

# Challenges One Staff Member Management Faces in Managing a Regional Centre in ODL: A Case for Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia

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## Abstract

Managing distance education regional centres as one staff member in Namibia is a challenge that calls for greater administrative and academic interventions. Although much work on student support by researchers and practitioners has been published, few scholars have recently begun to explore, through qualitative research, the challenges of managing regional centres alone. This paper contributes to the endeavour by first identifying the challenges of a case for the three regional administrative and student support officers (RASSOs) of the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia. It then narrates and interprets the challenges collected through in-depth interviews via telephones supported by written documents. Main themes from the challenges include poor communication and isolation from the main campus, inconveniences caused to the RASSOs and loneliness. The conclusion of the study focuses on implications for student support services.

**Keywords:** *challenges; managing regional centres; one staff member management; ODL*

## 1. Overview

Good management of regional centres has recently become an issue in distance education and this is so with the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia (CES-UNAM). Well managed regional centres contribute greatly to student support services. CES-UNAM has its own challenges in regional centres that need to be revisited, studied and overcome. While research in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has primarily focused on distance education students, their environments of learning, study materials and student support services, limited attention has been directed towards challenges facing regional centres in remote areas managed by one person.

Do regional administrative and student support officers (RASSOs) face challenges everyday as they serve students in remote areas at the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia? *RASSO A* said, “yes, there is no clear communication between regional centres and the main campus”. This is a challenge that Sallis & Jones (2002) insist should be attended to by organisations. *RASSO C* said, “How I wish the University as an organisation comprises of a variety of “open” functional units that are ready to help CES grow.” This idea of ‘open’ functional units in ODL management is supported by Moore & Kearsley (1996); Inglis *et al* (1999); Bates (2000); Latchem & Hanna (2001); Sallis & Jones (2002).

The above two RASSOs expressed viewpoints that are related to the challenges of managing distance education regional centres. One main research questions guided the study: What challenges does one staff member face in managing a regional centre at the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia?” Many unrequited questions about managing distance education regional centres such as these are petitioning to be reconnoitred as the growth rate of distance education enrolments in higher education is exceeding the fulltime enrolments in developing countries. Because of the ‘stagnation of development’ in regional centres in Namibia, managing such centres have brought many new challenges to the administration and the academic support of distance education students.

This study therefore provides details of challenges as listed and discussed with three regional administrative and student support officers of CES-UNAM. The study narrates, interprets and suggests ways to overcome such barriers.

## 2. Purpose

Although studies have shown that most regional centres have more than one academic, administrative and other staff in regional centres, (Mishra, 1988; Garje and Rastogi, 1995; Rena, 2007), there does not seem to be any study that has focused on regional centres managed by only one person but with multiple and conflicting roles. The three regional centres studied have enrolments of students above 200. For example, amongst many of such roles, how does a single RASSO become the expert of academic, administrative and other issues? There is counselling of students that needs a lot of time. There is photocopying and multiplication of study materials as a result of less numbers sent to regional centres. There is supervision of the computer laboratory and the library. The time for vacation school comes and the regional manager needs to arrange the venue that is far away from the regional centre, supervise the tutorials, and, at the same time go back to the office and continue with the other aspects of the office. Are RASSOs satisfied with the way these activities cross their paths of duty every day? The above questions have not been studied sufficiently in ODL. Biswas (1999) and Basu (1996) argue that most of the open and distance learning institutes in the world have established student support service centres and/or regional/study centres to cater for a large number of students on various matters like, admission, courses, examination schedules, materials dispatch, counselling and so on. These are all forms of student support emanating from regional centres.

Therefore, the purpose of this case study is to address the main research question by studying the challenges of three RASSOs who have been managing the CES-UNAM regional centres alone for the past five and more years.

## 3. Potential Significance

The examples of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and the Open University-United Kingdom (OU-UK), have pointed out the importance of efficient management of regional centres (Anjanappa and Chaturvedi, 1989; Mishra, 1988). However, few studies have focused on the challenges of one staff member managing a regional centre in remote areas. Studying challenges of managing regional centres in distance education will expand the ODL understanding of student support in distance education (Latchen and Hanna, 2001; Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

### 3.1 General Research Question

The general research question was “*What challenges does one staff member face in managing a regional centre at the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia?*”

## 4. Brief Review of Related Literature

### 4.1 Defining Regional Centres

Anjanappa and Chaturvedi (1989) define regional centres as centres

“established or maintained by the University for the purpose of coordinating and supervising the work of Study Centres in any region and for performing such other functions as may be conferred on such centres by the Board of Management”.

Broadly speaking, in Namibia, these are sub-offices of the University of Namibia established in regions with responsibilities to synchronise and oversee the university's operations through the Centre for External Studies.

### 4.2 Functions of Regional Centres Worldwide Include Inter Alia

- Supervise and coordinate all the university activities at regional centres
- Organise face to face tutorials and vacation school with their related activities on behalf of the mother institution
- Market the University to both external and internal stakeholders
- Recruit students to apply for admission into fulltime and open and distance learning modes
- Recruit tutors who help students with face to face contacts. Such tutors may also develop study materials and take care of assignments and examinations.
- Take care of all examinations and tests at regional centres
- Act as the frontline desk of all open and distance learning students
- Manage the library and modulates ITC used by students (Centre for External Studies Staff Manual, 2006)

### 4.3 Organisation of the Regional Centres

Using a few cases as examples of the study, IGNOU has many regional centres managed by regional directors and several staff members. According to Anjanappa and Chaturvedi, (1989), a “Regional Director is in-charge of the university's activities within the region and responsible to the Director (Regional Services Division)”. The Regional Director’s principal responsibilities within a region include directing, “in accordance with established policies and procedures, the university's operations and to coordinate the working of study centres”.

The supporting staff work at the regional centres to take care of administration and academic duties. In some cases, they help the regional director with any day to day work that they may be requested to do. They maintain contacts and beneficial relationships with authorities and other interested bodies that contribute to the existence of the centre. They keep inventories of buildings, insurance security and safety as they coordinate the use of office equipment and furniture. They sometimes administer the contractual obligations of tutors and all personnel that work for the university (Anjanappa and Chaturvedi (1989).

Zimbabwe Open University has almost a similar arrangement to that of IGNOU where each regional centre has several staff members.

“In order to increase its accessibility for students, the university rapidly established regional centres in each of Zimbabwe’s ten provinces. Each regional centre serves as the hub for all the learning activities for students in that province: from registration to face-to-face tutoring and counselling and from assignment administration to a venue for invigilated examinations. These centres obviate the need for students to travel to the university’s headquarters in Harare, thus substantially cutting travelling costs”. (Retrieved 17 November 2012 from [http://www.sarua.org/?q=uni\\_Zimbabwe+Open+University](http://www.sarua.org/?q=uni_Zimbabwe+Open+University)).

The Madhya Pradesh Bhoj (Open) University, with the main campus in Bhopal, (India) has regional directors in all regional centres (Retrieved 17 November 2009 from [www.indiaedunews.net/notification/show.asp?nid=4283...](http://www.indiaedunews.net/notification/show.asp?nid=4283...)). The Open University of Tanzania has 25 regional centres with 23 in the Mainland and one in Unguja and one in Pemba. These regional centres have more one regional staff member each (Retrieved 17 November 2012 from [www.out.ac.tz/content/speech/document/diet-speech.pdf](http://www.out.ac.tz/content/speech/document/diet-speech.pdf)).

### 4.4 Facilities at Regional Centres

Each regional centre in the universities cited as examples above have libraries with reference books on open and distance learning, printed study materials developed by the University. Libraries also keep audio and video tapes including all soft information.

#### 4.4.1 Context and Background of CES, UNAM Regional Centres

CES-UNAM has nine regional centres around the country. Most of the regional centres are found or serve students from very remote areas of the country. They are referred to as remote areas because numerous infrastructural facilities are inadequate or nonexistent. These include electricity, cellphone network coverage, libraries, public roads and learning centres. The functions of CES-UNAM regional centres include amongst others:

- “supervision and coordination of the work at the regional centres, ensure a spirit of goodwill among students as well as staff;
- organisation of contact programmes and contact sessions as per the university's policies;
- To promote public awareness in the region of the university and its role, and goodwill towards the university among the officers and staff of institutions of higher, adult and continuing education;
- to encourage students to apply for admission to the university;
- to encourage and promote positive and helpful attitudes towards the university's students on the part of employers and local authorities;
- To exercise necessary control on full-time and part-time staff and students in accordance with the provisions of the university's rules” (Centre for External Studies Staff Manual, 2012)

#### 4.4.2 Organisation of the CES-UNAM Regional Centres

Each regional centre of CES-UNAM has a RASSO. The centre at the main campus employs distance education officers, store managers, administrative coordinators and other supporting staff. Three of the centres with higher student numbers have two academic and outreach coordinators. One regional centre that is bigger than all has two distance education officers with a lecturer and a store manager. The second largest regional centre has a

librarian-cum-administrative assistant. All other centres are run by a single person.

Where the universities reviewed in this paper have local centres and regional centres managed by several staff members (Rena, 2007); CES-UNAM has only regional centres managed by one staff member known as a RASSO.

Responsibilities of the RASSOs amongst others, in a nutshell include:

- ✓ Provision of student information and answering enquiries from the general public
- ✓ Distribution of study materials
- ✓ Handling and safekeeping of finances
- ✓ Provision of Library services
- ✓ Provision of outreach programmes
- ✓ Provision of student support services
- ✓ Examinations administration
- ✓ Provide services to students of other institutions as per agreement/contract (Centre for External Studies Staff Manual, 2012)

Besides the RASSOs, CES-UNAM has two academic and outreach coordinators in two large regional centres.

#### *4.5 Responsibilities of the Academic and Outreach Coordinators*

Amongst other responsibilities, the academic and outreach coordinators are responsible for:

- ✓ The recruitment of tutors,
- ✓ Arranging and supervising contact sessions,
- ✓ Tutoring in their areas of academic specialisation,
- ✓ Marking assignments and examinations,
- ✓ Overseeing the administration of regional centres,
- ✓ Initiating and coordinating outreach programmes,
- ✓ Liaison officer for the department of continuing education
- ✓ Organizing and attending seminars and workshops
- ✓ Providing academic leadership to the outreach and academic services
- ✓ Monitoring progress of outreach and academic services
- ✓ Providing advice and support to the RASSOs (Centre for External Studies Staff Manual, 2012)

#### *4.6 CES-UNAM Facilities at Regional Centres*

Facilities at the regional centres vary according to the size of the centre. The biggest regional centre has a big library with videoconferencing facilities. All other centres have small libraries that contain books related to courses offered on distance education, course study materials developed by the University, reference books, audio and video tapes. One also finds printed study materials, audio and video study materials. There are computers that facilitate web-based learning.

## **5. Theoretical Framework**

Research findings (Miller, 1978; Miller & Friesen, 1984; Miles & Snow, 1986, 1992, Morgan, 1997, Lawley and Tompkins, 2000) supported the idea that successful management in distance education should be seen as what happens in successful business companies. Although the organisation and management of regional centres with several staff members have been recognised by several researchers as successful industries (Anjanappa and Chaturvedi, 1989), the one staff managed regional centres in distance education have not been well studied. In trying to find ways of understanding the discussion, the study is grounded in the 'systems theory' borrowed from the business world of sound management. The system theory amongst many, purports that organisations should work as organisms. This organisational theory agrees that social needs are important in the workplace (Hawthorne studies) and humans struggle to self-actualisation everyday (Maslow's theory of motivation) (Morgan, 1997, 1998). He further states that the failure to that yields bad results. The Tavistock Institute of Human Resources incorporated the human and technical aspects of work. Thus in the end, the biological (organisms metaphor) behavioural, psychological, anthropological, social

perspective studies impacted on several organisations and they came to life (Morgan, 1997, 1998). This is what should happen in distance education.

Life in organisations assumes several things. Firstly, it assumes that there must be openness in the system where purposeful living things exist together flexibly with great dynamism within given environments. Secondly, it adopts an open and creative social system where the roles and responsibilities of the organisation are flowing with ease. Thirdly, it assumes that the organisation can compete against others because it has the ability to survive as it is adaptive or generative in its daily operations. It has a sound relationship between itself and its environment. Such setting allows Total Quality Assurance principles to flourish centring on improving the organisation's business processes and build capacities for its own employees as social organisms within its structures. The employees in such organisations work toward workable solutions when faced by challenges as a result of the life that has been breathed into them by the senior managers (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1996)

In distance education, Wedemeyer (in Moore & Kearsley, 1996); Peters (1967), Keagan (1994) and Moore, (2007) also supported the systems theory. They realise that distance education also needs to be broken down into manageable systems. These include teaching, instructional media, educational support with appropriate division of labour. The OU-UK base their ideas of industrialisation on Peters & Wedemeyer where they eventually broke down their systems into subsystems such as own finances, curricula, faculties, crediting and what to offer across degrees (Keagan, 1994). Of course all this work realises the division of labour.

Even if some researchers (Shobe, 1982; Coldeway, 1987) do not support the systems theory; Saba & Twtchell, (1988) endorse the theory. It is the systems theory that is embedded in literature that should govern the administration, management, policy making and leadership of distance education especially in regional centres where division of labour looks to be a barrier or non-existent.

## 6. Design and Methodology

### 6.1 Overall Approach and Rationale

This study has followed the qualitative way of understanding the case for the CES-UNAM regional centres. According to Eisner (1991), qualitative research is “the search for qualities--the characteristics of the researcher's experience”. Qualitative research study is “field-focused, constructed so that the researcher is an instrument, interpretive in nature, expressive in language, highly detailed, and is persuasive” (Eisner (1991:32-40).

Qualitative inquiry is a “systematic process of describing, analysing and interpreting insights discovered in everyday life” (Wolcott, 1994). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) defined qualitative research as:

“... multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials case study, personal experience, introspective, life story interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts-that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives.”

Creswell (2014) divided qualitative research into five main qualitative research types, i.e. the biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. This study chose the case study type as the researcher needed to explore and understand the case for single management and administration at regional centres at CES-UNAM. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Stake (1988) referred to qualitative research as “naturalistic inquiry, which is a careful study of human activity in its natural and complex state”. Finally, qualitative inquiry widens the researcher's field of knowledge or disproves the accepted theories through contrasts with other cases. The case was explored and understood using the interpretive methodology of understating case studies.

For example, the ability to interpret is quite natural and occurs from the commencement of an experience, as when one is stung by a bee, begins to swell and eventually feels sick. One is translating the experience in any given language and is “bound by an anthropological lens as opposed to a psychological one”. The undertaking of the raconteur of the understanding is to attain a deeper explanation of the experience.

Eisner (1991) defined interpretation as a “process of explaining the meaning of an event by putting it in its context, making the experience vivid, identifying its prior conditions and potential consequences, and providing reasons for practices”. As we have seen with the sting of a bee, there are different meanings that could be interpreted from such an experience. Parts of the experience may have meaning while others may not. Interpretations are good guesses or suppositions. The researcher therefore engaged in interpretation to find out the meaning to the events that surround the

lonely regional manager. Guesses and suppositions for future research emanated from this kind of study.

The process of interpretation is simultaneously interwoven with description. Maitland-Gholson and Ettinger (1994) reminded researchers that when interpreting, they should remember to 1) state their pre-understandings of the occurrence and elucidate its context; 2) realise that the researcher's information is probably true; 3) seek entirety and consistency of meaning in the description; 4) search for the human meaning of the phenomenon and all its "etymological, traditional, and philosophical meanings"; and 5) apply own findings to own life and state how the experience has transformed the researcher. The underlying philosophy in interpretation as used by the researcher was to understand "different interpretive research roles in order to: 1) construct meanings directly from participants' words and actions [phenomenology], and 2) disclose patterns of power and behaviour through linguistic analysis [interpretive analytics]."

### 6.2 Population Selection and Access

In this study, two criteria were required in selecting the participants: 1) they were all regional administrative and student support officers in distance education and 2) they could consciously articulate their experiences. At the same time, this study tried to follow the maximum variation sampling techniques. In selecting the co-researchers (participants) for this study, the co-researchers should have (1) worked for CES-UNAM as RASSOs for five years and more, (2) come from different environmental settings of Namibia i.e. urban and remote, and (3) possessed a wide range of experiences with distance education. The goal of this sampling method was not to generalise, but rather to see the pattern emerging from a variety of backgrounds.

To follow the criteria for population selection and access, the following steps were used to select the participants:

1. A statement of purpose was prepared and sent to all RASSOs. The statement included the intention of the study and an invitation to have a short interview with the researcher.
2. For the participants who responded to the invitation, a 15-minute interview was conducted via telephone with each person. There were two purposes for the short interviews: Firstly, to inform the interviewees the purpose of the study and their rights in the study process. Secondly, to find out if the interviewees were suitable and if they had time to commit to this study.

### 6.3 Sample and Sampling Procedures

CES-UNAM has nine regional centres across the country. Three regional centres with one staff member were used at the sample. They were purposively sampled on the basis that they have served longer as one staff member at their regional centres. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants on the basis of one's belief that they had adequate knowledge on the subject under discussion rather than selecting them on the basis of criteria unilaterally constructed by the researcher prior to interacting with members of the target group. This procedure allowed the researcher to work within known and repetitive behaviour and where those being interviewed were likely to be cooperative and knowledgeable about the human experience that was being studied (LeCompte M. D. *eds* 1992). It also allowed the researcher to choose a case because it illustrated some feature or process in which there is interest (Saba, 2000 and Gay & Airasian, 2003). The researcher focused exclusively on key persons until enough and meaningful data was collected for the study.

### 6.4 Qualitative Methods of Data Collection

The researcher chose the interview and the use of the electronic mail as key ways of capturing the data. The interview is one of the major sources of data collection, and it is also one of the most difficult ones to get right. In qualitative research the interview is a form of discourse. The general format of the interview was a dyad (one interviewer and one RASSO).

According to Mischler (1986) qualitative research's particular features reflect the distinctive organisation and aims of interviewing, namely, that it is discourse shaped and organised by asking and answering questions. An interview is a *joint product* of what interviewees and interviewers talk about together and how they talk with each other. The record of an interview that we researchers make and then use in our work of analysis and interpretation is a representation of that talk. A semi-structured interview protocol was selected for this paper. It allowed more variation than traditional structured interviewing and reflected the importance of co-construction between the research and participants. The interview protocol was designed according to the general research question of the study. Interview probes were the key techniques in data collection.

As Gubrium and Holstein (2002) noted, we "live in an interview society". Besides in-depth interviews, a search was conducted to find a variety of documents to collect more data for this study. The documents were: (1) the

responsibilities of RASSOs, (2) CES-UNAM policies on management of regional centres

### 6.5 Data Analysis Procedures and Display

The database consisted of interview transcriptions from open ended questions supported by written text that came through to the researcher via electronic mail. Narrative analysis was used. This is a strategy that recognises the extent to which the stories we tell provide insights about our lived experiences. The data (both from transcriptions and emails) were narrated and interpreted to retell a new story about RASSOs managing regional centres alone.

The researcher looked for categories and subcategories that eventually ended up into five major themes after several coding was done. This was the identification of passages of text and applying labels to them that indicated they were examples of some thematic idea. The labelling or coding process enabled the researcher quickly to retrieve and collect together all the text and other data that were associated with some thematic idea so that they could be examined together and different cases could be compared in that respect.

The researcher then used a notebook for collecting responses that repeatedly showed similarities so that themes were marked for further presentation and analysis. Carefully coding the repeated statements in the notebooks so that it was enabled the researcher to check back and scrutinise bits and pieces of the broader context in which that data occurred. The researcher needed to know where the snippets of data in the notebooks came from so that they could be re-arranged to display needed data.

As data display and analysis were interwoven, the researcher continued to capture data on the spot, immediately went back to the data and made sense of it for further display and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994:51). After capturing the relevant data, it was imperative that the researcher reduced data to manageable sizes of information that could later be displayed for analysis.

At the end of the cycle four themes were identified. These included communication, loneliness, inconveniences and isolation as challenges. Matrices, tables and checklists were used to display the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## 7. Limitations

Although the focus of this study is management of regional centres by one staff member, it would also be beneficial to conduct interviews with the other regional centres, director of CES-UNAM, senior administrators, and other related personnel. By only interviewing three RASSOs, it is hard to see the whole picture of this case because it intertwines with so many other issues in an institutional setting at different regional centres. It was also difficult to gauge reliable and valid responses as interviewees tend to hide information from the interviewer when RASSOs know that they are talking to the interviewer via telephone.

## 8. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The interview discussions through the telephone and the interaction with the written text through the email yielded a good story. It is not easy to run a regional centre alone. Many challenges are felt on the spot as the one staff member has to juggle among many difficult simultaneous activities at the centre. In a day's time, *RASSO A* said the RASSO has "planned, led, organised, communicated and controlled" numerous activities that could have been done by different people at different times with precision and quality. Unfortunately, this manager's job, as remonstrated by *RASSO B*, is "poor at CES". RASSOs feel that they are greatly inconvenienced while doing their actual job. RASSOs were asked to share the challenges they face each day as they manage the centre being alone. Their responses are summarised below.

**Table 1.** Themes and Subthemes

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Categories/subcategories</i>
1. Communication	1.1 Telephone calls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Unanswered</li> <li>➤ Unreturned</li> </ul>
	1.2 Lost items <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Assignments</li> <li>➤ Portfolios for students</li> <li>➤ Marks</li> </ul>
	1.3 Electronic mails

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	➤ Harsh tone in emails
	➤ Unreturned emails
	1.4 Information
	➤ Late to centres
	➤ Delayed or no feedback on students' tests and assignments
2. Isolation	2.1 distance
	➤ Between regional centres
	➤ From students
3. Facilities	3.1 Library
	➤ Inadequate materials
	➤ Irrelevant books and journals
4. Inconvenience	"There is no time one can easily take leave"

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Retelling a story using interpretation technique allowed the researcher to use quotations from sources to build a new story with the same cultural context. When one looks in column c) of Table 2, one sees that RASSOs are frustrated. They find it difficult to run regional centres alone. This frustration is evident and indicated when *RASSO B* said "we should have lecturers that are permanent at regional centres who should handle academic issues". This was also an indication that CES-UNAM should place more staff in the regions as is the practice in other institutions worldwide. RASSOs are primarily recruited to run administrative subsystems which are part of student support services. Academic staff should also be recruited to run the subsystems that complete the picture of student support services at regional centres.

**Table 2.** Data Display Matrix on Perceptions and Assessments on the Most on the Most Difficult Challenge at Regional Centres

<i>Subsystem</i>	<i>a) challenge named</i>	<i>b) which one is too strong a challenge?</i>	<i>c) why?</i>
Academic issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ "lack of equipped library facilities" (<i>Document A</i>)</li> <li>➤ "lecturers are not available to coach the students" (<i>Document B</i>)</li> <li>➤ "Distance students are treated like second class" (<i>Document A</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ "lack of equipped library facilities" (<i>Document A</i>)</li> <li>➤ "lecturers are not available to coach the students" (<i>Document B</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ "there is nothing that regional centres can do to equip libraries" (<i>Document A</i>)</li> <li>➤ "we are not lecturers and so we cannot speak directly to them with authority" (<i>Document B</i>)</li> </ul>
Administrative issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ "the central command is not quick to respond to student queries" (<i>Document B</i>)</li> <li>➤ "Lack of coordinated communication between centre and regional centres" (<i>Document C</i>)</li> <li>➤ "we feel that our seniors at the main campus do not appreciate the time and effort that we invest in our work" (<i>Document A</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ "the central command is not quick to respond to student queries" (<i>Document C</i>)</li> <li>➤ "Lack of coordinated communication between centre and regional centres" (<i>RASSO B</i>)</li> <li>➤ "we will that our seniors at the main campus do not appreciate the time and effort that we invest in our work" (<i>Document B</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ "Each officer has their own way of handling matters. We are not a unity" (<i>Document B</i>)</li> <li>➤ "We report to the Asst Registrar and still liaise with the academics, stores and examinations department, too much work on one person" (<i>RASSO B</i>)</li> <li>➤ "We work each day, we report issues, our working conditions in terms of isolation and oneness but they do not seem to get to us and help us" (<i>RASSO A</i>)</li> </ul>

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One main area of interest in this study was to find out the simultaneous activities that developed as challenges at regional centres. RASSOs, in their own words, showed once more that it is not easy to run regional centres being a single person. The table below summarised such simultaneous activities as challenges.

**Table 3.** Simultaneous Activities as Challenges

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Activity 1</i>	<i>Simultaneous activity on the same day</i>
1. Oneness	1.1 Registration	1.1.1 Academic counselling
	1.2 Registration	1.2.1 Examinations
	1.3 Registration	1.3.1 Study materials dispatch
	1.4 Registration	1.4.1 Banking of previous day's money
	1.5 Vacation school	1.5 Doing any of the above, including managing the library and the computer laboratory
2. Communication	2.1 Registration	2.1.1 Examination queries
		2.1.2 Marks for students, missing or totally lost
	2.2 Telephone reception	

The information above implied that RASSOs would want to see other staff being employed possibly as examination officers, counsellors, lecturers, store clerks and some who could be doing different jobs at the regional centres. The themes that emanated from the findings as challenges from this discussion are communication problems, loneliness, inconvenience and isolation.

#### *8.1 Communication*

Communication is one of the causes of all the pressure that RASSOs feel at regional centres. "You know at CES we at the centre have to smell and guess what is happening – we even get the registration info (sic) from students and not from CES" (*RASSO C*). The RASSO further insisted that there is "no information from CES and no support from CES". Examples were given where prospective students would bring new information to the regional centre that is unknown to them.

#### *8.2 Loneliness*

Loneliness is another challenge that has crept into the management of regional centres that are far away from the main campus. This is different from being one staff member as one finds oneself with many students but who are demanding too much work from one person. "We work alone all day fulfilling multiple roles at our centres. It is not good and it makes one wonders why our seniors do not employ other people to help us" (*RASSO B*).

Loneliness is described by TOP Health (2001) as a pervasive feeling of emptiness, a perception of being separate from others and missing out on meaningful relationships, regardless of whether a person has frequent interactions with people or is a "loner". "I would like to work in an environment that where I am talked to by colleagues, not necessarily students. I cannot wait to find a job elsewhere that gives me a sense of belonging" (*RASSO A*). Feeling isolated and disconnected can lead to feelings of sadness and eventually one may begin to hate the job.

#### *8.3 Inconvenience*

RASSOs are forced to come back to their regional centres for activities if they were on leave as there are no substitutes. There are also times "when the RASSO has no weekends because of mature age tests one weekend and 2<sup>nd</sup> assignment tests the next and so forth.... At the end of the year one has not had convenient time for private activities. It is greatly inconveniencing" (*Document A*).

#### *8.4 Isolation*

According to Wunsch (2000),

"Autonomy can give a director a sense of personal control over daily operations, but the long-term results of isolation from the mainstream of campus process carry a heavy price (p. 65)."

Wunsch (2000) goes on to state, "proactive, risk-taking leadership means that no director can stand being a single person or behind the scenes (p. 65)." RASSOs A and C strongly showed that they felt they are isolated from the central

points of decision making. RASSO A insisted that “employing more than one person at regional centres would solve many hurdles that we are experiencing. You cannot be a leader and a follower at the same time. It is also difficult to be led like a robot at a distance. A leader or a colleague must be nearby to help with on the spot decision making”.

### **9. Implications for Theory and Practice**

Management is a multifaceted field of learning. The role of a manager is to attain desired outcomes through the efforts of others as they show up their presence on the spot. The absence of sound management results in wasted time and resources and ultimately a reduced lowest line. The challenges from the findings imply that ODL management demands effectiveness and quality in all its undertakings.

ODL is an organisation with systems. Such systems need meaningful management in their daily operations. A lack of total quality management has bearings on the clients of the organisation, which in this case, are the students. Total quality management is an essential approach for achieving superior performance to satisfy students with high quality, quick delivery of learning aids and low costs. Conflicting roles for one staff member at a regional centre opposes the assurance of total quality delivery. Such roles lead to loneliness, isolation and inconveniences RASSOs leading to breeding of low self-actualisation. Signs of low energy, indecisiveness, and lack of accountability follow. Conflicting management roles decrease the morale of the employees. Morale and motivation work in tandem. Morale is the base of motivation and motivation is a key component of productivity in systems. Morale shows the general condition of the emotions of a person while motivation drives one's efforts to perform. The higher the morale and motivation, the higher the results.

Finally, when no extra support is showed to good regional managers, they flee and end up working for a competitor while the poor regional manager continues to drain resources from their employer.

### **10. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Distance education institutions have certain distinctive features that require management styles and patterns different from those normally associated with traditional universities. Most universities across the world were established and developed in the liberal traditions of self-governing institutions marked by a style that is collegial and participatory. Distance teaching universities on the other hand combine in themselves functions of a traditional university as well as the assembly of line processes associated with a modern industrial enterprise, since most of them have also to manage large scale production and distribution functions.

The management styles of distance teaching universities, therefore, require an approach that is more techno-managerial than the collegial-liberal traditions of the conventional university. Unless the CES-UNAM is efficient in its daily operations at regional centres, it is unlikely to serve the needs of a vastly distributed student body with many of whom the institution may not come in direct contact as a result of remoteness of the developing countries. The separation of the CES-UNAM from its students demands that the line operations (regional centres) have to be closely supported for total execution with precision. The institution therefore needs to implement modern management practices and methods that improve efficiency where other staff members should be employed in regional centres to assure quality of the products and services, and also keep up the morale of the managers and the student body irrespective of their locality.

CES-UNAM has seen RASSOs that have showed a variety of individual personality traits, characterised by self-serving and negative attitudes toward others. Self-esteem has become low in some RASSOs and they have become negative because in them is a self-defeating attitude; feeling unneeded and misunderstood. They feel that no one trusts them and may leave their jobs when self motivating jobs arise elsewhere (RASSO C). This is also supported by TOP Health (2001) that they may even fail to control their social situations as they are likely to be bossy, aggressive in behaviour and be hostile to new innovations in the organisation that employs them. Regional centres managed by one person engaging in numerous activities simultaneously are destined to doom and failure. CES-UNAM as an organisation should be characterised by its teamwork internally and externally with collaboration as key.

There is a need to employ a small core of permanent full-time staff, consisting of academic, professional, technical and administrative personnel, supplemented by a much larger number of part-time staff at different locations engaged for specific periods and for specific tasks at regional centres.

There is also a need for CES-UNAM to engage in some research to find out the impact and cost effectiveness of one staff member managing a regional centre with multiple activities. The results thereof would add knowledge to ODL

institutions with smaller numbers of students.

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