

**Role of adult education, challenges and prospects**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the role of adult educators in national development, challenges and prospects. It starts by providing a brief historical background of adult education at the University of Zambia which is the main focus of this article. It then makes an attempt at defining some concepts relevant to this discussion. The roles of adult education which include economic, social development, political and national integration are described. The main challenges of adult education namely inadequate staffing, lack of appropriate teaching materials and limited areas of specialized fields of study at the University of Zambia under the current programme offerings are presented. The paper concludes by highlighting some major prospects of adult education at the institution.*

**Introduction**

The University of Zambia's motto is Service and Excellence. Excellence is achieved through "teaching and research" which Cabal (1991b, 21) refers to as the "intellectual functions" of the university. These functions are related to the educational mission consisting of the "cultivation of the mind" and the "transmission of basic ideas and concepts". In addition, service is the "social function" or social role of the university that provides the link between the intellectual and educational role of universities on the one hand and the development of society on the other. However, carrying out these functions, no matter how they are expressed or put into practice, ought to be interactive within the university and with society (Ostar, 1990).

It is within the foregoing context of the functions of a university vis-à-vis national development that the paper attempts to discuss the University of Zambia's Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies' role in national development. The thesis of the paper, therefore, is that adult education at the University of Zambia has been and continues to play an important role in national development. In the process of executing this role, however, the Department encounters a number of challenges.

The paper starts with a brief historical background of adult education at the University of Zambia. This is followed by the definition of the conceptual framework within which the discussion takes place and a brief description of the organization of adult education programmes. The role of adult education in national development forms the third section of the paper while the fourth section discusses the challenges of adult education. The final section examines the prospects of adult education in national development in light of the challenges.

The University of Zambia was born in 1966 with the Department of Extra Mural Studies created which later became the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies (DAEES). It started in 1966 as two departments namely the Department of Extra-Mural Studies (DEMS) and the Department of Correspondence Studies. The Department of Extra Mural Studies was mandated to run adult education programmes.

The two main principles for the Department's policies and work were to maintain the University links with the community and to make a contribution to the socio-economic advancement of the nation by diffusing University knowledge and ways of thought throughout the nation. According to Alexander (1971), the major aim of the Department was to contribute to nation-building, unity and economic development through programmes designed to inform and stimulate an analysis of existing problems in Zambia and the cultural, political, economic and social factors at work.

In order to fulfil the mission and translate the two main principles into action, the Department, in addition to the adult education programmes at the main University campus, established provincial offices manned by Resident Lecturers. In view of the importance attached to civic and liberal education and the necessity for developing capacities to come to terms with, and participate in the processes of change and development, the emphasis was on the social sciences, and especially on political science and economics (Alexander, 1971). These courses were tailored to meet local needs and interests – within the policy that all subjects offered would be appropriate for the University to teach as well as related in some way to national development goals.

**Conceptual and definitional issues**

In the context of this paper, adult education refers to educational activities offered by the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies of the University of Zambia at the main campus and provincial centres, including a few selected district centres.

The concept of development is complex as it tends to have several connotations. However, in this paper, development refers to a process of economic, social, political and cultural change brought about to a society through the collective efforts of men and women. The result of these efforts is an improvement in people's lives in a sustainable manner. National development, therefore, is as a result of the various processes of change. These changes are reflected at both individual and national level.

The Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies is made up of two 'units' namely Adult Education and Extension Studies. The Adult Education Unit is based at the main university campus, in Lusaka. Currently, this Unit has four credit programmes. These are certificate, diploma, degree and masters in adult education. Credit programmes target two broad categories of people. The first category is that of de facto adult educators or people who are involved in the education of adults as trainers, facilitators or administrators without skills in adult education. The second category is non-adult educators who are interested in developing a career in adult education.

On the other hand, the Extension Studies Unit has offices at all the nine provincial centres of the country. The provincial offices run two non-credit programmes at certificate and diploma level. Programmes at the provincial centres and in some cases district centres are designed to suit the needs of individual regions; they are need driven. Consequently, the content, structure and objectives tend to differ from one programme to the other. These programmes target any adult who wishes to update or acquire knowledge and skills in a particular field of study.

University adult education is normally concerned with persons who have already obtained a certain amount of education and who usually hold positions of some responsibility in the community (Alexander, 1971). But in recent years even school leavers straight from school have been admitted in various programmes. These programmes concern the different completers of formal education at different levels. However, the entry qualification into any of the adult education credit programmes at the University of Zambia is a school certificate with a minimum of 5 credits. The Extra Mural Department (Now DAAES) does not attempt directly to cover fields of literacy or what may be termed remedial education for adults, but it does attempt to be of service to persons engaged in such fields by undertaking research and 'training the trainers' (Alexander, 1971).

### **The role of adult education**

The role of a university in national development is a subject of much discussion in Africa today. History shows that most African nations have strived to establish at least one national university immediately after independence. Any university worthy its name is expected to exercise a high degree of objectivity in the search for truth and advancement of knowledge. Nyerere (1980) and Kamba (1983) see the main function of a university as playing a crucial role in solving social problems of ignorance, hunger, poverty, disease, and poor living conditions facing African nations. Yusufu (1973) sees the role of the truly African university as fulfilling the following objectives: pursuit, promotion and dissemination of knowledge; research; manpower development; promoting social and economic modernization; and promoting intercontinental unity and international understanding.

Kenneth Kaunda, the former President of Zambia, commented on the role of the university as follows: "The University of Zambia is part and parcel of our society and therefore, to have any meaningful existence, it must continue to be involved in that society" (Cabal, 1993:10). Thus among other things (that),

the University of Zambia has been explicitly designed as an instrument of national development. Consequently, it is agreed that the University must consciously and systematically shape itself to serve the cause of Zambia's development and that its order of priorities should be dictated by the needs of Zambia (Okafor, 1971:1).

A university is inherently endowed with capacities to contribute to national development. It is within this context that the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies (then DEMS) was created. Like any other unit in the university, the Department has the task of contributing to knowledge through teaching, research, publication and consultancy. But its actual role in national development can be seen clearly through its interaction with the public that it is meant to serve.

The role of adult education should be seen in the wider context of the mandate of the University. The University of Zambia is mandated, and expected, to help overcome the social, economic and scientific challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the provision of 'high quality, high level human resources to manage the dynamic and vibrant economy of our nation' (Mwanza, 2006). The major roles, therefore, that the Department plays in national development are four. These are in the areas of the economy, politics, social development and national integration.

As far as Zambia is concerned, one of her immediate and most serious handicaps today in her efforts to develop the country is the extreme shortage of high-level manpower. In 1964, Zambia had just over 100 university graduates with 1200 holding Cambridge School Certificates against the estimated manpower requirements for 1970 of 23,400 'O' levels, 10,200 Diploma or 'A' levels and 5,600 university graduates (Zambia Manpower Report, 1966). Thus, the economic role of adult education in national development can be seen in its contribution to human capital formation. Since inception, the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies has been contributing to human capital formation through its various academic programmes. Through study, students sharpen their skills which enhance labour productivity. Thus, investment in the development of human capital, through adult education, is important for developing a labour force and enhancing managerial skills.

The economic role of adult education in national development through the creation of high level human resource can be illustrated further. The Department trains adult educators who in turn, for example, take part in community literacy education. When illiteracy is an aspect of underdevelopment, literacy training should form an integral part of any development undertaking to help man become a conscious agent and master of himself. Functional literacy aims at developing individual's mental equipment and communicative powers, as well as their technical and vocational capacities (Osuji, 2006). The Department, therefore, indirectly contributes to national development through the people it trains, who in turn contribute to national development.

The role of adult education has become even greater considering the fact that more and more educated people also want to have their knowledge and skills updated in order to improve their efficiency at work. This is because the world is changing very rapidly, for example, in terms of technology. For this reason, what may have been appropriate knowledge and skills acquired in the past, may become inappropriate and fail to meet the demands of modern industry. Stressing the importance of adult education, Osuji (2006) argues that education is not just a pill that once taken perpetually immunizes one against ignorance. Hence adult education could be seen as making continuous provisions for all the people within a society so as to make them up-to-date in their knowledge and skills, refine their thought and make them understand issues and fully be in control of their destinies. Adult education, therefore, helps one not to relapse in knowledge.

Another important role that adult education plays in national development is social development. Zambia, like most developing countries, faces challenges of poverty and disease, among others which negatively affect the pace of national development. Educated people can analyse situations, define strategies, draw up programmes of action and opt for a better deal on any socio-economic matter. In this regard, the fight against poverty and other social ills cannot be won unless everybody including the underprivileged is given the chance to take part in it. Through adult education, for example, people learn about reproductive health. They are able to control their reproductive behaviour. They are able to raise and educate healthy children. They learn about or get exposed to information on hygiene, diseases and safe water. Parents who are educated are more likely to send their children to school and more willing to help them. This results in a general improvement of people's standard of living. As a result of this, productivity is raised by reducing incidences of sickness and death rates. Thus, when people undertake adult education programmes, they are able to contribute effectively to socio-economic development.

The empowering potential of adult education can translate into increased political participation and contribute to the quality of public policies and democracy. Thus, consolidating democracy is the other role of adult education in national development. It is widely acknowledged that there is a link between adult learning and democracy. The precise nature of the relationship between education and democracy remains unclear but studies suggest that the more learners know about democratic institutions and what their rights are, the more likely they are to plan on voting as adults as well as participating in national issues.

A recent research study on attitudes to democracy in Africa showed that education had a role to play in increasing understanding of democracy by providing the knowledge, skills and values associated with a political culture that supports democracy (Harber, 2006). Adult education gives adults cultural and civic education for public enlightenment. It enables people to fully participate in both local and national politics. The more people participate in national activities, the more government becomes responsive to their needs and well-being.

According to UNESCO (1997), 'substantive democracy and a culture of peace are not given; they need to be constructed'. In other words, for democracy to be achieved, adult education is needed to educate people on the democratic culture as well as to inform them of their rights and responsibilities. This is because democracy requires people to take part in it at various levels of society. Democracy can only thrive meaningfully in society when people are educated. Okafor (1971: 8) supports this assertion when he says:

Again, in a democratic society like Zambia, the citizens are called upon from time to time to make important decisions that determine who governs them and how they are governed. The University feels that if these decisions, such as voting in the National Elections, a Referendum or the Local Government Elections, are to be made meaningful, the populace ought to be fairly well informed about the problem of the world around them as well as be imbued with objective standards of logical thinking, which are the marks of university teaching.

The extent of people's participation in the nation's affairs may be determined by the level of democracy. When people are denied the chance to participate in national affairs, it affects the social and economic affairs of the country. The role of adult education in consolidating democracy is achieved through such courses as 'Emerging Issues in Adult Education' and 'Community Development'. These courses deal with issues of good governance and human rights.

National integration is another role that adult education has been playing in national development. Within so many ethnic groupings, the country requires unity in order to develop. This diversity in the country compelled the founding fathers of the nation to use adult education to reach out to all parts of the country. They did this by establishing University adult education centres in every region. Prominent among the subjects taught was politics in which the country's philosophy 'Humanism' was one of the major topics. Issues of nationalism and how to maintain the country's unity were also part of the curriculum. The country's motto 'One Zambia, One Nation', which became a topical issue for debate even in academic circles, also contributed to national integration. Leaders were fully convinced that without peace national development would not be achieved. The Department's role was further enhanced by the adoption of English as the official national language in order to avoid divisions. Adult education played a big role in national integration through its interaction with programme participants.

### **Challenges**

The rapid expansion in enrolments reflects two factors. The first factor is that population in Zambia has been growing rapidly. The second factor is that there has been substantial expansion of both primary and secondary education in recent years. Many completers of secondary education, therefore, apply for further education at the University of Zambia. However, these huge enrolments have nothing to do with high levels of employment opportunities in the country. This is because in recent years the country's economy has declined drastically resulting in many job losses. The rapid expansion of enrolments has led to overcrowding in lecture rooms and theatres. This has also discouraged some students from attending lectures as sitting space is always inadequate.

Adult education at the University of Zambia also faces yet another challenge namely specialization. The current programmes in the adult education do not provide students with specific areas to specialize in. What students obtain on completion of their studies is simply a general qualification in adult education. This has caused problems to the students when they leave the institution for the world of work. The expectation of the industry out there is that a student should have a specialized field like Gerontology, Literacy, Non-formal Education or Community Development, just to mention a few. This is because a specialized area enhances understanding and quality of production. Unfortunately, the current adult education programmes are studied as individual courses leading to the award, for example, of diploma or degree in adult education.

Globalization poses even a greater challenge to adult education in Zambia. It has turned out that in Africa, democracy and capitalism are the moving spirits behind the globalization phenomenon. Through democracy, adult education has been energized and found a new lease of life through civic education campaigns and outreach programmes in African countries. New economic policies of liberalization and free market enterprise resulting from the era of globalization have reduced public spending on education. This is where adult education has been the most adversely affected (Nafukho, 2005). One classical example is that in the early 90s, the Extension Studies Unit of the Department had its activities put on hold for almost five years due to severe cuts in university funding by government. Civic education campaigns and outreach programmes were taken to be more pragmatic, even when most of the personnel did not have knowledge and skills of how to run adult education programmes.

Instability in the teaching staff in the Extension Studies Unit is yet another challenge for adult education. The Unit recruits people to teach on a part time basis. Upon recruitment, the Department provides in-service training to tutors in order to acquaint them with techniques of teaching adults, objectives of the Department as well as the principles and practice of adult education. The training of tutors has, however, proved expensive as new people have to be recruited on a continuous basis due to the high attrition rates. The high attrition rate is due to transfers and low salaries. Efforts to have salaries improved in order to stabilize the teaching staff have proved futile. In addition, the Unit does not have the capacity to supplement tutors' meagre salaries. Compounding the problem is the fact that participants

cannot be asked to pay more than the stipulated fees to supplement tutors' salaries because that would defeat the principle of adult education.

Another challenge is inadequate indigenous teaching and learning materials. According to Fordham (2000), compared, say, with teacher education, the knowledge base for scholarship in this field remains quite small and is dominated by thinking which stems from Western Europe and North America. Second, the main scholarly texts relate to a field of practice which is also rooted in those continents. Third, because field practice is changing so fast, certainly in Europe, texts which were once standard fair in academic training courses (e.g. Houle, 1973; Bown and Tomori, 1979; Knowles, 1980; Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982; Rogers, 1986) are fast becoming out of date even in countries for which they were written.

In light of the above observations, members of staff have been challenged to carry out research and write papers that would constitute a Departmental journal and textbooks for various courses. The response has been good. For example, a new book entitled: *Extension Education: A Reader*, was recently published. This will certainly go a long way in helping students and scholars alike in their academic work. In spite of this new development, some questions still remain unanswered: should Zambia continue to have their adult education programmes based on a European or North American model? Will adult education based on foreign models effectively contribute to national development?

### **Prospects**

A new way of looking at adult education is what is contained in the Hamburg Declaration (1997, par.2) which emphasises that adult education should become the key to the twenty-first century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society. It is a powerful concept for fostering sustainable development; promoting democracy, justice, gender equity, and scientific, social and economic development; and building a world in which conflict is replaced by dialogue and a culture of peace.

One implication of enrolment expansion in adult education programmes under the present resource conditions concerns the issue of quality. If the number of students in relation to the number of academic staff is too big, the latter may fail to discharge their duties in the most effective and efficient way. For example, an overburdened staff may fail to give students assignments which will be very demanding when it comes to marking, let alone extra work. This may, in the long run, compromise quality and the subsequent contribution to national development.

In the same vein, a well-funded adult education will certainly contribute immensely to national development. This is because it will be able to purchase all the necessary teaching and learning materials. Attention should not only be directed at quantitative aspects but at qualitative aspects of the University's possible contribution to national development. Similarly, availability of funds will enable people to carry out research to improve stock of materials. The needs of Zambia demand that those who come out of the University should be people of integrity, competent and capable of facing problems thoughtfully and objectively, with the desire to find constructive solutions to the problems rather than augment partisan controversy (Goma, 1969). The idea is that the students that graduate should be of high calibre to help society find solutions to the problems of the country.

To speed up national development, the Department has started reviewing the curriculum in order to provide for specialization and also take into account changes that have taken place and be able to face the prevailing social, economic, cultural and political situation. This is possible though the production of indigenous materials is moving at a snail's pace. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Department used to encourage members of staff to select and train at institutions and universities that offer different subject areas (Mbozi, 2007). This gave chance to staff to complete their post graduate programmes in countries such as Canada, United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia, in addition to programmes in Africa. This resulted in diversity of specializations of the academic members of staff and allowed for more new courses such as Non- Governmental Organisations and Emerging Issues in Adult Education to be introduced.

The diversity of specializations of academic members of staff is itself a resource which can be utilized to expand the existing course structure to allow for specializations in adult education. In the event that this exercise comes to fruition, new staff will be required to handle different specialized areas. In this regard, once a green light to recruit staff development fellows is given, the same human resource can be used to train the new 'recruits'. In this way, the role of adult education in national development will not only be widened but will be executed more effectively. Considering that an academic institution of university level is traditionally associated with advanced knowledge production and dissemination, creating specialized programmes of study will be a commendable move. This is because today's industry is in search of highly specialized knowledge and skills.

The pace at which adult education will make a contribution to national development will largely depend on the relevance of teaching materials available to the institution. Youngman (2007) has observed that the post-colonial history of adult education as a field of study in African tertiary education institutions shows that very few indigenous textbooks have been produced over the years. Hence the textbooks currently being used, mainly from advanced industrialized countries of the west, in the training of adult educators in Africa are at best lacking in relevance and, at worst, actively promoting inappropriate models of adult education.

Zambia finds itself in a situation where most of available teaching materials are old, and foreign. Joint efforts in research and writing books with other universities in sub-Saharan Africa may not only quicken the pace of acquiring teaching materials but the materials will also be more relevant to Zambia. Cross-pollination of ideas is very important in what has become a knowledge-based world. The cross-pollination of ideas may reduce the existing knowledge gap and contribute to national development. The recent call for papers in the 'write a chapter' project, therefore, may be the solution to this long standing problem.

### Conclusion

In spite of the many challenges highlighted, the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies at the University of Zambia, has played an important role in national development. The Department contributes to national progress and development broadly in two fundamental respects: through teaching to produce skilled human capital, and through advanced research to either contribute to knowledge generation generally, or in applied form, for problem solving. Additionally, the Department contributes to national unity, social development and consolidation of democracy among people. Since there are many people who have graduated in adult education, some of them holding high positions, it is hoped that their voice to lobby for a policy on adult education may now be strong enough to influence government.

The most pragmatic way of meeting Zambia's developmental needs is to educate interested adults who are already in positions of influence, since adult education is supposed to provide a change of attitudes, knowledge and skills in the shortest possible time. But the extent to which the Department will fulfil its role in national development will largely depend on government's direct support and funding of teaching and research responsibilities. When infrastructure and facilities are expanded to allow for increased student enrolments and the impact of brain drain is reversed through better conditions of service, adult education will play a greater role in national development. This will avoid negative effects on the quality of teaching and research and staff morale which could have grave consequences on the nation in the not too distant future. Today, education is no longer seen only in terms of a social cost that has to be minimized but also as a strategic investment. The skills of the workforce are elements in a strategy for promoting the economic and social well-being of nations (Tuijnman, 1992).

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