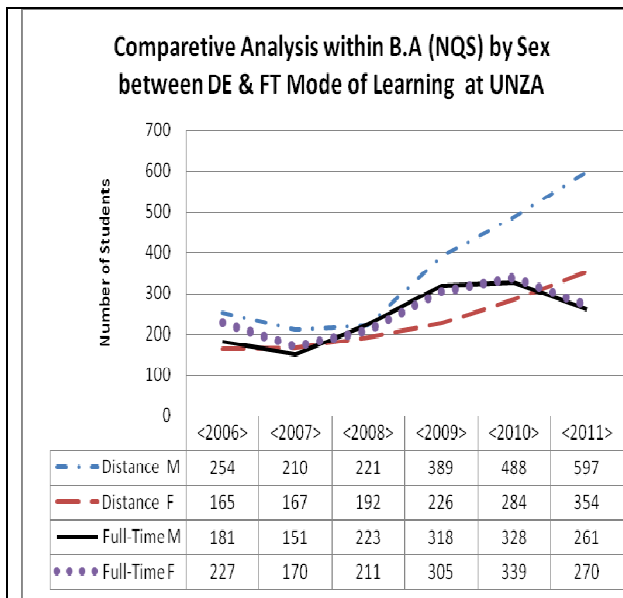
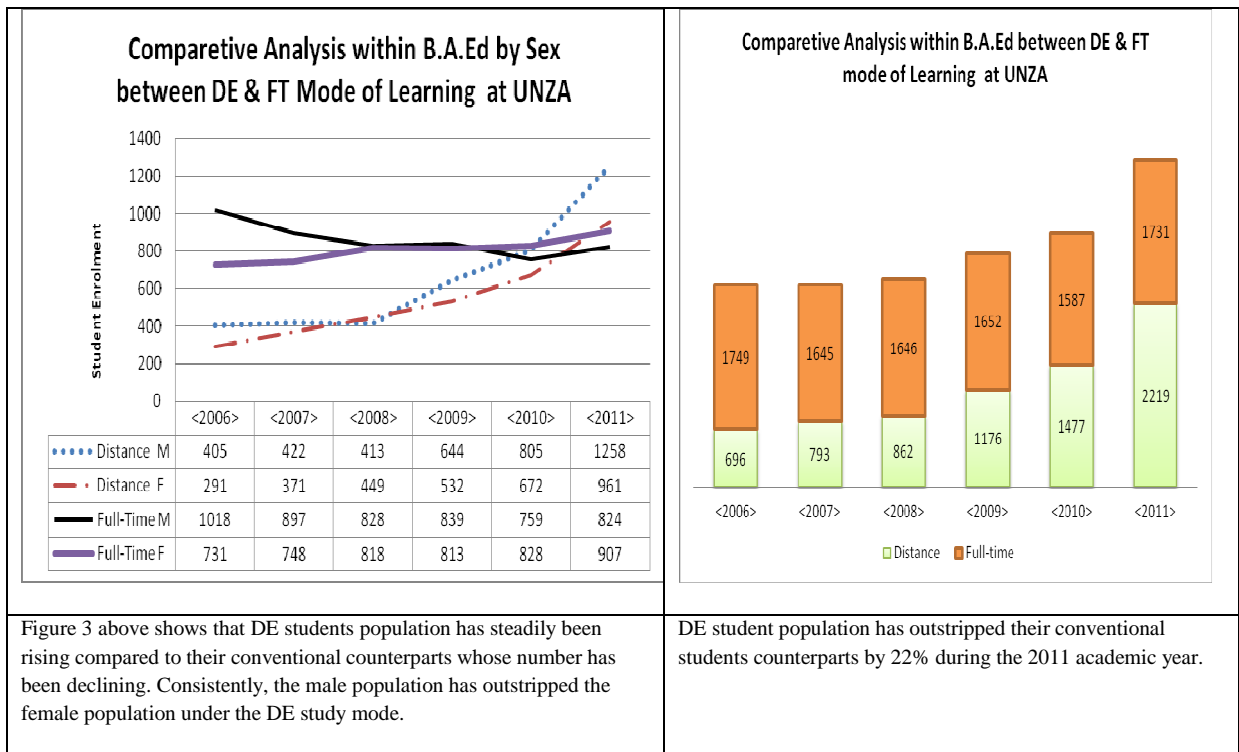


Figure 2 above shows a rising student population under the DE study mode compared to the conventional study mode which is declining.

DE student population outstripped their conventional students counterparts by 44% during the 2011 academic year.

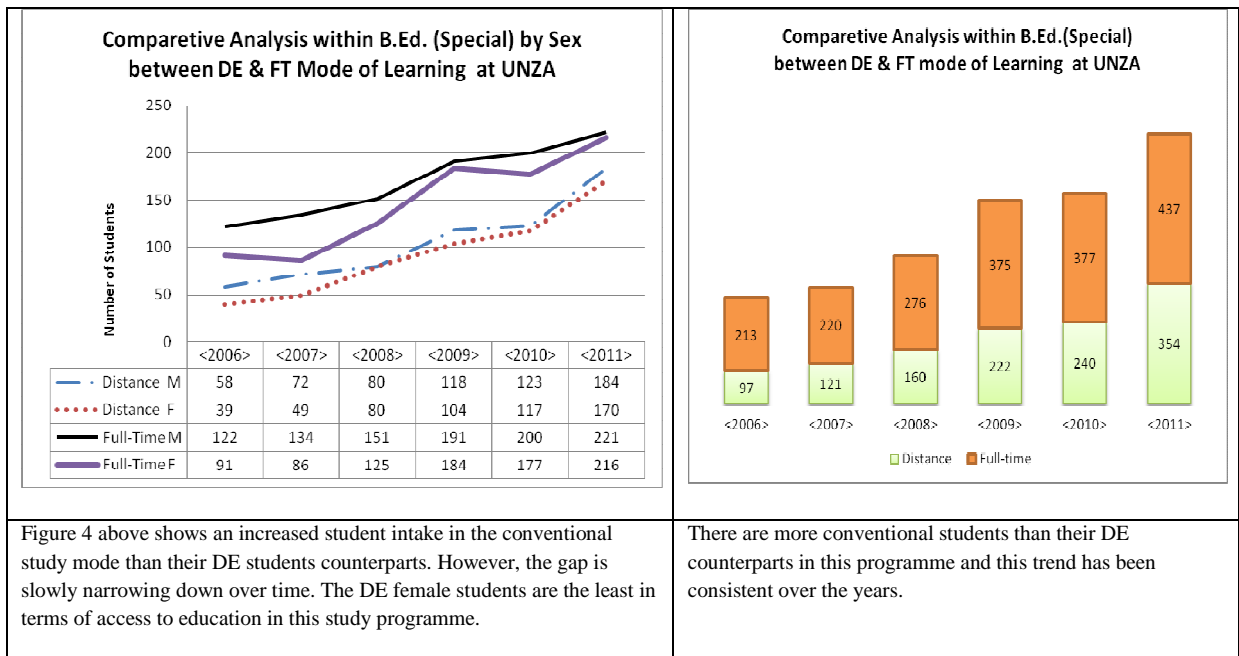
Source: (UNZA, 2012)

Figure 3: Bachelor of Arts with Education



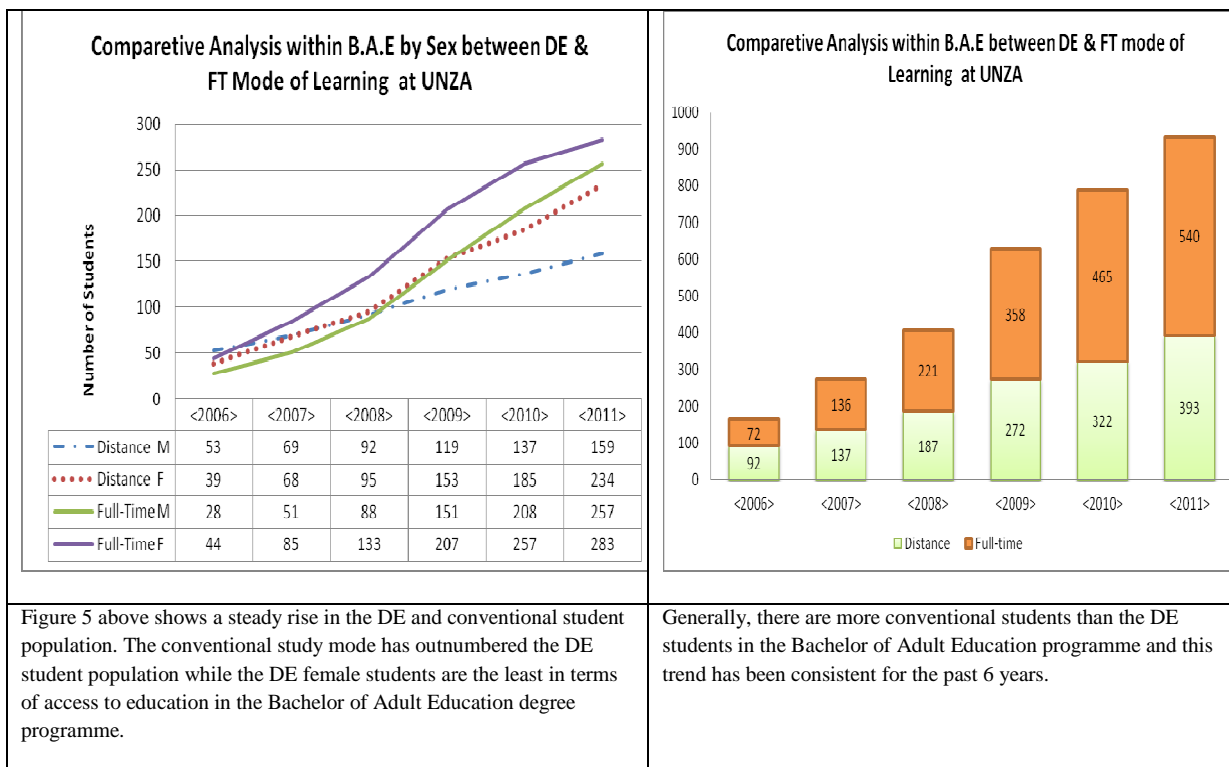
Source: (UNZA, 2012)

Figure 4: Bachelor of Education (Special Education)



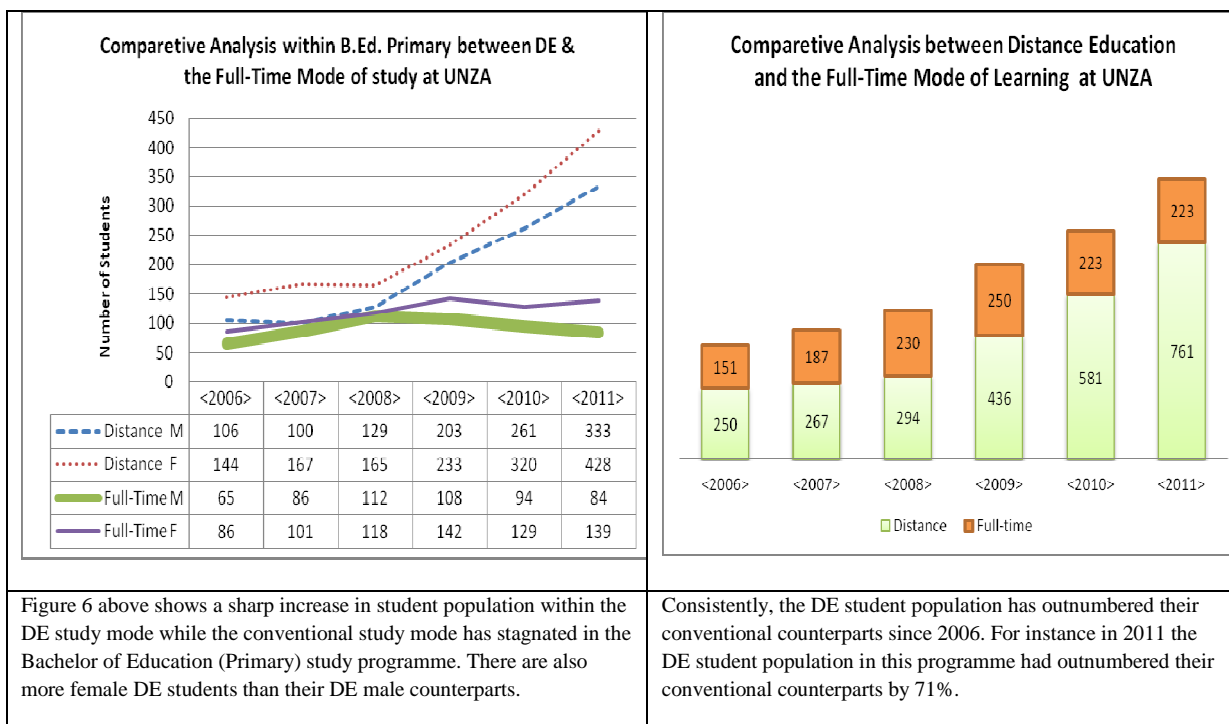
Source: (UNZA, 2012)

Figure 5: Bachelor of Adult Education



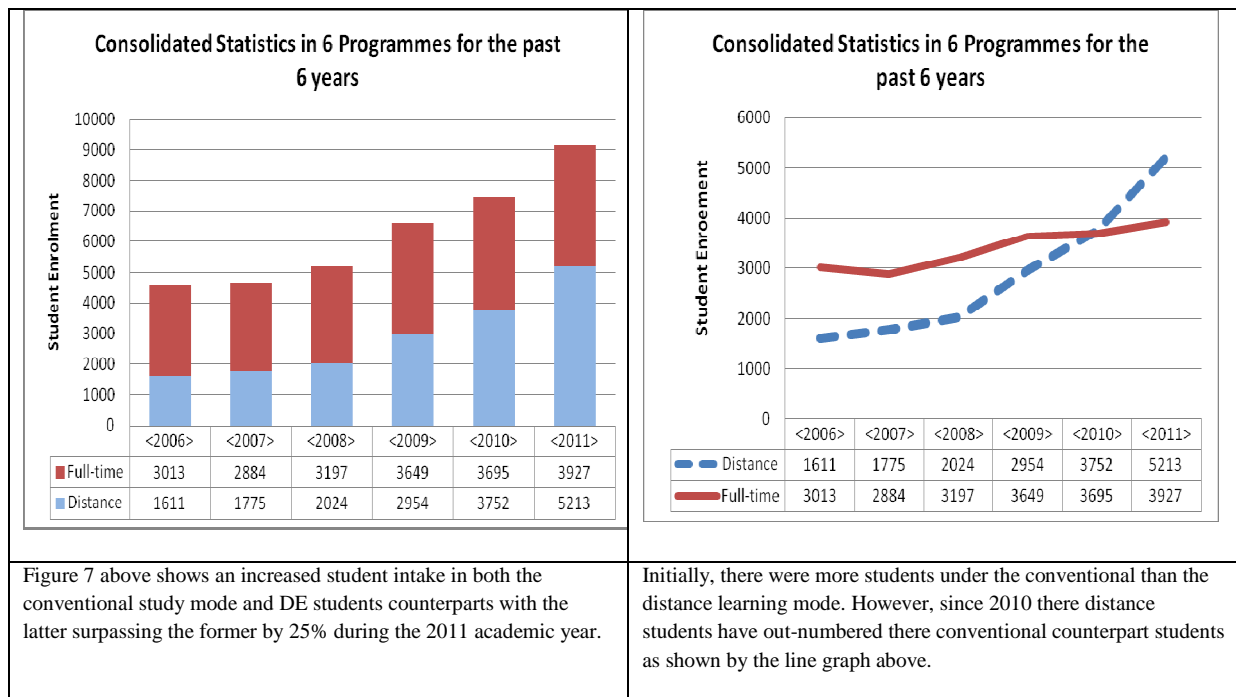
Source: (UNZA, 2012)

Figure 6: Comparative analysis of DE and conventional study modes by sex



Source: (UNZA, 2012)

Figure 7: Consolidated Statistics in 6 Programmes for the past 6 year



Discussion

Generally, there has been a steady rise in student population among the DE students compared to the conventional study mode since 2006. This could represent the high demand for University education in Zambia. The currently high demand for tertiary education is consistent with the Sixth National Development Plan which advocates expansion in access for tertiary education (GRZ, 2011).

Reflecting on the level of access to education in the Bachelor of Arts with Library and Information Studies at first and second year levels, there has been an upswing increase among distance learning students compared to the conventional students over time. As was indicated in figure 1 above, the DE female students have consistently outnumbered their male counterparts under the distance learning mode and their number is higher than their female counterparts under the conventional study mode. Generally, there has been a high rise among students accessing university education under the distance learning than under the conventional learning mode as shown by the narrowing of the gap between the two modes of studies in figure 1.

In the Bachelor of Arts programme, there is steady increase in the number of distance students compared to the conventional students as reflected in figure 2 above. For instance in the 2011 academic year, the DE student population outnumbered their conventional counterparts by 44% in the Bachelor of Arts (NQS) at first and second year levels.

The School of Education trend is not different to that of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences which manages the Bachelor of Arts programme represented by figure 2 above. In figure 3 above, students pursuing Bachelor of Arts with Education show a steady increase among the DE students population than their conventional counterparts whose number had been declining. Consistently, the male population had outnumbered the female population under the DE study mode. For instance, DE student population had outnumbered their conventional counterparts by 22% during the 2011 academic year.

In the Bachelor of Education (Special Education), as indicated by figure 4 above, there was an increased student intake in the conventional study mode than their DE counterparts. The DE female students are the least in terms of access to education. There are more conventional students than their DE counterparts and this trend has been consistent over the years. However, the gap is slowly narrowing down over time.

The Bachelor of Adult Education shows a similar trend to the one depicted in the Bachelor of Education (Special). As can be seen in figure 5 above, there was a steady rise in the DE and conventional student population. The conventional study mode has outnumbered the DE student population while the DE female students are the least in terms of access to education. Generally, there are more conventional students than the DE students in the Bachelor of Adult Education programme and this trend has been consistent for the past 6 years.

In the Bachelor of Education (Primary) as represented by figure 6 above, there was a sharp increase in student population within the DE study mode while the conventional study mode had stagnated. In addition, there were more female DE students than their DE male counterparts. Consistently, the DE student population has outstripped their conventional counterparts since 2006. For instance in 2011 the DE student population had outnumbered their conventional students counterparts by 71%.

Overall, the emerging picture in the level of access to university education shows that there more students under the DE than the conventional study modes. Whereas in the initial stages, there were more students under the conventional than the distance learning mode, there trend had changed in favour of the DE study mode. For instance, since 2010, the distance students have out-numbered there conventional counterpart as shown by the line graph in figure 7 above.

Conclusions

Considering that the Institute of Distance Education has been mandated to offer their programmes exclusively by the distance learning mode starting with programmes where it has study modules at third and fourth year levels, it is expected that the student population will keep on rising. As for conventional students, considering the lack of physical expansion in infrastructure and staff, the student population at best may remain unchanged and at worst decline.

Recommendations

Considering the outcomes of this study, we, therefore, wish to recommend the following:

- i) With the structural challenges inherent in dual mode institutions, such as dealing with students who are enrolled in other units in the University, delays in handling students' requests, etc. This means that enrolment of students should be done by the IDE. Besides admitting students directly, the IDE would be providing support services such as academic, financial and psycho-social counselling.
- ii) The increase in student population under the distance learning mode should be sustained by ensuring that funds collected from students are more easily accessible by IDE for its operations. This would enable the IDE to generate more funds for the operations of the Institute and continue assisting Central Administration significantly. Therefore, with the introduction of on-line registration for distance education students, IDE should be empowered to continue collecting the student fees on behalf of the University to enhance the approval process of funds needed by the Institute.
- iii) In addition, the population increase under the DE necessitates the creation of a separate IDE calendar from the conventional study mode. This would bring stability in the calendar for distance education thereby encouraging students to study via distance learning mode.
- iv) Further, there is need to improve incentives for staff managing the DE programme in order to motivate them to produce quality work in a timely manner.
- v) Encourage the use of the SRS as a research tool rather than storage facility only.
- vi) Furthermore, speedup the recruitment process of new staff identified in the new establishment to effectively manage the growing student population.

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