

## Attitudes, experiences and expectations of first year undergraduate Adult education students at the University of Zambia

<sup>1</sup> Akakandelwa Akakandelwa, <sup>2</sup> Moses Changala, <sup>3</sup> Anolt LH Moonga

<sup>1,2,3</sup> University of Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia

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### Abstract

This paper examined the attitudes, expectations and experiences of first year undergraduate students enrolled in the 2012/13 Bachelor of Adult Education (BAE) programme at the University of Zambia. It explored a range of factors which impact on students' learning: their motives and reasons for entering higher education and selecting the degree of Bachelor of Adult Education programme and their expectations. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to a total population of 177 regular students and 128 were completed, giving a response rate of 72.32%. The findings of the study revealed that students were motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The desire to obtain a degree, study a programme of interest, and improve job prospects were the major motivating factors for pursuing higher education while family, friends and teachers' influence accounted for choosing the Adult Education degree programme. Students found the academic workload and demands heavy and hard due to the poor learning environment arising from lack of resources. The study concluded that Adult Education students had different attitudes, experiences and expectations in their studies at the University of Zambia. The study, therefore, recommended that the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies, in particular, and the School of Education in general, should develop orientation activities, assessment tools and teaching approaches which will foster the enhancement of positive attitudes in students and create a conducive teaching and learning environment.

**Keywords:** Adult education, students' attitudes, students' expectations, students' experiences, higher education.

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### Introduction

Universities and the environment within which they operate are undergoing unprecedented rapid significant changes. With the current political drive to encourage greater numbers of students from all walks of life to enter higher education, and a large increase in the number of universities and degree courses on offer in Zambia, institutions are increasingly finding themselves operating in a highly competitive market. The University of Zambia (UNZA) is now not only competing with local universities but also with international universities, including those which are offering distance learning programmes. Alongside this, there are changes in the manner in which Higher Education is being financed, with a decrease in the amount of grants available from the government and the government requirement that students should pay for part of their education. Universities world over are being asked to be self-reliant and self-sufficient in funding. Competition for students is growing while students are having more choices than ever before. This is leading to students contributing more financially towards their university education. Students are becoming sophisticated consumers of educational services. It is, therefore, important for UNZA to understand what students expect from it.

Advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) are also having a big impact on universities in the mode of teaching, learning, and research, the way that staff communicate and interact with students, and how students conduct their social life and communicate with their friends and families. This has created expectations in terms of the technological capabilities of the university and the role of the university in facilitating their social lives. Students are

becoming technology savvy and are seeking service experiences which are fast, efficient, reliable, transparent, interactive, and encompassing. Consequently, in order to remain competitive, it is essential for universities to recognise these shifts and be aware of changes in students' attitudes and expectations.

### 2. Statement of the Problem

Although a number of studies have been conducted to investigate attitudes, expectations and experiences of students in higher education, no similar study is known to have been conducted at the University of Zambia. This study, therefore, sought to highlight the attitudes, experiences and expectations of first year Adult Education students at the University of Zambia.

### 3. Significance of the study

The study was significant in that its findings might offer an opportunity for Adult Education and School of Education staff in particular, and other stake holders at large, a better understanding of first year Adult Education students. It was hoped that the findings of the study would lead to the creation and review of curricular, teaching and assessment methods and tools in the discipline of Adult Education. It was also envisaged that the findings would help administrators, both in the department and the School of Education foster a conducive teaching-learning environment in the university. The findings of this study could also be used to enhance the pre-entry student support activities for undergraduate studies in the School of Education in particular, and the University of Zambia at large.

#### 4. Study objectives

The main objective of this research was to investigate attitudes, experiences and expectations of first year undergraduate students enrolled in the Bachelor of Adult Education (BAE) at the University of Zambia. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine students' motives and goals for coming to the university.
2. Determine students' attitudes, experiences and expectations of university education.
3. Establish the extent to which students' expectations were met.

#### 5. Literature Review

Many studies on undergraduate students' satisfaction, academic performance and retention in higher education (HE) identify the critical importance of the first year for shaping their attitudes and approaches to learning (Krause *et al.*, 2005; Yorke, 1999) [15, 26]. A large number of students encounter difficulties adjusting to the academic and social demands of university life, managing the workload and becoming independent learners (Lowe & Cook, 2003) [16]. They contend that poor transition into university life and inability to handle the academic and social demands of HE result in underachievement and drop-out. The House of Commons (2001) [12] estimated that one in six students entering HE in Britain in 2001 [10] was likely to withdraw from their courses. Yorke and Longden (2004) [28] identified four groups of reasons related to attrition from their UK study, namely poor choice of field of study or course, unsatisfactory experience at university, difficulties in coping with the programme demands, and lastly, factors of a more personal nature (financial, family circumstances, illness, etc.).

Edirisingha (n.d.) observes that research on factors contributing positively to students' HE experience and the likelihood of completion of their courses identifies two main clusters of variables: first, the interaction between student background factors and the institutional environment and cultures; and second, students' level of preparedness for HE. Many studies have demonstrated that students' previous educational experience and values, family higher education history, and the quality of their interaction with the HE environment influence attrition rates and the success of students' integration into academic institutions, both academically and socially (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1993) [20, 23, 24].

The House of Commons (2001) [12] reports that HE experience of learners from non-traditional backgrounds raises further concerns: students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to drop out regardless of the entry qualifications; mature students are likely to drop out more readily than younger people; and universities recruiting students from poorer backgrounds have the lowest completion figures. Studies conducted by many researchers have observed that students at risk of non-completion and withdrawal are mostly those who are older than 21 years of age, having family responsibilities, living at home or non-university accommodation, and working part-time (HEFCE, 2004; Benette, 2003; Farwell, 2002; National Audit Office, 2002; Haque, 2001; Walker, 2000) [9, 2, 10, 11, 18, 25].

Edirisingha (n.d.) identifies the second main cluster of factors contributing to a successful HE experience and completion as students' level of preparedness for HE and their awareness of HE and institutional cultures (Boyle, Carter & Clark, 2002; NAO, 2002; Ozga & Sukhanandan, 1998) [3, 18, 19]. Citing Lowe

and Cook (2003) [16] Edirisingha lists these factors as undergraduates' misconceptions and levels of unawareness of academic and social aspects of their studies including: course options available in the first year, assessment procedures, placements, hours of classes and private study required, and the size of lecture and other teaching sessions. One third of the students surveyed expected the teaching at the university to be similar to that at secondary school. Byrne and Flood (2005) [4] also found that many students begin HE with low expectations and underestimate the commitment required of them, resulting in poor time management and under performance. Comparable findings by Cook and Leckey (1999) [5] identified lack of study skills and awareness of cultural aspects of HE such as private study, note-taking, time management, interactions in large groups, team and project work, and information technology (IT) competence.

#### 6. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on Dewey's (1938; Dewey, 1958) [6, 7] experiential learning theory in which he hypothesised that experience and education were related, and, thus, the primary goal of the experience was to promote growth in learning, positive future experiences, and changes in the students. He defines experience as an event or an act that results from continuous interaction with the environment that produces knowledge for future transaction. Dewey contends that while experience is a large part of learning, not all genuine education comes about through experience. He also maintains that, "what" was experienced is often the interaction of our emotions, the situation and the environment.

Dewey (1938) [6] identified different types of experiences: experiences that were educative, experiences that were 'mis-educative' (retarding further growth), experiences that resulted in lack of response and sensitivity, experiences that landed one in a rut, and experiences that were enjoyable but lacked substance. He, therefore, concluded that experience impacts the learning outcome of the student. Consequently, it is important that the nature and impact of the experience should be noted in order to predict future developments. He further observed that many students, "were rendered callous to ideas... and lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them" (1938, p.26). He, therefore, recommended that educators should guide their students to the kind of experiences that engage their attention and promote desirable future experiences. Dewey (1938) [6] further indicated that while experience resides in a person it also "influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose" (p. 39).

#### 7. Research Methodology

This study used a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consisted of the first year undergraduate students enrolled in the 2012/13 Bachelor of Adult Education Programme at the University of Zambia. The sample of the study was made up of 128 students who completed the questionnaires. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. Data was collected at the end of the second semester, before students wrote second semester final examinations. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Version 20.

The questionnaire used was a modified version of the Student Experience and Student Expectations (SESE) questionnaire designed by the Anna Round Student Retention Project (2005).

The instrument was modified to suit the local situation. The questionnaire was designed to elicit four sets of information: basic demographics, student's academic lifestyle (e.g. attendance and study habits), reasons for entering the University of Zambia, reasons for choosing the BAE programme, a profile of the students' experience, expectations and attitudes regarding higher education. Some sections of the questionnaire used a multiple choice format, with the option of one-word and or very brief answers in a few cases. Forty-two Likert-type items were used to measure the extent to which students had adjusted to the university environment, the extent to which their expectations had been met, and their general attitudes towards academic life. The academic subscale contained 9 items and the social subscale had 14 items. Thirty-two of the items were scored on a 5-point Likert-scale from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree while six items were scored on a 4-point Likert-scale from (1) very accurate to (4) very mistaken. Negatively worded items were reverse scored so that high scores reflected "high expectations and experiences" and low scores reflected "low expectations and experiences."

### 8. Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study should be considered within the context of its limitations. First, the study only used information collected from one public institution and from one programme offered at that institution. Second, the research utilised a small population, which could limit the applicability of the findings on a larger scale. Therefore, generalisations of the findings of this study may not be applied to all students at UNZA, let alone in all institutions of higher education in Zambia. For the current

study, each subscale revealed adequate internal consistency, averaging 0.62.

### 9. Findings

The findings of the study are presented below:

#### 9.1 Characteristics of Respondents

One hundred and seventy-seven questionnaires were distributed to first year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Adult Education programme at the University of Zambia in the 2012-2013 academic year. One hundred and twenty-eight questionnaires were successfully completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 72.31%. Forty-four percent of the respondents were males while 56% were females. All the students who responded held Grade 12 certificates as their primary entry qualifications. One hundred and sixteen (90.6%) of the respondents had only Grade 12 Certificates before coming to UNZA, four (3.1%) had college certificates, while eight (6.3%) had college diplomas. These findings indicate that the majority of the students enrolling in the Bachelor of Adult Education (BAE) program were direct school leavers. Forty-four (34.4%) were aged 19-20 years, 69 (53.9%) were aged 21-24 years, four (3.1%) were aged 25-30 years, four (3.1%) were aged 31-39 years, and one was aged 40-49 years. Six respondents did not state their age range. Therefore, the majority (almost 93%) were young (aged 19-24 years). The majority (59.4%) of the students in the study were 'first generation' university students, i.e. neither of their parents had attended university. The rest of the students' generation is shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Number of students with parents that had attained university education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	neither parent	76	59.4	62.8	62.8
	mother only	27	21.1	22.3	85.1
	both parents	13	10.2	10.7	95.9
	father only	5	3.9	4.1	100.0
	Total	121	94.5	100.0	
Missing	not stated	7	5.5		
Total		128	100.0		

Only 27 (22.88%) of the students were accommodated at UNZA; of the one hundred and two students who were not accommodated at the university, 21.19% lived in their parents' homes, 38.98% lived in a shared rental boarding house or a private flat, and 16.95% were squatting with friends in the hostels.

There was an association between gender and being accommodated at UNZA ( $\chi^2=8.696$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.003$  at  $\alpha=0.05$ ). More first year female students than male students were accommodated at the university. There was no association between gender and type of accommodation ( $\chi^2=2.704$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.259$  at  $\alpha=0.05$ ). Furthermore, there was no association between age and type of accommodation ( $\chi^2=3.244$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.198$  at  $\alpha=0.05$ ). Had more mature-age students been included, an association between age and type of

accommodation might have emerged (mature-age students are considerably more likely to live 'at home'), but their numbers were too small to gain a meaningful statistic on this point.

#### 9.2 Motivation for studying at UNZA

Table 2 below shows that 121 (94.5%) indicated that they had initially applied for the BAE programme at UNZA while 5.5% had initially applied for other programmes (three for Bachelor of Secondary Education, one for Bachelor of Science, one for Bachelor of Library and Information Studies, one for Bachelor of Mass Communications, and one for unstated programme). These findings indicate that 5.5% of the respondents had been transferred to BAE from other programmes. This shows that students in the BAE programme at UNZA were highly motivated to study for BAE degree.

**Table 2:** Programme initially applied to at UNZA

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
BAE	121	94.5	94.5
BAED	3	2.3	96.9
BSCNQ	1	.8	97.7
BALIS	1	.8	98.4
MASCOM	1	.8	99.2
Others	1	.8	100.0
Total	128	100.0	

On who had introduced the students to the BAE programme, the majority indicated that they were introduced by their relatives and friends. See table 3 below:

**Table 3:** Who introduced respondents to BAE

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	relatives	34	26.6	37.0	37.0
	friends	31	24.2	33.7	70.7
	self	12	9.4	13.0	83.7
	parents (mother & father)	9	7.0	9.8	93.5
	teachers/lecturers	6	4.7	6.5	100.0
	Total	92	71.9	100.0	
Missing	not stated	36	28.1		
Total		128	100.0		

On reasons for deciding to pursue university education, the majority of them indicated that they wanted to obtain a university degree by studying a programme that really interested and generally improved their job prospects. The rest of the reasons given for pursuing a university degree are given in Table 4 below:

**Table 4:** Most important reason for deciding to study for a university degree

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	I want to obtain a degree	35	27.3	34.3	34.3
	to study a program that really interests me	24	18.8	23.5	57.8
	to improve my job prospects generally	17	13.3	16.7	74.5
	I enjoy learning and studying	11	8.6	10.8	85.3
	to train for a specific type of job	7	5.5	6.9	92.2
	family wanted me to go to university	6	4.7	5.9	98.0
	I didn't want to get a job right away	1	.8	1.0	99.0
	teachers advised me to go to university	1	.8	1.0	100.0
Total		102	79.7	100.0	
Missing	not stated	26	20.3		
Total		128	100.0		

The following are some of the expressions from the respondents on why they pursued university education:

1. "I wanted to break the barrier; no one in my family has ever obtained university education."
2. "I wanted to be an inspiration to my young sisters and brothers."
3. "Hardships I have gone through have motivated me to work hard in order to have a better future."
4. "To acquire knowledge and become a responsible citizen."
5. "I was motivated by the availability of government bursary."

There were no significant statistical differences in the reasons expressed by both male and female students for deciding to enter higher education. The only significant difference was in the percentage who wanted to obtain a university degree ( $\chi^2=17.742$ ;  $df=7$ ;  $p=0.005$ ). While 68.4% of the males stated that it was an important factor, 82.9% of the females named it as the most important factor.

### 9.3 Reasons for choosing UNZA

Table 5 below shows the main reasons respondents gave for choosing to study at UNZA. The majority of them indicated that the reputation of the university was a major attraction.

**Table 5:** Reasons for choosing UNZA

	Count	Table Responses %
Reputation of the university	88	29.10%
Recommendation of friend/relative	64	21.20%
It offered a program I wanted to do	59	19.50%
Reputation of the program	38	12.60%
This was the only place I was offered	26	8.60%
My friends were going to UNZA	14	4.60%
I wanted to leave home	8	2.60%
Reputation of the city	5	1.70%
Total	124	100.0%

**NB:** this is a multiple response question



#### 9.4 Reasons for choosing the BAE programme

On reasons for choosing the BAE programmes, the majority of the respondents attributed it to family and friends' advice. The rest of the reasons are given in table 6 below:

**Table 6:** Reasons for choosing BAE

	Count	Table Responses %
Advice of family/friends	69	26.80%
Interest in the subject	45	17.50%
Advice of teachers/careers advisers	36	14.00%
Want to get a well-paid job	34	13.20%
Reputation of this programme	31	12.10%
Want to get a particular type of job	27	10.50%
Attracted by programme title	15	5.80%
Total	115	100.0%

Other reasons given by respondents for selecting the BAE programme were:

- BAE was multidimensional; it provides job opportunities in all sectors including the government
- Lack of other options because of stiff competition
- BAE was in line with some students' current professions
- The desire to pursue a career that none of the relatives had done before

When respondents were asked whether at any point in their first year they had considered dropping out of the BAE programme or transferring to a different programme, the majority of them seventy-nine (79%) indicated that they had earlier considered dropping out but had rescinded their decision because they came to enjoy the BAE programme and also got support from lecturers/tutors, family members and friends. Other reasons given for staying on the BAE programme included:

- BAE was in line with the students' ambitions.
- BAE provided students access to government bursary.
- Difficulties of changing from BAE to other programmes.
- BAE provides a lot of opportunities to work in many fields.

#### 9.5 Students experiences in first year at UNZA

Some of the experiences the respondents had in their first year of study at UNZA were that they:

- Generally felt part and parcel of the large university family.
- Realised that the BAE programme was as good as any other academic programme in the university.
- Realised that university study involved a lot activities such as lectures, seminars, tutorials and study groups
- Missed early lectures due to transport problems by off-campus, students which led to loss of time for studies.
- Felt uncomfortable due to overcrowding and lack of seats in the lecture theatres.
- Faced financial and social difficulties.
- Had competing academic demands such as attending lessons and tutorials and writing assignments and tests.
- Suffered mental and physical exhaustion due to lack of refreshment facilities within the School premises.

Other scholars have found out that undergraduate students identify the critical importance of the first year for shaping their attitudes and approaches to learning and that a large number of

them encounter difficulties adjusting to academic and social demands of academic life (Krause *et al.*, 2005; Yorke, 1999; Lowe & Cook, 2003) <sup>[15, 26, 16]</sup>. Similarly, UNZA students in the BAE programme experienced both positive and negative situations in their first year of study. Edirisingha (n.d.; Spady, 1970 & Tinto, 1975. 1993) <sup>[20, 23, 24]</sup> observe that students' higher education experience and the likelihood of completion of their courses depend on two main variables namely, the interaction between students' background factors and the institutional environment and cultures and the students' level of preparedness. When these factors are not well integrated, there is a likelihood of a high attrition rate among students.

#### 9.6 Students' expectations

When asked to rate the extent to which their expectations were met by the university, the respondents indicated that:

- The academic workload would be lighter than expected.
- The academic programmes would not demand as much as expected and that the programme would not be as interesting as expected.
- They amount of support they got from both academic and non-academic staff in the department was more than expected.
- Making friends at the university would be easier than expected.

Studies have shown that some undergraduate students have misconceptions about university education. Edirisingha (n.d.) identifies some of them to be unawareness of academic and social aspects of their studies like course options available in the first year, assessment procedures, placement, hours of classes and private study required and the size of lecture and other teaching sessions. Byrne & Flood, 2005) <sup>[4]</sup> attributed low expectations among students to poor time management and underperformance. Similarly, Cook and Leckey, (1999) <sup>[5]</sup> identified lack of study skills and awareness of cultural aspects of higher education such as private study, note-taking, time management, interaction in large groups, project work and information technology competence (IT) as being responsible for low expectations in undergraduate students. To some extent, therefore, the expectations of the University of Zambia BAE first year students can be described as low as they expected lighter workloads, less demanding programmes and minimal staff support.

On average students found the workload a bit heavier than expected. They also found the academic demands of their programme a bit harder than expected. However, they found the programme a bit more interesting than expected. They also claimed to have found their previous school or college preparation for university adequate. Furthermore, students found their expectation about the amount of academic support a bit too high. However, students found making friends at the university as easy as they had expected. On the other hand, students found their expectations about non-academic support and individual contact with staff as was expected.

#### 9.7 Students' adjustment to academic life

The respondents indicated that in order for them to fit in the university, they had to adjust in several ways. They adjusted to;

- Academic demands of the institution,
- The social life of the university,
- Independent study,

- The need for one to be consistent in one's academic work, and
- Prudent management of time and resources.

Overall, the outcomes were quite positive, with students showing good overall adjustment by the end of their first year. This was in the areas of academic adjustment, relations with lecturers, time management, and social adjustment. However, the majority of the students were making a very smooth transition. This is in line with Dewey (1938) <sup>[6]</sup> who recommended that educators should guide their students to the kind of experiences that engage their attention and promote desirable future experience. The adjustment by first year BAE students should, therefore, have come through the interaction with lecturers and lecturers within and outside the department

### 9.8 Students' attitudes towards academic work

In terms of attitude towards academic work and social life, most of the respondents indicated that they developed a positive attitude. In terms of motivation, respondents indicated that they were highly motivated to learning and scoring high marks in the BAE programme. The respondents also stated that they were easily integrated and felt a sense of belonging to the university community.

### 10. Conclusion

This paper examined the attitudes, experiences, motivation and expectations of first-year students enrolled in the 2012/13 Bachelor of Adult Education programme at the University of Zambia. The findings revealed that students were motivated by a combination of both internal and external factors. Among the internal factors were the desire to obtain a degree, to study a programme of interest, and to improve job prospects, while family, friends and teachers' influence were the major external factors responsible for students' choice of the Adult Education Degree programme. On the one hand, students found the academic workload heavy and the academic demands hard, while on the other hand, they found the programme interesting and satisfactory. The study also concluded that students chose to study at UNZA because of the good reputation of the institution and other factors such as recommendation by friends and relatives, suitable programmes offered and that students chose the BAE programme due to advice from teachers, friends and relatives. The study further concluded that students had several experiences in the first year at UNZA which included the feeling of welcome to the institution, the realisation that the BAE was as good as any other programme and the discovery that university study involved a lot of activities like lectures, seminars, tutorials and study groups on one hand. However, students experienced challenges of failing to attend lectures due to transport and timetabling problems, overcrowding in lecture theatres and halls and other competing academic and social demands which resulted into mental and physical exhaustion. The study also concluded that students had many expectations some of which were of low type as they had expected less than what they found. Others expectations were high as students found more than what they had expected. The findings of the study revealed that students had to adjust to academic life in order to meet the academic and social demands of the institution and enable them manage their time and study consistently. The study finally concluded that the attitude of the students to the academic work was positive

### 11. Recommendations

Arising from the findings, the study made the following recommendations:

1. The Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies should develop orientation, assessment and teaching approaches which will foster effective learning among students.
2. The Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies should provide better communication of what is expected of:
  - a) students in terms of independent learning, assessment and writing styles and their implications in terms of how they should approach their studies.
  - b) workload on the programme, including: the scope and shape of the academic work (for example, number of lectures, tutorials, labs and so on); what students can expect to happen in a lecture, tutorials, etc.
3. The Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies should provide:
  - a) Induction throughout the first year, where students are given the information they need and when they need it.
  - b) Study skills as an integrated activity in disciplinary course teaching.
4. The Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies should foster among students a sense of pride and belonging to the department.

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