Work experiences of adult educators during the COVID-19 pandemic: A Case of the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies at the University of Zambia

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Abstract

This article is based on the experiences of adult educators in the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies at the University of Zambia in performing their different roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article was motivated by the relevance of adult education in responding to emergencies of any nature. Adult education takes up a leadership role in guiding the process and providing necessary information and education to bring a situation under control. Additionally, sharing experiences is an important aspect of adult education for bridging the gap between theory and practice. In achieving this objective, a qualitative research design was employed to conduct interviews with academic staff in the Department at the University of Zambia main campus and Resident Lecturers in the provincial centres. The interview protocols were emailed to the participants following the COVID-19 public health guidelines. The findings show that experiences were personal and affected their teaching and research activities. The participants attempted to teach online though the majority were limited in technological skills and knowledge. The majority of the participants did not engage in any research activity, including desk research. The article concludes that the participants underutilised the potency of adult education in dealing with emergencies and crises.

Keyword*s: Adult education, adult educators, emergency remote teaching and learning, COVID-19, University of Zambia*

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Introduction

This article shares the experiences of adult educators in the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies at the University of Zambia (UNZA) in their academic and administrative roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has put the entire field of adult education including higher adult education to the test, thereby affecting the way the field is likely to operate in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted adult educators to reflect on their practice and engagements and adopt more and better flexible approaches to serving adult learners in different contexts (Boeren, Roumell, & Roessger, 2020). This development stems from the fact that adult education is generally a potent tool for a variety of social transformational interventions. Adult education, which denotes the entire body of learning processes, formal, non-formal and informal, has been used to respond to different situations and challenges in different contexts and societies (Sichula, Luchembe, & Chakanika, 2016). The responsiveness of adult education is embedded within its dynamic nature in approach and ability to work with different interest groups and systems in society. It has a comprehensive integrative power to mobilize people and resources for change (Sichula, 2018). It offers life-transforming opportunities through skill acquisitions for personal and societies progress (Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, & O'Herin, 2009). Thus, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 ushered in several adult education innovations. The first and immediate intervention was public health education to prevent and minimize transmission.

The interventions commenced at the global level and trickled down to regional, country, community and household level. It is acknowledged that the public health guidelines were meant for every person to follow, but the primary audience were adults for the reason that by nature adults take the lead in responding to issues in society, and are expected to cascade the information to their families and communities (Turner & Kim, 2005). As the COVID-19 crisis continues to take hold of the globe, adult education intervention continues to provide a more important lifeline in human history (Lopes & McKay, 2020). Without adult learning interventions such as public health community targeted education, homeschooling and online learning, several populations including those that are difficult to reach could have lagged (James & Thériault, 2020). Without these interventions, life would have been more difficult to cope with for the vulnerable and poor communities. However, the COVID-19 has made matters worse for many vulnerable and poor communities in developing countries.

Drawing from one European case study on adult and community education, a range of informal and formal learning opportunities emerged as a response to the effect of COVID-19 on education. These opportunities included entry-level courses to professional qualifications and confidence-boosting programmes in a range of community settings. In this case, Adult and Community Education (ACE) provided access to community learning and skills for services including employment, as well as connecting with agencies like job centres and local colleges (Leese & Bentley, 2020). In another case study from the Asian Pacific Region, it was established that education and training systems experienced unprecedented disruption due to COVID-19. Closures of schools and higher learning institutions were among the immediate educational interventions. This was followed by other measures such as home learning through different virtual platforms which were limited to places with access to internet services. The most disadvantaged were poor communities as the majority lacked access to internet services because of cost and lack of Information Communication Technology (ICT) devices (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Similarly, in Africa, the early intervention on education involved closing learning institutions. A

few weeks later, the closure of learning institutions was followed by the introduction and implementation of online learning. Though online learning is a global adult learning mode, many countries in Africa were experiencing it for the first time. Its introduction and implementation in learning institutions were characterized by a lack of preparation by both education providers and the learners. The implementation involved several learning curves for all stakeholders at the same time, which culminated in several challenges. The virtual learning mode did not work for every learner both at primary and higher learning institutions especially in poor communities because of the associated challenges that ranged from the cost of internet services to availability including the lack of ICT devices.

Theoretical framework

This article is grounded within the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). There is a saying that 'experience is the best teacher'. Therefore, the suitability of ELT to the purpose of this article cannot be overemphasized. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it numerous experiences that may have resulted into real learning, and the lessons learned could potentially be converted into new knowledge. Besides providing a foundation for an approach to education and learning as a lifelong process (Skerritt, 1992), its robust and comprehensive nature (Sichula, 2018) offers the best lens for understanding and explaining the experiences of the participants in this article. The ELT was propounded by psychologist David Kolb who was influenced by the work of other theorists including John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget. According to Kolb (1984:38) "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". Knowledge results from the combinations of grasping and transforming the experience. Drawing from this theory, we see a spiralling relationship between learning and life experiences. As adult educators and Resident Lecturers deliberately engaged in their roles, their experiences and learning were shaped by the contexts. What is also fundamental about this theory is that it explains learning and experiences in terms of the four learning stages, which are Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE). An important feature of the theory is that the different stages are associated with distinct learning styles.

However, the weakness of this theory is that it ignores the importance of informal learning on all forms of learning. ETL is biased towards seeing learning as a conscious process through daily experiences. For example, it emphasizes that learning occurs naturally through experience - discovery and active participation. For this reason, the theory offers a limited definition of learning as a process involving knowledge creation through the transformation of experience. Learning is not always a conscious process, so are our life experiences – both can be incidental, accidental or coincidental (Sichula, 2018). However, the theory offers knowledge on the human experience as a crucial component of all learnings and knowledge construction. In this case, the experiences of our research participants were relevant in meeting the objectives of this study.

The theory states that learning progresses through the four stages previously highlighted to complete a cycle that culminates into transforming experience into knowledge. Based on these stages, we assumed that both categories of our research participants had a concrete experience of their active involvement in performing their roles. We also envisaged that based on their roles, reflecting on their experiences in terms of the decisions and actions taken was an important component for new learning and knowledge construction. Practically, this involves taking a step

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko, M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

to look back, review or reflect on the experiences of performing their roles in the COVID-19 environment. The interest in these reflections was to understand the sense they could draw from this. As they engage in abstract conceptualization they begin to make sense of their experiences, episodes and events. The sense and lessons drawn from the experiences are expected to inform action. The final stage which is *active experimentation* suggests that participants are expected to transfer their valuable experiences into practice. They do so by returning to participate in a task to apply their conclusions to new experiences as well as make plans for the acquired knowledge in their continued practice.

Methodology

Public health engagements on education are embedded in adult education methods for their effectiveness in capturing the audience and information delivery (McCaffery et al., 2019). For example, community-based adult education has played a pivotal role in the dissemination of the COVID-19 pandemic messages to different communities around the globe (Lopes, & McKay, 2020). This is essential because adult education has a community integrative attribute, which makes it effective for information dissemination, community sensitization, and education (Freire, 2014). In this pandemic, adult education has been at the centre of public health education at global, regional, national and community levels. In this qualitative study, we decided to interview the most ignored stakeholders in much of adult education research in Zambia's higher learning institution – the trainers of adult educators (Lecturers at UNZA main campus) and Resident Lecturers in the Provincial Centres of the University of Zambia.

At the time of this study, the role of the Resident Lecturers was largely the management and administration of Extension Studies at UNZA provincial centres. The context was the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies at the University of Zambia. The primary objectives were to generate an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the adult educators at the undergraduate degree level at the University of Zambia and administrators of University Extension Education centres as they performed their academic and administrative roles respectively during the COVID-19. We also wanted to learn how the different contextual interventions reimagined adult education practice and also draw key lessons, which could inform adult education practice.

Being a qualitative study the selection of the research participants was purposeful (Merriam, 2009). The participants were included in the study on the basis that they were academic members of staff in adult education stationed at the University of Zambia main campus or Resident Lecturers stationed in the provincial centres. Participation in the study was voluntary. The total number of volunteered participants was Nine (9) with a gender distribution of 4 males and 5 females. Furthermore, the number of academic staff at the main campus was 5 with a gender distribution of 3 males and 2 females, while the Resident Lecturers were 4 with a gender distribution of 3 females and 1 male.

An email interview was used to collect the data. We developed interview questions and emailed the interview protocol to our research participants who responded to the questions and returned their responses through email. This was the most convenient and acceptable data collection method considering the COVID-19 pandemic. The public health guidelines restricted us from having physical contact with the research participants. The collected textual data responses

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko, M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

were organized and prepared for analysis. The analysis involved reading through the interview transcripts severally to get the sense of the data. This was followed by identifying the key features of the data concerning how the lecturers and administrators responded to the COVID-19 pandemic given their roles as lecturers and administrators.

Findings

The findings highlight the experiences of the participants in managing their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, they reveal some disparities in adult education practice that have been occasioned by the effect of the pandemic. Key lessons have been drawn from these experiences. To protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms are used. Chembe, Mulinda, Lemba, Mbita, and Funga represent participants at the main campus, while Kinda, Kwekwe, Finka, and Silavwe represent participants from the provincial offices.

Experiences in managing their roles

There were diverse experiences shared by the participants while they performed and managed their academic and administrative roles respectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. They ranged from **personal** to **teaching** including **research** activities.

(a) Personal experiences

Some of the research participants shared their personal experiences regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, fear, dread and anxiety were found to be prominent in the families, communities, and workplace such that people could not work with a free conscience to produce quality results. For the majority of the participants, the uncertainty of the COVID-19 situation created hopelessness to even think of the short term solutions and interventions regarding work for them to perform as expected. For example, Chembe highlights some of his work experiences during the COVID-19 period. He feels that the COVID-19 situation lacked organized and coordinated crisis management as it promoted instability in the work environment:

> *The outbreak of COVID-19 and unclear information about the disease at the beginning caused a lot of fear and anxiety in all of us including students. This was coupled with uncoordinated management of the situation. Specifically, poor communication characterized by mixed messages on the way forward in terms of teaching and learning. For example, the first intervention by management was instructing staff to work from home until the situation normalised. However, it was surprising that within a few days' staff were called back to work from offices. This kind of crisis management created an atmosphere that was filled with instability and lowered the morale to teach and research.*

Similarly, Kinda highlighted that she experienced fear and anxiety as she performed her administrative work. She said,

> *…there was fear and anxiety among students, staff and part-time tutors and lecturers resulting in absenteeism… frequent bereavements among friends, workmates and family members. Closure of the offices leading to disruption of work to allow*

> *disinfection by Ministry of Health staff following confirmed cases. As a way of managing the situation, I provided counselling to students and clients as I attended to them. The counselling was centred on reassurances that if the COVID-19 prevention measures are followed strictly, disease transmission would be prevented.*

For Mbita, her personal experiences with COVID-19 were more confined to both her professional role of teaching and the desire to see positive growth in her learners. She shared her experiences in terms of one of her goals of teaching, which is to facilitate learner acquisition and improvement of both cognitive and psychomotor skills. She expressed empathy for her learners in the sense that most of them had their interpersonal skills greatly affected owing to disruption of their social interactions and learning. She said,

> *… While the cognitive domain may have not been affected so much by the COVID-19 pandemic the other domains were greatly affected. Specifically, the practical and interpersonal skills of learners were greatly negatively affected. These skills include group dynamics and facial communication during class or adult learning situations...*

However, Mbita observed that despite the learners' interpersonal skills being affected negatively, an effort was made to manage the effects of this development. For example, she observed and experienced that mutual respect gained prominence among the learners and towards her– a moral attribute that is crucial for adult learning. She said,

> *I witnessed mutual respect among the learners and the idea of shared learning gained prominence in the group learning sessions I conducted. I noticed and appreciated the value of group sessions. They created an atmosphere for correcting wrong aspects and support positive learning. When wrong behaviours were exhibited by the participant(s), they were corrected and positive behaviours were demonstrated and developed...*

This experience by Mbita is both a reminder and an emphasis on the value of mutual respect and group learning towards successful adult learning. It relates to self-concept and learner experiences which are fundamental constructs in adult learning. Self-concept in adult learning is about acknowledging an adult as a mature person who values self-respect and respect for other people. Group learning is a familiar and effective approach because it is part of the everyday interactions in which learning occurs.

An interview with Kwekwe highlighted two side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on her academic and administrative roles. She said,

> *COVID-19 pandemic has both undesirable and desirable elements. The undesirable elements relate to the distractions, restrictions, loss of life and livelihoods. She felt that while COVID-19 has its downside, there is also a silver lining in the sense that it has some desirable element – it offers opportunities to innovate new ways of doing business.*

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

Mulinda felt that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and highlighted the already existing challenges of providing and managing Higher Education in Zambia. He said,

> *COVID-19 has exposed and highlighted the weakness and existing challenges in service delivery and adult education practice. It has pushed the boundaries of adult education into a never imagined digital space. This unprecedented push and uncertainty admittedly, has exerted a tremendous psychological toll on my teaching and researching as I have less, considering my limited technology skills. Suddenly, I have found myself navigating new technologies and ways of teaching and learning virtually.*

Finka's personal experience was empathetic to her students. She shared that,

> *most of them were employed in the tourism and hospitality industry which was among the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. as the tourism. This has resulted in having students stop school because they have no income to sustain their studies. All businesses were affected by the closure of borders as a result sponsors of students were affected and could not pay tuition fees. This has been a major challenge that is difficult to mitigate. Furthermore, when the government allowed schools, colleges and universities to start meeting, most students started missing classes for fear of contracting COVID-19.*

Fear and anxiety were also highlighted by Silavwe as they affected the way he performed his duties. He said,

> *Students developed fear and anxiety of contracting COVID-19 disease. This was despite the measures put in place to effectively manage the situation. Unfortunately, student enrolment has drastically gone down.*

(b) Experiences on teaching

The management of teaching comprised different activities from planning to implementing and assessments using different virtual platforms. For most of the participants in the study, teaching online was their first experience, and it presented both challenges and opportunities. For example, Mbita explains that she implemented her teaching through the use of blended learning. She explains that,

> *…blended learning involved a combination of virtual learning platforms and face-to-face interactions. The virtual learning platforms included Moodle, Google Meet and Zoom. These platforms were additions to the Astria Learning Management System which was already in use for Distance Education students. Moodle was quite good for uploading notes and readings while Google Meet and Zoom were used for classroom*

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko, M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

interactions between students and myself. WhatsApp was good for communicating messages and sharing some supplementary materials.

For students who have difficulties with internet connectivity Mbita said, "*I record my lessons in advance on google meet and send links to my students. This helps the students to be able to access the lesson when they have internet bundles at their own time.* However, Mbita, felt that while other courses could easily be taught entirely online, one of her courses could not. The nature of the course necessitates physical contact. ion. She said,

> *My course on participatory approaches to development was robbed of its identity because the nature of this course is offered wholly online. The practical group learning and facilitation exercises such as the Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques cannot be conducted individually. Both I and the students need a group and physical interaction to effect participatory learning.*

Mbita's concern regarding her course that requires practical teaching, raises quality concerns. This could also apply to other courses of a similar nature that could not be accorded practical learning. The quality of learners' learning raises genuine concerns. However, these challenges did not seem to impede Mbita's resolve to achieve her teaching targets. Mbita explains that,

> *The teaching targets were met wholly concerning the cognitive domain of learning and partially concerning collaborative learning. This was due to limited resources skills among the students to maximize learning through presentations using ICT platforms. However, teaching and learning were managed by supplementing the content by playing lesson-based videos during class sessions.*

Chembe says,

> *When it came to teaching, students' attendance to virtual learning was erratic. Most of them were missing my scheduled sessions, instead, they preferred collecting snapshots of the lessons (e.g. PowerPoint slides) from the few that were consistent in their attendance. It was, therefore, difficult to ascertain the learning levels of most of the students, who were predominantly learning online.*

Kinda explains that the closure of academic institutions was premature and was followed by an unplanned online teaching and learning. She said,

> *While this intervention had good intentions, the implementation proved futile in her case. For example, the two tutors who were under her supervision we incapable of organizing students for online lessons. This was attributed to an abrupt introduction of online teaching where the tutors were not prepared and trained for it. Additionally, there was a general lack of smart devices to implement online teaching. Internet connectivity and the cost of internet bundles was another challenge.*

Despite the foregoing, Kinda made an effort to manage teaching and learning. She said,

I used my adult education skills to encouraged and support learners to utilize the time away from physical classes for self-study and complete tasks and assignments given before the premature/COVID-19 closure. The measures that were put in place enabled students to remain abreast with their studies to some extent.

She further said,

The interventions that I have employed to ensure that my academic work continues despite the pandemic have been the use of ICT provisions such as Zoom and Google Meet to interact with my students and deliver lecture content and assessment. Unfortunately, I am yet to use the UNZA prescribed Moodle platform because of low registration levels by students. A number of them have been unable to registered citing financial challenges. Although, a number of the students are generally absent during real-time sessions. I am seeking to use whatever possible innovation I will come across to ensure that I interact more with my students. This intervention is helping me to meet my teaching targets because most of the students now have access to online classes and we can move from one topic to the next easily.

Kwekwe took a different approach from the other participants. She acknowledged the challenges that came with COVID-19 on her work but directed her towards the possible interventions. She said,

While many people have been focusing on the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, I took time to channel my focus on both the desirable and undesirable factors arising from the COVID-19 pandemic – regarding my teaching, learning and management of Extension studies. This approach helped me to identify and implement mitigation strategies, against undesirable aspects. For example, I executed online teaching and learning for our students.

She further shared that she capitalized on adopting online teaching, which she incorporated in her teaching. In addition, she plans to adopt it as part of the traditional teaching and learning management of Extension studies. She said,

Online learning is the desirable effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, teaching and learning will be blended learning including both face-to-face and online learning. For me, this offers a solution to the current course offering challenges I have been experiencing with managing Extension Education. Online learning has facilitated a wider coverage of the clientele. I am hopeful that it can further help especially that extension studies offer demand-driven programmes.

Kwekwe's experience with challenges related to technology is rather different from the other participants. She does not say anything about her challenges in using technology which has been the case with other participants. Perhaps the explanation could be that she decided to focus on the desirable aspects of COVID-19 and not the challenges which she described as undesirable. This experience could relate to the importance of directing our efforts towards possibilities rather than difficulties.

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

Lemba shared a concern about the uncoordinated flow of information from University management to its staff. He said,

> *While it was decided that teaching and learning should be blended-combing both online and face-to-face interactions, the information from management on whether all students both registered and unregistered were supposed to participate in class was not clear from the onset.*

He felt that the ineffective communication by the management cost him the loss of teaching and learning time for students close to a month. This was further compounded by a large number of unregistered students.

> *The number of unregistered students was large for the class to commence with a few registered students. Therefore, I had to wait for other students to register so that I could accommodate all of them at once. With a lot of unregistered students, it became difficult to invite students who are not registered. I have also encountered some challenges, for example, sometimes my office does not have stable internet to offer online classes. Another challenge is that students' attendance is poor and less participation in-class tutorials. Administering a test is difficult due to internet connectivity for the majority of students. Admitting students who join in late is frustrating as class is disrupted.*

Lemba thought of a way of managing these challenges and developed some interventions He said,

> *The interventions that I have employed to ensure that teaching continues during the pandemic are that in cases, where I had taught very few students, I have had to repeat topics. Unregistered students or without a Gmail address get the link from their friends. I have a personal standby facility in case of poor or no school internet. I have instituted random class-based activities to improve class attendance and it has worked. I give them topics to discuss and make presentations. The online platform is not very conducive for tests mainly due to poor internet connectivity as the duration a test has to be completed is timed. For this reason, tests will be replaced with short assignments.*

Funga shared the challenges she experienced with teaching during the COVID-19. She said,

> *When it comes to teaching during this COVID-19 period some challenges that I have encountered include spending more money on buying bundles for the internet at home because most of the teaching had been done at home especially in the early days of the COVID-19 period. Another challenge is getting students to actively participate in the classes. Most students are not participating in online classes due to the fact they also have financial challenges. Most of the students cannot manage to buy internet data bundles that will enable them to participate in the online classes. Most students also don't have smartphones and computers which makes it difficult for them to access online lectures. Teaching with face masks on is also a challenge. It is very difficult to*

> *talk and breathe with the face mask on especially for an hour or two. When it comes to research, I have not been able to conduct much research due to COVID-19.*

Mulinda's teaching was characterized by the challenges he encountered with students who gave numerous excuses for not submitting assignments, attending classes, or completing tasks on time. He said,

> *The students gave a lot of excuses for not doing their assignment and submitting on time. Some of the excuses were that they had no access to library facilities to easily work on their assignments, lack of laptops or desktop computers, poor internet connectivity and being remote from the university made it difficult to consult their colleagues and tutors on the assigned tasks. For me, this made my work cumbersome as marking was now based on whenever students submitted their assignments. The other challenge faced is that student's performance has slightly gone down due to missed online lessons for varied reasons including lack of familiarity with technology.*

Other than the challenges he encountered, Mulinda took the time to explain how he managed some of these challenges. He began by acknowledging his technological challenge with online teaching. He said,

> *My digital ability and fluency have been my starting point. I have attended in-house training organized by the department on how to teach online. I have also consulted colleagues on how to organize, connect and teach a class online including personal investment in appropriate gadgets and internet facilities. More consultations and learning continues on the preparation and uploading of teaching and learning materials. I have learned how to use Moodle for teaching and learning how to use it for assessing students. I also employed WhatsApp so that those who do not have laptops or desktops or internet facilities can easily access the learning materials on their phones. Students are also encouraged to communicate with me anytime they have challenges to understand given concepts, theories or instructions. I have continued to encourage and provide the necessary support to learners.*

According to Mulinda, these interventions have worked very well in meeting his teaching targets. He said,

> *The up-skilling of my digital skills has helped me to gain confidence and reduce anxiety on how I conduct online classes, uploading notes including giving instructions to learners. I have also noticed a reduction in excuses from my learners. I have not heard all the excuses they were making before except that of internet connectivity which I man convinced that it's a real challenge for many learners especially those in rural places. Most of them are now able to do attend classes and do their assignments.*

For Finka, her experiences of teaching were more directed at empathizing with learners who had to switch to online learning without being prepared for it. She feels that the intervention for online teaching and learning was prematurely implemented without considering many aspects. She said,

> *...Online teaching and learning was a welcome intervention considering the COVID-19 situation. However, its implementation was premature. The challenges encountered*

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

were that many students had not yet gotten familiar with e-learning. Others did not have smartphones or computers to use for online learning. The use of e-learning as a mode of teaching and learning was not only new to students but also some Part-time Tutors and Lecturers.

According to Finka, this situation caught her attention to intervene and avoid disruptions in service delivery. She said,

I had to prevent more damage to happen, so to partly resolve this situation, students as well Tutors and Lecturers were oriented on how to use e-learning. Tutors and Lecturers were encouraged to come to the office whenever they were teaching to use office Wi-Fi. Students were encouraged to buy smartphones and for those who could not afford them, I encouraged them to approach some of their friends who had, and ask if they could pair up and learn together as long as they observed the health guidelines put in place.

(c) Research

Research is an important part of adult education; without research, adult education practice is almost impossible. Research is everything that makes adult education practitioners effective and efficient in their work. Adult education research involves basic and applied research. This section shares the research experiences of the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mbita shares the difficulties of researching the COVID-19 pandemic. She identifies and highlights the COVID-19 restrictions as key barriers to engaging with her participants. This is because typically much of adult education research involves participatory action within the contexts of the research participants.

The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions such as social distancing and stay-at-home made research difficult. My kind of research requires the use of observation methods as well as face-to-face data collection methods. This is because I conduct studies on populations that normally have low literacy levels, so the questionnaire method is not one of the best. I am also making efforts to learn how to work around doing research that does not require much contact with a lot of people.

Similarly, Similarly, Mulinda's research work was hindered by COVID-19 restrictions, which also impacted student research supervision. His experience was that,

My research projects and student supervisions were greatly affected by the COVID-19 restrictions. The completion rate was low because of difficulties accessing the respondents. It was a challenge to administer and collect questionnaires during covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns as most organisations were closed due to COVID-19.

Funga shared that she was not able to research due to the COVID-19 restrictions. However, now that some restrictions have been lifted, she is considering conducting research that does not require physical contact with her participants. "*Now that there is relief on some COVID-19 restrictions I hope to do research that does not require much contact with a lot of people*".

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

Lemba, also acknowledges that research during the COVID-19 pandemic was equally affected. He observed resistance from the research participants for fear of contracting Coronavirus disease. However, his research intervention involved group-based research. He said *I teamed up with colleagues so that at least each one of us could collect data for the study as opposed to doing it individually.* Similarly, Kinda adopted a group research approach by working with colleagues. She said, "*In terms of research, firstly I managed to work with students and we are preparing to present the findings at virtual conferences and publishing others in journals as articles. I am also working with colleagues in the department on joint research, though data collection remains a challenge due to the still-raging pandemic.*

For Chembe conducting research was difficult because mobility and access to the participants were impeded by the pandemic. He shared that, "*It was a challenge to plan a study and later on access the participants to collect data. Even dissemination of research findings became a challenge as some international conferences were abruptly cancelled, with a few offering the virtual alternative, which required adjustment and different focus.*" Mbita's experience with research was that she made an effort to engage in research by observing the COVID-19 restrictions. According to her, face-to-face interviews with community members were possible through masking up and keeping a sizeable distance from the interviewee. She also mailed the questionnaires which were used to collect data from the literate participants. She said, through this intervention, her research targets were partially met and she is considering sharing her research findings at virtual conferences.

The future of extension studies

The participants shared common views regarding the future of extension studies. The outlook of extension studies is seen in terms of a transition from offering certificate and diploma programmes alone to include degree programmes. It needs indicating here that there is already a University of Zambia senate resolution of 2019 that all University of Zambia academic programmes are open to being provided through various modes of study. These include distance learning mode, face-to-face, parallel, block release, blended learning and extension studies (typically evening classes). However, there has been a slow implementation of this resolution. So the findings presented below could be understood in the sense of the drag in the actualization of the senate resolution.

For example, Finka said, "*degree programme for extension studies is a way to go as this move will revamp enrolments*". She went on to explain course delivery mode as well. She said, "*In terms of mode of delivery given the COVID-19, emphasis should be on building the internet infrastructure at all provincial centres for teaching and learning. Training of staff on the use of digital platforms for teaching including support for learners with e-learning services.* Similarly, Silavwe shared with optimism the need for degree programmes. He said, "*if degree programmes are introduced student numbers will improve but if the status quo is maintained I am afraid the numbers will continue shrinking.* For, Kweko she felt that the introduction of degree programmes on extension studies was long overdue. She said, "*degree programmes are the in-thing at the moment, and this step has a potential to bring back extension studies to its lost glory*". Kinda, shared similar views when she said, "*the current demand for extension studies programmes is on undergraduate degree programs, short courses and health-related programs. She added that this*

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

is important because the survival of extension studies is dependent on how well the response is to the current demand for the degree programmes".

The findings have revealed similarities and differences in the research participants' experiences while performing their roles.

(a) Similarities

All the participants shared the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and research that requires observation of human behaviour and in-depth conversational interviews. This experience explains the low completion rate of the students' scheduled researches. In support of this, the 2020 European Commission Report on adult learning reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced a digitalisation of education and rapidly pushed education and training systems to explore new ways of teaching and learning. And the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on adult learning (AL) has also been acute in the sense that participation in adult learning has been impacted, with adult learning providers and educators facing multiple challenges in continuing their learning offers and adapting to the situation (European Commission Education and Training, 2020). It was also observed that as part of the COVID-19 intervention for research, teaching and generally working online, the need for upscaling the ICT skills was common to all participants. Most of the participants acknowledged that ICT skills are critical to their practice. For this reason, Continuous Profession Development (CDP) is essential in this area. This finding is supported by the literature on the Challenges of COVID-19 on adult learning. For instance, World Education (2020) found that the efforts to slow the pace of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rapid pivot to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL). In the field of adult education, efforts to support online learning witnessed an urgent need to continuously build among others ICT capacity of adult education programmes and practitioners to serve their communities. This includes adult education learner and staff access to ICT devices and reliable internet connectivity including skills for online learning. These were primary barriers to the effective implementation and persistence of online teaching and learning.

The participants also shared a common perception of their adult education role. They perceived themselves as adult educators and their role was that of facilitating the learning process rather than teaching. From this perspective, some participants cited mutual respect, collaborative learning and the importance of independent learning. This orientation is also evidence of their support for ICT learning platforms as important aids and flexible avenues for adult learning in a global technological environment. This finding points to the identity of the adult educator, and studies have shown the impact on practice. For example, Bukor (2015) found that teacher identity is deeply embedded in one's biography and the beliefs and interpretations rooted in one's environment have an impact on among others instructional practice, and teaching philosophy. Similarly, a study on how teacher educators perceived themselves in terms of their role found a correlational impact on their professional identity. This identity shaped the way they viewed themselves as educators including their practice, and for others, it contributed to their leadership role and career progression (White, 2014).

In terms of the future of extension studies, there was a common emphasis on the need to introduce undergraduate degree programmes. This has been necessitated by the demand for degree programmes and higher education changing landscape. The insistence to continue offering certificate and diploma programmes has resulted in declining enrollments under extension studies.

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

Sichula (2016) projected that due to the global rise in demand for higher education, university extension education in Zambia and its services were likely to intensify in the foreseeable future. This includes changes in course offering and delivery by introducing degree programmes and diversifying modes of delivery that embraces technology to live up to the philosophy of extending university education from the centre to the periphery. The reality of diversifying modes of delivery is evident in the implementation of ICT tools by the University of Zambia management for purposes of improving teaching and learning. Further, this development resonates with the assertion by Cline, Rosson, and Weeks (2019) that the success of extension programmes can largely benefit from good leadership and management. Additionally, Dev, Blitch, Hatton-Bowers, and Ramsay (2018) observed the value of ICT tools through the use of live online sessions and video recordings for extension education in an innovative five-step procedure. They posit that video is a favoured adult learning tool as it conveys information through visual images and auditory signals thereby creating a higher level of engaging the learner effectively through ICTs.

Another area where participants shared similarities was the management of adult education programmes and activities. For instance, there are similar interventions towards teaching and learning, research and administration to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As earlier indicated under research and teaching, the management function suffered communication disruptions partly due to lack of sufficient ICT devices, affordable and reliable internet services. In support of this finding, Hidayat and Wibawa (2020) explored 'Crisis management and communication experience in education during the covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia'. The study shows management challenges which included communication difficulties and slow adaptation of technology. This situation resulted in lecturers not being able to manage the teaching and learning effectively. In both scenarios, building and fostering collaborative practices among adult education practitioners could be essential in strengthening the practices and narrowing the existing gaps.

Another fundamental similarity in the experiences of the participants is their non-involvement in research activities. The majority could not engage in research activities due to the barriers created by the COVID-19. We would suppose that while the Covid-19 created barriers for field-based research, it also created an opportunity for adult educators to conduct desk-based researches. The stay-at-home measure meant that adult educators had an opportunity to engage in desk research and other systematic literature reviews. But only two participants indicated their efforts in conducting field researches individually and group-based. The lack of research by adult educators in this study has the potential to affect the quality of adult learning support. The reality of the COVID-19 situation is that it is likely to be with us for some time. Therefore, utilizing the available research avenues will be a reasonable step for adult educators.

(b)   Differences

The differences in the experiences of the participants in performing their roles were the depth, nature and scale of interventions which varied from participant to participant. Some participants were quite robust, detailed and comprehensive in their interventions including innovation and creativity while others were basic. There could be many reasons for this development including contextual factors, personal and professional attributes of the participants. Van Wart and Kapucu (2011) found that a combination of key attributes such as self-confidence, decisiveness, adaptation and resilience by leaders is crucial in crisis management. This also includes the ability to identify and understand specific contextual factors including environmental demands. For adult educators,

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

effective crisis management involves a variety of skills and strategies, such as strategic planning, problem-solving, message production, information management, communication management and issues management (Wang, 2017).

An adult educator would require new strategies in crisis management and transformation based on the matter at hand considering contextual boundaries (Formenti & West, 2018). Sometimes the strategies do not come cheaply, they are costly, but if well designed they can be effective. These strategies may require developing segmented responses as opposed to a one-size-fits-all because challenges in adult education are usually in different segments (Bosworth, 2008).

Key lessons learned

(a) Disparities in adult education

It is quite evident that the COVID-19 has revealed existing disparities in the practice of adult education. These disparities are evident and more pronounced in the social and economic characteristics of adult learners and their communities. One of the biggest disparities we see from these findings is access to reliable technology and ICT devices. This also includes knowledge, skills and effective utilization of technology and ICT devices in teaching and learning. The ICT skill and knowledge disparity have been evident in both staff and learners. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) found that for the educator and students to engage effectively in online learning, exposure to ICT for both parties is necessary. Further, disparities in extension education exist as a result of the Resident lecturers' creativity and dynamic leadership. While challenges of extension education might be cross-cutting, the leadership exhibited in some provincial centres revealed positive gains. Chakanika, Sichula and Ngambi (2016) found that the principles of extension education have their roots in the field of adult education. This implies that the successful response to crisis and management of extension programmes depends to a larger extent on the Resident lecturer's knowledge of adult education.

(b) Need for diversity and inclusion

Another key lesson we have learned is that the pandemic has highlighted the need for addressing learner and educator diversity and inclusion to improve access to adult education. Learner and educator diversity has been revealed in terms of differences in needs, capabilities, potentials, assets, gender, linguistic, cultural and technology dynamics. Therefore, improved professional development and training in managing diversity and inclusion are necessary to reach more adult learners effectively. During COVID-19 inclusive family-based learning has gained ground as families have spent more time together. As adults play their caregiving role, they are indirectly involved in learning too. This is crucial especially in poor and marginalized communities.

(c) Participation in adult education

Different challenges have been highlighted regarding the COVID-19 and we all have been affected and responded differently. One important point to mention though is that despite these challenges adult education remains an answer. However, prioritizing adult education is likely not to be the case for everyone considering the socioeconomic disparities. There is a strong feeling that the

Journal of Adult Education, June 2021, 2(2)

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

participants in adult education and lifelong learning are more likely to be those who are already highly literate, as opposed to those with limited literacy skills and learning opportunities.

(d) Leadership is crucial in a crisis

Leadership is central to adult education for the reason that adults are the key players in the leadership process and the nature of adult education is that of facilitating learning for solving problems at different levels of human life (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Thus, adult education leader's knowledge of andragogy as a guiding framework for the selection and development of leadership decisions is critical for people to deal with a crisis (McCauley, Hammer, & Hinojosa, 2017). Effective leadership will aim at bringing people together, provided a clear perspective on what is happening and what response is needed to mobilize the population to act in the most effective ways to bring the crisis under control (Haslam, Steffens, Reicher, & Bentley 2021). In a crisis, identity leadership (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2020), offers a potent avenue grounded in the leader's ability to represent and advance the shared interests of group members and to create and embed a sense of shared social identity among them (a sense of "us-ness"). For leaders then, this sense of us-ness is the key resource that they need to marshal to harness the support and energy of citizens (Haslam, Steffens, Reicher, & Bentley, 2021).

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) underscore the need to embrace multiple ethical paradigms approach to assist educational leaders in grappling with complexities, uncertainty and diversity. This includes leaders examining both their personal and professional ethics in their day-to-day administrative decision-making processes. Adult educators are required to rise above the challenges of the interruptions associated with the COVID-19 period by spearheading the realignment of academic activities. In a crisis, leadership is pivotal in guiding the process and having systems and processes under control (McCauley, Hammer, & Hinojosa, 2017). However, the effectiveness of leadership in a crisis partly depends on the nature (and stage) of the crisis, what led to the crisis (e.g. natural disaster, industrial accident, gradual weakening) and how leadership style interacts with leaders and organizations prepared for the possibility of an organizational crisis (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). It is also important to indicate that preparation for different crisis scenarios can influence how leaders react to the crisis, which in turn affects crisis response outcomes (Powley & Taylor, 2014). Therefore, the significance of leadership provision in a crisis should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the experiences of adult educators in the Department of Adult Education and Extension Studies at the University of Zambia in performing their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences were varied and reveal different responses and interventions while performing their roles. The experiences were in three categories and included personal, teaching, and research. This article establishes that the participant's personal experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic had implications on how one performed their role. Like many people, fear, dread and anxiety were prominent emotions that were expressed during the interviews. This situation created a proportionate scale of uncertainty among the participants who concentrated on teaching and neglected research and yet research is an important aspect of quality teaching and learning. Although the COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges to adult

N.K. Sichula*, M. Changala, M. Luchembe, E.H. Mbozi, M. Mulaisho, M.S. Ngoma-Kaiko,
M. Namuyamba, F. Finch, F. Ngoma, S. Salinyinga

learning, there were also opportunities for research that these adult educators did not utilize – such as desk research as the majority were working from home. In terms of the similarities, the slow uptake of technology and preparedness for crisis management is a huge barrier to effective crisis management as these were part of the key interventions. Many participants indicated the challenge of managing the COVID-19 crisis at an individual level. Lack of ICT skills and knowledge played a bigger part in implementing online teaching and later on conducting research. Regarding the differences, the article concludes that the variations in the depth and comprehensiveness in responses and interventions reveal some participants' inability to fully engage with the field of adult education in dealing with the crisis. Some participants were quite detailed in their interventions in managing the crisis, while others were basic – suggesting their underutilization of adult education in crisis management. The views on the future of extension education were centred on the need for a paradigm shift in course offerings from a concentration on certificate and diploma programmes to offering undergraduate degree programmes in response to market demand. Finally, it is indisputable that adult education has an inherent element of every emergency strategy. However, this article concludes that the participants underutilised the potential of adult education in emergency preparedness and crisis management.

Acknowledgement

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