

# Balancing work, family, and professional growth: Coping strategies of adult learners in Zimbabwe

<sup>1</sup>Florence Sebele & <sup>2</sup>Phumuzani Mpofu

## Abstract

Adult learners in Zimbabwean Design and Technology programmes often struggle to balance work, family, and academic responsibilities, resulting in tensions that affect their emotional, social, and professional development. Hence, this study examined the challenges experienced by adult learners and the coping strategies they adopt to sustain resilience, holistic well-being, and academic success. Framed within an interpretivist paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine part-time students and two focus group discussions. Purposive sampling ensured diversity in age, gender, professional roles, and family responsibilities. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation, member checking, and the use of audit trails. Five themes emerged from the study: balancing competing responsibilities; coping strategies and routines; impact on family and social life; institutional support and limitations; and financial pressures. The findings indicate that personal coping strategies, social support, and institutional facilitation satisfy learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, enabling resilience, engagement, and academic achievement. Institutional constraints and financial stressors intensified challenges, while structured routines, effective time management, and external support networks were central coping mechanisms. The study was limited to a small sample of part-time adult learners within a specific disciplinary context, which may restrict generalisability. Nevertheless, the findings offer practical implications for curriculum development, institutional support systems, and adult education policy. Flexible programme design, blended learning modalities, financial support, and wellness-oriented policies are critical for enabling adult learners to succeed in resource-constrained contexts while safeguarding their holistic well-being and professional growth.

**Keywords:** *adult education, Design and Technology education, work–family–school balance, academic success*

## Article History:

*Received:* January 3, 2026

*Accepted:* March 4, 2026

*Revised:* February 19, 2026

*Published online:* March 7, 2026

## Suggested Citation:

Sebele, F. & Mpofu, P. (2026). Balancing work, family, and professional growth: Coping strategies of adult learners in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 7(1), 157-177. <https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353329>

## About the authors:

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. PhD in Education with Curriculum Studies. Senior Lecturer, National University of Science and Technology. Email: [florence.sebele@nust.ac.zw](mailto:florence.sebele@nust.ac.zw)

<sup>2</sup>PhD in Education with Educational Psychology. PostDoc, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.



## 1. Introduction

Research on adult education consistently emphasises that returning to formal study often entails negotiating multiple, competing role demands that extend beyond the classroom (Kasworm, 2010; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). For instance, adult learners pursuing Design and Technology (D&T) programmes in Zimbabwe face significant pressures as they attempt to balance professional, family, and academic responsibilities. In professional programmes such as D&T, which require extensive hands-on engagement, continuous assessment, and long-term project work, these pressures are particularly pronounced. While further qualifications offer pathways to career advancement, financial security, and personal development, adult learners often experience stress, reduced family interaction, and compromised academic performance as they navigate competing responsibilities (Andrade et al., 2024).

Globally, the intersection of work, family, and education has received considerable attention. In the Global North, these tensions are conceptualised through the lens of work–family conflict, which highlights inter-role strain arising when demands in one domain constrain participation in others (Shockley et al., 2021). In the Global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, these challenges are compounded by socioeconomic pressures, limited institutional flexibility, and resource constraints (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). In Zimbabwe, adult learners often pursue part-time professional development programmes while also fulfilling family and income-generating responsibilities, creating a complex context in which role conflict and coping strategies must be understood.

Within Zimbabwean higher education, the national agenda of Education 5.0 and the strategic drive toward industrialisation have elevated the importance of technical and vocational programmes such as D&T (Mupaikwa, 2025; Alharbi, 2023; Togo & Gandidzanwa, 2021; Mpofu et al., 2026). These programmes aim not only to develop competent professionals but also to foster innovation, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial skills critical for national development. Despite this emphasis, research on Zimbabwean adult learners has largely focused on access, completion rates, and curriculum reforms (Maringe & Sing, 2014), leaving a gap in understanding how learners sustain wellness, motivation, and resilience while managing work, family, and academic demands.

Theoretically, this study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which posits that adult learners' motivation and well-being depend on the fulfilment of

three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For adult learners juggling multiple roles, autonomy in time management, competence across professional and academic tasks, and supportive relationships within families and institutions are pivotal for persistence and success. Applying SDT in the Zimbabwean D&T context provides insights into student motivation and wellness in resource-constrained higher education systems and informs institutional policy and practice.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to address critical knowledge gaps and inform both national and global education priorities. By focusing on the lived experiences of Zimbabwean adult learners, the research highlights the human dimension of Education 5.0 reforms, illustrating how institutional support can mitigate stress, enhance motivation, and strengthen retention. Practically, the findings can guide universities and policymakers in designing flexible, inclusive, and supportive learning environments that respond to the realities of adult learners. Moreover, the study contributes to broader discussions on equity in higher education, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), by promoting inclusive lifelong learning, employability, and industrial innovation.

Accordingly, this study investigates the lived experiences of adult learners in Zimbabwean D&T programmes by examining how they manage tensions between work, family, and professional development, the coping strategies they adopt, and the extent to which institutional support fosters wellness and academic achievement.

## **2. Literature Review**

Adult learners pursuing vocational and professional programmes, such as D&T, often face significant pressures balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities. Globally, studies show that managing multiple roles can create conflict and stress that challenge learners' well-being and academic persistence (Yusoff, 2026; Andrade et al., 2024). In the SADC region, including South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe, these challenges are compounded by limited institutional flexibility, socioeconomic pressures, and access constraints that affect participation and engagement in higher education (Park & Su, 2026). Programmes requiring hands-on engagement, continuous assessment, and long-term projects intensify these pressures, making adult learners particularly vulnerable to work–family–academic conflict.

Despite the international recognition of adult learners' challenges, most studies focus on traditional academic programs (i.e., Kariwo, 2009; Gomba & Chigarira, 2025; Munamatia et al., 2023; Maphosa & Oughton, 2021; Simon et al., 2024; Pasipanodya & Khosa, 2024; Mpofo & Youngman, (2001; Mutanana, 2019), leaving a research gap in vocational disciplines such as D&T. Little is known about how adult learners in these programs sustain well-being, motivation, and resilience while navigating competing responsibilities, especially in resource-constrained contexts like Zimbabwe. Addressing this gap aligns with the study's objectives to explore adult learners' experiences within professional D&T programmes and identify factors influencing their academic success and holistic wellness

### ***2.1. Coping Strategies Employed by Adult Learners***

Adult learners often adopt diverse coping strategies to manage the pressures of work–family–academic conflict. Common strategies include structured routines, time management, leveraging digital tools, seeking support from family and peers, and employing blended learning platforms (Hendricks & Mutongoza, 2023). In the SADC region, research indicates that online resources, the use of mobile devices to access learning materials, and flexible scheduling can alleviate some role strain for learners, although access to technology, connectivity issues, and infrastructure limitations remain constraints (Zwane & Mudau, 2024). However, the effectiveness of coping strategies is mediated by institutional support. Evidence suggests that when flexible policies, academic advising frameworks, and mentorship structures are available, adult learners are better able to manage competing demands and maintain resilience (De Klerk et al., 2024). Studies focusing on vocational and professional programmes in Zimbabwe, particularly D&T, remain limited. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining how adult learners combine personal coping mechanisms with structural support to sustain academic achievement and well-being.

### ***2.2. Institutional Support and Its Impact***

Institutional structures play a critical role in shaping adult learners' experiences. Studies in Southern Africa demonstrate that flexible program design, financial assistance, academic advising, and wellness initiatives positively influence learner outcomes (Dukhi et al., 2024; Mukhithi et al., 2025). Conversely, rigid timelines, limited resources, and inadequate support systems exacerbate stress and hinder learner success.

In Zimbabwe, while policies such as blended learning and adult education support frameworks exist, their implementation in vocational D&T programmes is inconsistent (Mangwende & Nhlanhla, 2023). Wellness-focused interventions such as counselling, peer support, and work–life balance programs are recommended but largely underdeveloped. This highlights a gap in empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of institutional support in mitigating role conflict for adult learners in resource-constrained settings (Lesunyane et al., 2025).

### ***2.3. Implications for Curriculum Design and Policy***

Curriculum design and institutional policy are key determinants of adult learners' academic success and well-being. Flexible and responsive curricula, blended learning modalities, and inclusion of resilience-building strategies can enhance learners' capacity to navigate multiple responsibilities effectively (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In the SADC region, evidence suggests that aligning program delivery with learners' professional and personal schedules improves engagement, reduces stress, and fosters motivation (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). Despite recognition of these strategies, research on their implementation and impact in Zimbabwean D&T education is scarce. This study thus investigates the interplay of personal coping strategies and institutional support, offering actionable insights for curriculum design, policy development, and support systems tailored to adult learners' unique needs.

### ***2.4. Theoretical Framework***

The study is anchored in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017), which posits that motivation and well-being depend on fulfilling three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For adult learners in D&T programmes, autonomy relates to managing time and learning pathways; competence involves confidence in performing professional and academic tasks; and relatedness pertains to supportive interactions with peers, family, and institutions (Wang et al., 2019; Chiu, 2021). By linking SDT constructs to anticipated findings, the study can offer targeted recommendations for policies, curricula, and interventions that strengthen adult learners' well-being in vocational programs within resource-constrained contexts.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Design***

This study adopted a qualitative methodological approach to explore the lived experiences of adult learners enrolled in D&T programmes in Zimbabwe. The study was guided by an interpretivist research paradigm, which seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences within specific social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paradigm was appropriate for the study because the research aimed to explore how adult learners perceive, interpret, and manage the complex interplay between work, family responsibilities, and professional development within Zimbabwean D&T programmes.

Within this paradigm, a qualitative phenomenological research design was employed. Phenomenology focuses on capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This design was suitable because the study sought to gain in-depth insights into adult learners' experiences of role conflict, coping strategies, and institutional support rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses. The design also aligned with the study's theoretical framework, SDT, by allowing exploration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as experienced in participants' everyday academic and professional lives.

#### ***3.2. Participants of the Study***

Nine participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria comprised part-time adult learners enrolled in D&T programmes within continuous professional development frameworks who were concurrently employed and had family responsibilities at a Zimbabwean university. Exclusion criteria included full-time students and individuals without professional or family obligations, as their experiences did not align with the focus of the study. Adult learners were deliberately targeted because the study sought to examine experiences of balancing work, family, and professional development challenges that are characteristic of this group and central to the research questions. While the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable, they offer rich analytical and contextual insights that may inform policy, practice, and future research in similar vocational and resource-constrained higher education contexts.

The participants varied in age, gender, professional roles, and family responsibilities, allowing for a diverse range of perspectives (Table 1). The sample size was considered appropriate for a phenomenological study, as such designs prioritise depth of understanding over breadth and typically involve small, information-rich samples (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, the selected participants were well positioned to provide in-depth insights into the complexities of balancing work, family, and academic demands within a vocational and resource-constrained context.

The participants were predominantly practising teachers with substantial professional experience, most of whom were married and managing family responsibilities alongside their studies. This biographical context summarised in Table 1 is essential for interpreting how participants experienced the demands of work, study, and family life, as well as how they sustained engagement and well-being.

**Table 1**

*Biographical characteristics of participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>Family status</b>
P1	Male	30-39	Teacher	Married with 2 children
P2	Female	40-49	Teacher	Married with children
P3	Male	30-39	Teacher	Married
P4	Female	30-39	Teacher	Married
P5	Male	40-49	Teacher	Married with children
P6	Female	30-39	Teacher	Married
P7	Female	30-39	Teacher	Married with 2 children
P8	Male	20-29	Teacher	Married
P9	Male	30-39	Teacher	Married

### ***3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process***

Data were generated using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), which allowed for both individual reflection and collective meaning-making. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for participants to describe their personal experiences while ensuring alignment with the study's research questions. The interview guide focused on participants' experiences of work–family–academic conflict, coping strategies, institutional support, and perceived areas for improvement.

FDGs were used to complement interview data by enabling participants to engage in shared reflection, compare experiences, and validate emerging ideas. This method enriched the data by capturing interactions and common concerns among adult learners. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted at times convenient to participants, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until sufficient depth and richness were achieved to address the research objectives.

### ***3.4. Data Analysis***

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which includes familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis was both inductive and deductive. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from participants' narratives, while deductive coding was guided by the core constructs of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Autonomy-related codes captured participants' experiences of time management, decision-making, and control over learning processes. Competence-related codes reflected confidence, skill development, and perceived academic effectiveness. Relatedness-related codes focused on support from family, peers, and institutional structures. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted to validate interpretations, and data triangulation was achieved through the use of both interviews and focus group discussions.

### ***3.5. Research Ethics***

Ethical approval was obtained (Approval No: NUST/IRB/2025/142) and ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study and gave informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data. Audio recordings and transcripts were accessible only to the researchers and were handled in accordance with institutional data protection guidelines. These measures ensured the safety, dignity, and welfare of all participants.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings from semi-structured interviews and FGDs with adult learners enrolled in D&T teacher education programmes in Zimbabwe. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. To enhance clarity and readability, participants' reported experiences (results) are presented first within each sub-theme, followed by a focused discussion interpreted through SDT, which foregrounds autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs underpinning motivation and engagement. Five interrelated themes emerged: balancing competing responsibilities; coping strategies and routines; impact on family and social life; institutional support, limitations, and financial pressures; and a synthesising conceptual framework.

### *Theme 1: Balancing Competing Responsibilities*

This theme captures the central challenge faced by adult learners as they attempted to reconcile professional duties, academic workload, and family obligations. Table 2 highlights how competing responsibilities primarily constrained autonomy and relatedness, while adaptive role-management strategies supported learners' sense of competence.

**Table 2**

*Balancing professional duties, study, and family responsibilities*

Sub-theme	Core issue	Affected STD need	Evidence
Professional duties vs. study	Time pressure and role conflict	Autonomy	"Very limited time to focus on academic demands since I'm working." (Int. 9)
Family obligations	Emotional strain and personal sacrifice	Relatedness	"Most of the time I feel overwhelmed with a lot of stuff to do." (Int. 2)
Role management strategies	Negotiation with employers; weekend study	Competence	"I liaise with the school authorities... covering the workload at the school." (Int. 1)

***Professional duties and academic workload.*** Participants consistently reported difficulty balancing full-time teaching responsibilities with academic demands. Interviewee 9 stated, "*Being a part-time student is so challenging. Very limited time to focus on academic demands since I'm working,*" while Interviewee 7 observed, "*It is very difficult to manage*

*between work, school, and family responsibilities.*” These accounts indicate persistent time pressure and role conflict.

From an SDT perspective, heavy professional workloads constrained learners’ autonomy by limiting control over when and how academic tasks could be undertaken. When engagement is shaped largely by externally imposed schedules, motivation tends to shift towards controlled regulation, increasing stress and fatigue (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Similar patterns have been reported among adult and part-time learners, where work-related role strain undermines engagement and persistence (Tinto, 2017).

***Family obligations and personal sacrifice.*** Family responsibilities further complicated participants’ academic engagement. Interviewee 2 explained, “*Most of the time I feel overwhelmed with a lot of stuff to do that I can barely study,*” while several participants described feelings of guilt associated with reduced time spent with family members.

These experiences reflect inter-role conflict that undermines both autonomy and relatedness. Limited opportunities for family interaction weakened relational satisfaction, while constant multitasking reduced learners’ sense of volitional engagement. Consistent with recent research, demands from multiple roles including family and academic or work responsibilities are associated with lower well-being and psychological strain when support structures are limited (Kulík, 2025)

***Strategies to manage multiple roles.*** Despite the challenges, participants adopted adaptive strategies such as studying late at night, using weekends for academic work, and negotiating workloads with school authorities. Interviewee 1 stated, “*Sometimes I liaise with the school authorities... even abusing my weekend time covering the workload at the school.*” These strategies reflect deliberate efforts to uphold competence by meeting academic and professional expectations despite limited autonomy. SDT suggests that maintaining a sense of effectiveness can help sustain motivation and persistence in challenging contexts. Adaptive self-regulation has also been shown to support persistence and task completion among learners facing high demands (Adler et al., 2025).

### ***Theme 2: Coping Strategies and Routines***

This theme focuses on the deliberate strategies participants employed to sustain resilience and academic engagement amid competing demands. Participants described a combination of behavioural, social, and motivational strategies that enabled them to remain

engaged, manage stress, and persist despite ongoing pressures. As shown in Table 3, coping routines functioned as self-regulatory mechanisms that strengthened competence and autonomy, while social support mitigated isolation and enhanced relatedness.

**Table 3**

*Coping strategies and routines adopted by adult learners*

Sub-theme	Core issue	Affected SDT need	Evidence
Time management	Structured planning and prioritisation	Competence	“All I’m doing now is time tabled.” (Int. 3)
Delegation and support	Use of family and peer support	Relatedness	“During holidays I can get a house helper.” (Int. 2)
Personal determination	Persistence and intrinsic motivation	Autonomy	“I don’t sleep with an unfinished task.” (Int. 8)

***Strategic time management and planning.*** Participants described structured planning and prioritisation as essential coping mechanisms. Interviewee 3 noted, “*All I’m doing now is time tabled,*” while Interviewee 5 stated, “*Planning ahead... putting my phone on silent.*” These practices involved allocating specific time blocks for study and minimising distractions.

Strategic time management functioned as a self-regulatory mechanism that enhanced competence and reduced cognitive overload. Empirical research links effective time planning to improved academic engagement and lower levels of procrastination, with findings showing that time management strategies are negatively associated with procrastination and positively related to academic success through effective self-regulation (Tao et al., 2025). For adult learners managing multiple roles, such routines foster a sense of control and self-efficacy, thereby supporting sustained motivation.

***Delegation and social resource utilization.*** Some participants relied on family and peer support to manage competing responsibilities. Interviewee 2 explained, “*During holidays I can get a house helper or send my child for the holidays,*” while Interviewee 5 highlighted peer discussions as a source of both academic and emotional support. These practices satisfied the SDT need for relatedness by reducing isolation and providing emotional and practical assistance. Social support also indirectly enhanced competence by freeing time and cognitive resources for academic tasks, consistent with evidence linking support networks to lower stress levels and higher academic self-efficacy (Alfaro Vasquez et al., 2022).

***Intrinsic motivation and personal determination.*** Participants frequently described relying on internal motivation and perseverance to cope with competing demands. Interviewee 7 remarked, “*I always remind myself that this too shall pass,*” while Interviewee 8 stated, “*I don’t sleep with an unfinished task.*” These accounts illustrate autonomous motivation and self-discipline, reinforcing both autonomy and competence. According to SDT, self-endorsed goals and personal commitment sustain engagement under pressure, a pattern clearly reflected in participants’ determination to complete academic tasks despite fatigue and competing responsibilities.

### ***Theme 3: Impact on Family and Social Life***

This theme examines how participation in adult education affected learners’ family relationships and social experiences, revealing both strain and personal growth. Participants described tensions arising from competing demands, alongside opportunities for personal and social growth, and adaptive strategies to navigate relational challenges. The findings in Table 4 indicate that while academic participation strained family relationships and emotional well-being, it also fostered personal growth and adaptive relational strategies that supported competence and relatedness.

**Table 4**

*Impact of studies on family and social life*

<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Core issue</b>	<b>SDT need affected</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Family strain	Reduced time with family members	Relatedness	“My family feels neglected especially during the holidays.” (Int. 9)
Emotional tension	Guilt and psychological strain	Relatedness / Autonomy	“I feel overwhelmed with a lot of stuff to do.” (Int. 2)
Personal and social growth	Increased confidence and communication skills	Competence	“I am now confident even to stand in public and air my views.” (Int. 9)
Relational coping strategies	Negotiating family arrangements	Relatedness	“I asked my wife to accompany me... and we rented a room together.” (Int. 3)

***Strain on family relationships.*** Participants described reduced family time and emotional tension arising from academic commitments. Interviewee 9 stated, “My family feels neglected especially during the holidays.” Such experiences represent threats to relatedness, as

academic demands encroached on meaningful family interactions. Consistent with previous studies, time-based conflict negatively affected emotional well-being unless buffered by supportive family relationships (Allen et al., 2020).

***Social and personal growth.*** Despite the challenges, participants reported increased confidence, improved communication skills, and greater openness to diversity. Interviewee 9 noted, “*I am now confident even to stand in public and air my views,*” while Interviewee 2 described increased willingness to listen to and value others’ perspectives. These outcomes reflect gains in competence and relatedness fostered through adult learning. Participation in higher education provided opportunities for developing communication, leadership, and interpersonal skills, supporting personal transformation and social integration (Kasworm, 2010).

***Navigating relational challenges.*** Participants adopted practical strategies to manage family strain, including leveraging technology and negotiating living arrangements during block-release sessions. Interviewee 3 explained, “*I would ask my wife to accompany me... and we would rent a room together.*” These strategies demonstrate intentional efforts to balance autonomy and relatedness, enabling learners to sustain family connections while meeting academic demands.

#### ***Theme 4: Institutional Support, Limitations, and Financial Pressures***

This theme explores how institutional structures and financial conditions shaped learners’ engagement, motivation, and well-being. While institutional flexibility supported motivation, rigid structures and financial pressures undermined autonomy and competence, shaping learners’ overall well-being and engagement.

**Table 4**

*Institutional and financial factors influencing engagement*

<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Core issue</b>	<b>SDT need affected</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Institutional support	Flexible deadlines and lecturer encouragement	Autonomy / Relatedness	“We receive motivational encouragement from lecturers.” (Int. 2)
Structural constraints	Compressed curriculum and tight deadlines	Competence	“Deadlines make me emotionally strained.” (Int. 3)
Financial pressures	Reliance on loans and financial strain	Autonomy	“Taking loans cushions us.” (Int. 4)

***Motivational and flexible support.*** Participants valued flexible submission options and supportive interactions with lecturers. Interviewee 2 referred to receiving “*motivational encouragement from lecturers.*” Such practices supported autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby enhancing engagement and persistence. Research in higher education shows that when teaching practices support students’ psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, students are more likely to develop autonomous motivation and sustain engagement in their studies (Zhu et al., 2024)

***Structural constraints and curriculum pressures.*** Participants reported heightened stress associated with compressed curricula and tight deadlines. Interviewee 3 described emotional strain as submission deadlines approached. Rigid programme structures undermined competence and relatedness by limiting opportunities for mastery and support. SDT research consistently links such environments to increased stress and reduced academic engagement.

***Financial pressures and coping mechanisms.*** Financial strain emerged as a significant challenge affecting participants’ academic experiences. Interviewee 4 stated, “Taking loans cushions us.” Financial insecurity constrained autonomy and heightened anxiety, echoing evidence that economic pressure negatively affects academic focus and well-being (Salameh et al., 2024). Participants’ coping strategies reflected deliberate efforts to sustain engagement despite limited financial resources.

***Institutional policy implications.*** Participants proposed blended learning approaches, flexible deadlines, and increased use of digital learning resources. Interviewee 2 suggested sharing instructional videos via WhatsApp prior to face-to-face sessions. These recommendations align with SDT by enhancing autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and they offer practical strategies for strengthening adult learner support in resource-constrained contexts.

### ***Theme 5: Conceptual Framework for Balancing Work, Family, And Professional Growth***

The thematic findings from this study highlighting adult learners’ personal coping strategies, use of social and family support, and experiences of institutional facilitators and constraints provide a foundation for conceptualising how these factors interact to support academic and personal outcomes. To synthesise these insights, a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate how adult learners in D&T education balance work, family

responsibilities, and professional growth. This framework integrates the three key domains identified in the findings, showing how personal, social, and institutional strategies work together to satisfy learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and ultimately enhance motivation, resilience, engagement, and professional development.

At the centre of the framework are three interrelated domains that collectively support adult learners in managing multiple roles:

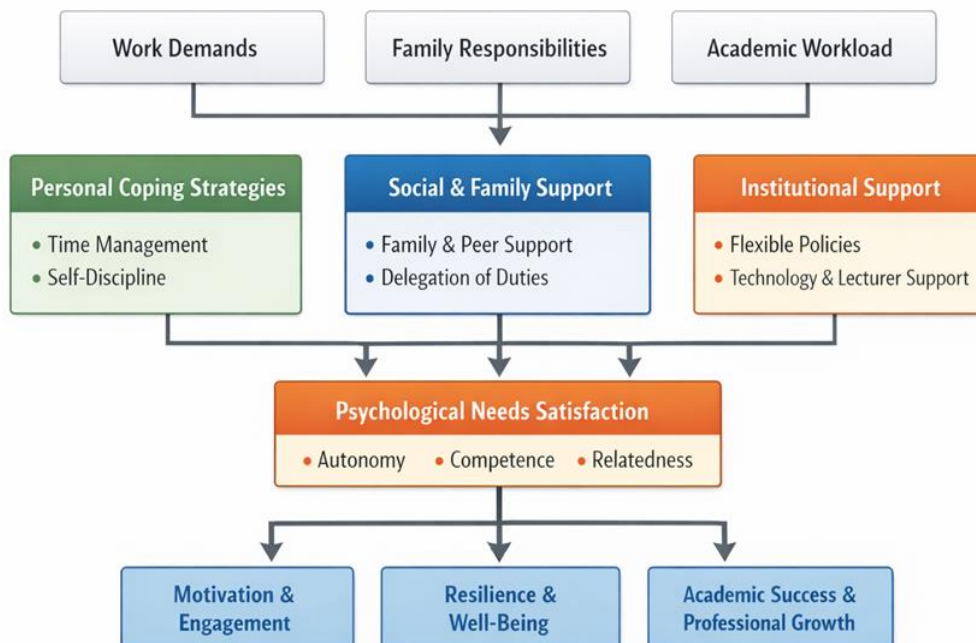
*Personal coping strategies* including time management, self-discipline, and prioritisation. These enhance learners' sense of autonomy, enabling them to exercise control over competing life roles and navigate academic, professional, and family demands effectively.

*Social and family support strategies* involving peer and family assistance in delegating responsibilities and providing emotional encouragement to satisfy the SDT need for relatedness, reducing role conflict, sustaining motivation, and promoting persistence.

*Institutional support mechanisms* such as flexible scheduling, technology-enabled learning, supportive lecturer practices, and adult-learner-responsive policies. These enhance competence by fostering academic self-efficacy, mitigating structural constraints, and enabling learners to engage effectively with their studies.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual framework for balancing work, family, and professional growth in adult learners*



*Source: Authors' own construction*

The framework further underscores the reciprocal impact of adult learning on family and social life. While participation in higher education may initially create family strain, stress, and reduced social time, it can also produce positive developmental outcomes, including improved communication skills, leadership capacity, and increased confidence. These outcomes are mediated by the effectiveness of personal, social, and institutional strategies.

When these three domains are aligned, learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, promoting increased motivation, engagement, and resilience. This, in turn, enhances academic performance, well-being, and professional growth. The framework highlights the strategic role of educational institutions in designing responsive and supportive systems that enable adult learners to thrive, particularly in resource-constrained contexts.

The framework illustrates how adult learners balance work, family, and professional growth through the interplay of personal coping strategies, social and family support, and institutional mechanisms. When aligned, these domains satisfy learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, enhancing motivation, engagement, resilience, and academic performance. It also highlights the reciprocal effects of adult learning on family and social life, showing that effective coping and supportive structures can transform potential strains into opportunities for personal and professional development.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that balancing work, family, and academic responsibilities is a significant challenge for adult learners in D&T programmes in Zimbabwe. The findings reveal that role conflict, financial pressures, and limited institutional support constrain learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, contributing to stress, fatigue, and reduced engagement. Despite these challenges, adult learners adopt adaptive coping strategies including structured routines, time management, task delegation, and social support to sustain resilience, motivation, and academic performance. Institutional practices such as flexible submission options, motivational lecturer support, and study leave facilitate the management of competing demands, while rigid curricula, compressed timelines, high fees, and limited mentorship exacerbate role strain and hinder well-being.

From a SDT perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2000), satisfaction of psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness fosters motivation, engagement, and holistic wellness,

whereas unmet needs can undermine persistence and academic success. These findings highlight the interconnected roles of personal strategies, social support, and institutional structures in enabling adult learners to navigate multiple responsibilities effectively.

To support adult learners, educational institutions should prioritise program flexibility through blended learning, provide financial assistance via grants and scholarships, and integrate wellness interventions such as counselling, stress management workshops, and peer-support networks. Strengthening mentorship and guidance structures can enhance academic and professional support, while curriculum adjustments such as reducing weekend classes and excessive contact hours promote family engagement and work-life balance. Collectively, these measures support learners' autonomy, resilience, and academic success.

This study is limited to adult learners in D&T programmes in Zimbabwe, which may affect the generalisability of the findings to other disciplines or regions. Future research could explore the applicability of these findings across different academic contexts, examine the long-term effects of flexible programmes and institutional support on adult learner outcomes, and investigate additional strategies for enhancing resilience and well-being among diverse learner populations.

This study provides evidence that a combination of personal coping strategies, social support, and institutional facilitation is essential for adult learners to successfully balance academic, professional, and family responsibilities. Addressing psychological needs through supportive practices and flexible structures not only enhances academic performance but also promotes holistic wellness and professional growth, offering practical guidance for policymakers, educators, and institutions in resource-constrained contexts.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Funding**

This work was not supported by any funding

### **Institutional Review Board Statement**

This study was granted ethical clearance by the National University of Science and Technology with Approval No: NUST/IRB/2025/142.

### **AI Declaration**

The authors acknowledge the use of the AI tool, particularly ChatGPT, for language refinement and editing.

### **ORCID**

Florence Sebele - <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9337-8958>

Phumuzani Mpofu - <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5671-9263>

### **References**

- Adler, I., Warren, S., Norris, C., et al. (2025). Leveraging opportunities for self-regulated learning in smart learning environments. *Smart Learning Environments*, 12, Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-024-00359-w>
- Alfaro Vasquez, R., & Carranza Esteban, R. F. (2022). Examining academic self-efficacy and perceived social support as predictors for coping with stress in Peruvian university students. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 881455. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.881455>
- Alharbi, A. (2023). Implementation of Education 5.0 in developed and developing countries: A comparative study. *Creative Education*, 14, 914–942. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2023.145059>
- Allen, T. D., French, K. A., Dumani, S., & Shockley, K. M. (2020). A cross-national meta-analytic examination of predictors and outcomes associated with work–family conflict. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(6), 539–576. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000442>
- Andrade, C., Fernandes, J. L., & Almeida, L. S. (2024). Mature working student parents navigating multiple roles: A qualitative analysis. *Education Sciences*, 14(7), Article 786. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14070786>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Broadbent, J., & Poon, W. L. (2015). Self-regulated learning strategies and academic achievement in online higher education learning environments: A systematic review. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 27, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2015.04.007>
- Chiu, T. K. F. (2021). Applying the self-determination theory (SDT) to explain student engagement in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 54(sup1), S14–S30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2021.1891998>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- De Klerk, D., Jadhav, A., & Hundermark, G. (2024). Enhancing student success through professionalised academic advising: A model for identifying academic advisors for South African higher education contexts. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 38(5), 210–229.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01)
- Dukhi, N., Sewpaul, R., Zungu, N. P., Mokhele, T., & Sifunda, S. (2024). Learning and institutional support for youth in higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, Article 1341712. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1341712>
- Gomba, C., & Chigarira, S. (2025). Adult learners’ lived experiences of learning technology at a private university in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, 14(16), 229–243. <https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrse.2025.25292>
- Hendricks, E. A., & Mutongoza, B. (2023). Paragons of inequality: Challenges associated with online learning at a selected rural university in South Africa. *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 18(1), 8–21.
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Kariwo, M. (2009). The role of continuing education in Zimbabwe. In A. A. Abdi & D. Kapoor (Eds.), *Global perspectives on adult education* (pp. 141–155). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230617971\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230617971_10)
- Kasworm, C. E. (2010). Adult learners in higher education: An overview. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2010(130), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.366>
- Kulík, L. (2025). Role conflict, enrichment, sense of balance, and well-being among working students who are parents. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 28(2), 86–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2025.2468264>
- Lesunyane, R. A., Ramano, E. M., & van Niekerk, K. (2025). Undergraduate students’ experience regarding wellness support services at universities offering health sciences programmes. *Discover Education*, 4, Article 540. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-025-00938-0>
- Mangwende, E., & Nhlanhla, M. (2023). An assessment of student support services within the open distance e-learning programme in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 856–868.

- <https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/an-assessment-of-student-support-services-within-the-open-distance-e-learning-programme-in-zimbabwe>
- Maphosa, N., & Oughton, H. (2021). “What am I doing here?” Perspectives of Zimbabwean adult learners on the relevance of adult numeracy to their needs and aspirations. *Adults Learning Mathematics: An International Journal*, 15(1), 19–44.
- Maringe, F., & Sing, N. (2014). Teaching large classes in an increasingly internationalising higher education environment: Pedagogical, quality and equity issues. *Higher Education*, 67(6), 761–782. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9710-0>
- McAnally, K., & Hagger, M. S. (2024). Self-determination theory and workplace outcomes: A conceptual review and future research directions. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(6), Article 428. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14060428>
- Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2013). *Adult learning: Linking theory and practice*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Mpofu, S. T., & Youngman, F. (2001). The dominant tradition in adult literacy: A comparative study of national literacy programmes in Botswana and Zimbabwe. *International Review of Education*, 47(5–6), 573–595. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1013194408268>
- Mpofu, S., Shava, G., & Mpofu, T. (2026). Transforming higher education towards economic development: A Zimbabwean case study. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 61(1), 162–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241287526>
- Mukhithi, A., Phahlane, M., & Malungana, L. (2025). Diffusing student performance in using blended learning models in higher learning. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, Article 1655941. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1655941>
- Munamatia, J., Mushonga, R., & Munamati, S. (2023). Blended teaching and learning in higher education institutions: Experiences of selected universities in Zimbabwe. *The Dyke*, 17(2). [https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-dyke\\_v17\\_n2\\_a4](https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejc-dyke_v17_n2_a4)
- Mupaikwa, E. (2025). Toward an evaluation framework for Education 5.0 in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, Article 1634459. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1634459>
- Mutanana, N. (2019). Open and distance learning in rural communities of Zimbabwe: Exploring challenges faced by Zimbabwe Open University students in Kadoma District, Zimbabwe. *Asian Journal of Humanity, Art and Literature*, 6(1), 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.18034/ajhal.v6i1.349>
- Park, J. H., & Su, M. N. (2026). Adult learners’ participation in higher education: A systematic review of determinants and barriers (2000–2025). *Trends in Higher Education*, 5(1), Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu5010019>
- Pasipanodya, T. M., & Khosa, M. T. (2024). Quality in adult education in the context of higher education. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, 11(3), 20–24. <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1103003>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.
- Salameh, P., Sacre, H., Hallit, S., Hajj, A., & Salameh, S. (2024). The impact of financial stress on student wellbeing in Lebanese higher education. *BMC Public Health*, 24, Article 1809. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-19312-0>
- Shockley, K. M., Clark, M. A., Dodd, H., & King, E. B. (2021). Work–family strategies during COVID-19: Examining gender dynamics among dual-earner couples with young

- children. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 106(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000857>
- Simon, C., Chinyamunjiko, N., Chalton, N., Peter, B., Masinire, S., & Manhiwa, E. T. (2024). Adult learning strategies used in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe for lifelong learning in the accounting field. *European Journal of Science, Innovation and Technology*, 4(1), 358–374. <https://ejst-journal.com/index.php/ejsit/article/view/388>
- Tao, X., Hanif, H., & Lieqin, W. (2025). The effects of self-regulated learning strategies on academic procrastination and academic success among college EFL students in China. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1562980. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1562980>
- Teferra, D., & Altbach, P. G. (2004). African higher education: Challenges for the 21st century. *Higher Education*, 47(1), 21–50. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:HIGH.00000009822.49980.30>
- Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 19(3), 254–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917>
- Togo, M., & Gandidzanwa, C. P. (2021). The role of Education 5.0 in accelerating the implementation of SDGs and challenges encountered at the University of Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 22(7), 1520–1535. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-05-2020-0158>
- Wang, C. K. J., Liu, W. C., Kee, Y. H., & Chian, L. K. (2019). Competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the classroom: Understanding students' motivational processes using self-determination theory. *Heliyon*, 5(7), Article e01983. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e01983>
- Yusoff, A. (2026). Balancing the books: Understanding the motivations and challenges of part-time students as lifelong learners and “resilient negotiators.” *International Review of Education*, 72(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-025-10166-1>
- Zhu, Y., Dolmans, D., Köhler, S. E., Kusrurkar, R. A., Abidi, L., & Savelberg, H. (2024). Paths to autonomous motivation and well-being: Understanding the contribution of basic psychological needs satisfaction in health professions students. *Medical Science Educator*, 34(6), 1331–1342. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-024-02106-9>
- Zwane, A., & Mudau, P. K. (2024). South African rural university students' experiences of open distance e-learning support. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 23(2). <https://www.ijlter.org/index.php/ijlter/article/view/9030>