

ODL in a competitive higher education market: Interrogating the supply side of the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract: This research sought to uncover strategies that could be employed by the Zimbabwe Open University to attract students to its programmes. It sought the views of current students and alumina members. The study was largely qualitative. It was a survey of a convenience sample of 58 alumni members and 120 students. An open-ended questionnaire was employed in the survey. Results showed that bringing the product to the door-steps of the customer through decentralisation, acting on the price of the product through scholarships, grants and a flexible fee payment plan and sprucing the image and reputation of the university through quality service that address customer's expectations are some of the issues that will attract students to an open and distance teaching university.

Keywords: Market, marketisation, supply side, Open and Distance learning, competitive advantage supply, globalization.

INTRODUCTION

The education systems of many countries have been undergoing fundamental reforms especially in recent years, to respond to the trend of globalisation and to meet the ever changing expectations of the respective communities in their development into knowledge based societies [1]. One of the major reforms in university education in Zimbabwe is the paradigm shift from conventional to distance education. Student entry into university prior to independence in Zimbabwe was restricted to only a small minority [2]. The Zimbabwe government demonstrated willingness to reform university education in its 1982 University Act which had the objective to provide correspondence courses for young persons and adults in order to meet the increasing demand for education [2, 3]. In 1989, the Williams Commission was set up with the mandate among other things to assess the need for distance education at university level.

This resulted in the birth of the Zimbabwe Open University, (ZOU) an open and distance learning university. The Zimbabwe Open University's mandate is that of providing tertiary education to varied learners and communities in an open and distance mode of delivery [4]. Its education programme is delivered in a most qualitative, yet flexible, affordable and learner friendly mode. Significantly, the Zimbabwe Open University advances human welfare by using a vehicle that is different from other national universities or enterprises. At its inception, in 1993, the Zimbabwe Open University started as a centre for distance education and offered degree programmes or admits who might have been disadvantaged and marginalized, and rendered unable to attain university education due to varied circumstances. New programmes were

introduced with time. This has been the trend over the years. ZOU is now equally competing with conventional universities in terms of the students, the market. To maintain its supply side, it has to market competitively its programmes in order to get a larger share of the market since it now offers programmes for both young and adults.

Higher education (HE) marketing is still in its infancy in many parts of the world [5]. In the past, marketing was a jargon of the business world, alien to higher education institutions. The role of Higher Education was to serve the community, engage in research activities, teach students, and equip them with knowledge and skills that are useful in their places of work. In a larger context, Higher Education was considered as a vehicle for developing a knowledge society [6]. This was the case with the Zimbabwe Open University as well. This situation continued as long as the university was flush with funds, demands outstripped supply, and job options were available to students. However, increasing competition, domination by undifferentiated universities that mushroomed countrywide offering similar programmes and the need to offer programmes emerging opportunity areas necessitates Zimbabwe Open University to develop strategies balancing institutional economies and opportunities to growth. In the past, educators were often forced to take a hard look at marketing to see what this discipline might offer to keep their institutions viable and relevant [7]. At its peak, Zimbabwe Open University had a students enrolment of about twenty thousand [8] but due to a number of challenges, chief among which is the supply side, the numbers are dwindling. There is need therefore, for the Zimbabwe Open University to interrogate its supply side by

rigorously marketing the university and its programmes. Research into HE choice or consumer behaviour in HE markets, has principally been stimulated by an individual institution's need to anticipate the long-term implications of choice and to understand the key factors involved in student [9]. The attempts by governments to enhance the quality of HE through the encouragement of market forces is based on the assumption that students are, or will become, informed consumers making rational choices of HE courses and institutions [10]. However, despite the substantial literature on the marketisation of HE and consumer behaviour, scholarship of HE and consumer behaviour, scholarship to provide evidence of the marketing strategies that have been implemented by higher education institutions on the supply-side remains limited, and this is relatively uncharted territory [11].

In an environment where HE is expanding globally, where new institutions are created to meet growing demand and where the diversity of university programmes and products are increasingly becoming heterogeneous, students are increasingly faced with broader choices and institutions are left competing with one another to wrestle business from rival providers [5]. The Zimbabwe Open University is thus left with no choice other than to embrace the marketing idea. The philosophy of marketing HE programmes is regarded useful in distance education institutions. According to Kotler [12] the philosophy holds that "...the key to achieving the organisation's goals depends on determining the needs and wants of target markets and by delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than the competitors". Quality service delivery has to be the in-thing in the service delivery of distance education programmes [13]. Zimbabwe Open University cannot be left behind marketing its programmes through quality service delivery. It has to interrogate the supply side to ensure its survival in a fiercely competitive market place that has been heavily infiltrated by other universities. This appears a grey area in a university that concentrate more on tutorials [14], on research supervision [15] and on administrative matters [16].

Statement of the problem

Zimbabwe Open University is the only university offering higher and tertiary education through the distance mode in Zimbabwe. All other universities are conventional and this is the traditional mode which the majority of the population feels to be the most competent way of providing higher education. The Zimbabwe Open University becomes an island that can be shunned by prospective students considering that enrolment has fallen from a peak of 22 000 in 2004 to a paltry 14 000 in 2010. All this point to the need for a radical awakening for the university. It is imperative that the university looks at the supply side of the market, in a bid to attract more students to join its programmes.

Research question:

How can the Zimbabwe Open University attract more students from the marketplace?

Sub-Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How can marketisation attract students for Zimbabwe Open University?
2. What marketing strategies can be employed by the Zimbabwe Open University to attract more students

Significance of the study

This study will help to provide strategies of attracting more students into the Zimbabwe Open University and help stem the plummeting numbers thereby boosting its enrolment of students in the various programmes. The study will also equip the university with competitive strategies of attracting students from the marketplace in the midst of equally competing conventional universities without compromising on retaining those already in the system.

Conceptual Framework: The concept of marketing in higher education

Marketing in the context of education is "the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of organizational objectives" [17]. In the 1990s higher education marketing was defined within the services marketing definition [18]. However, the meaning of marketing has evolved over time but the most enduring theme in these developments has been the centrality of the customer in the decisions of the organization. Marketing is a term that describes any exchange relationship to ensure that parties in this relationship derive maximum benefit from the exchange [5]. Thus there are now new marketing conceptualizations and orientations that have since emerged. The next section will discuss some of these.

Current Marketing conceptualizations/Orientations

The Product orientation of marketing

Kotler [12] considers this as being driven by a need to offer the highest quality, performance and innovative features. Universities all over the world pride themselves in being excellent at what they do and in delivering quality products and programmes of the highest standards. In this regard, the Zimbabwe Open University has set forth to become a world class university [4]. The question that remains is whether this is lip-service or not considering that of late enrolment figure showed a downward trend. The fear is exasperated by the fact that the product view of HE marketing is associated with the expert model and ivory tower symbol of universities [1], where the role of the

university is that of developing and offering programmes believed to be desired by the clients.

The Production view

This marketing philosophy is often linked with institutions that see themselves as being in competition with other providers and are keen to push their products more widely and at reduced cost to the customer. Zimbabwe Open University systems and new emerging HE institutions tend to base their marketing strategy around the philosophy of [19, 20]. The key challenge for these universities is that of developing products that are desired by their customers, rather than ones considered desirable. This aspect makes this research indispensable.

The selling philosophy

The selling philosophy captures the broad understanding which key university managers and marketers across the world hold about HE marketing. Central to this critical mass of publicity and public awareness about the universities' offerings is about projecting the right image, providing university information of applicants through a range of strategies that include advertising, public or external relations, direct promotion and personal selling. Research around the world has indicated that marketing in HE institutions is often very narrowly associated with these activities [20-24]. The hard sell approach normally associated with this marketing philosophy does not always reap the expected rewards of higher enrolments and satisfied customers, nor does it always help to counter negative feelings, sentiments and attitudes about institutions as Ivy [25] has recorded in South Africa:

The growth in advertising and personal selling activities did not always results in full programmes; neither did it always result in happy customers.

The marketing philosophy

The marketing philosophy was originally proposed by Kolter [28]. This philosophy has been uncritically accepted in the literature as the panacea for organizations to adopt in their quest to become more accountable to their publics both in terms of providing required products and services and in terms of guaranteeing customer satisfaction. The approach draws upon the needs and wants of customers as a prelude to designing products and services aimed at satisfying those needs and wants.

The societal marketing philosophy

It embraces the notion of conducting business with long-term interests of the customers in the fore-front Kariem [13]. Essentially, the societal concept calls for universities to be ethical and to embrace a social responsibility consciousness that ejects the idea of pushing products and services at any cost. The Zimbabwe Open University will then need to double its

efforts in community service-a key result area of the university [4].

Marketing models in Higher Education.

There are two models of the marketing approach which are now very well established in the field of marketing [26]. These models are transactional marketing and relationship marketing [13, 27].

Transactional marketing is based on the 4Ps. The models uses the 4Ps (price; place; promotion; product) to examine students' relationship with the university. The promotional variables in designing and marketing education overseas was the focus of a study of the international students' perceptions about UK education and UK performance in the world market for international education [11]. The survey was structured using the 4Ps transactional marketing model and found that most foreign students needs were clustered around the core and the tangible characteristics of the "product" (e.g. as academic recognition, quality and follow up services) and the "price" (e.g. the fees, scholarships, students' perceptions of value). Overall, the study concluded that the best way to attract more international students, was to lower tuition fees; provide more scholarships and give better quality of care and service. Second, the best promotional strategy was via: alumni, friends, relatives' web sites, Council and other promotional media such as television. The Zimbabwe Open University also caters for students in countries like South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, etc, in the SADC region. It is necessary to establish whether the transactional marketing model is useful in attracting foreign students.

Relationship marketing model is based on relationships. Gibbs [29] pointed out that those involved in higher education "seek to develop educational relationships rather than transactional deals between traders" and claimed that the "economic market commodities higher education on the basis on the accreditation earned at higher education institutions". Arnett *et al.* [30] carried out a research to establish benefits of relationship marketing and found out those encouraging students to be actively involved in school activities and improving or maintaining a level of university prestige encouraged the formation and development of a university identity, which in turn encouraged students to engage in supportive behaviours in the future. Relationship marketing was considered by the authors to be a viable strategy in the context of the HE but they claimed that success required non-profit organizations, to not only focus on economic rewards, but also highlight the social benefits including emotional satisfaction, spiritual values and the sharing of humanitarian ideas.

The application of marketing ideas in education

Expansion, diversification, increasing competition and greater choice have been described as

the “overreaching forces” [20, 24, 31] that have driven educational institutions to embrace the marketing idea across the world. The approaches used in education have tended to vary reflecting issues of institutional background, the nature of the manpower base and the available resources [22].

Curran [32] has suggested five key strategies which university departments could utilize to support a growing marketing orientation. He has argued for support of senior management, the creation of structures to serve a marketing function, develop an in-house marketing trained programme, developing a system of rewarding good marketing practice. According to Maringe [5] Zimbabwe Open University systems, show a greater tendency to embrace the customer perspective of marketing. This may be because of the specific circumstances in which they find themselves which include the need to find and establish their niche, a desire to become more competitive, the need to recruit students for existing programmes, the need to appeal to a more mature applicant base and in some cases a clear belief in the efficacy of the marketing model. Marketing therefore implies survival in a competitive environment and establishing the organization outside the shadow of rival institutions [5].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The research employed the descriptive survey design. Babbie [33] says “descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond”. Thus the researchers chose this method as it enabled the respondents to say exactly what they felt about the need for marketing Zimbabwe Open University programmes and the strategies that can be used to attract more students. The study was largely qualitative. The survey was chosen because it was seen as the best method for collecting original data for purposes of describing a population too large to observe directly, as was the case in this study [34]. The use of surveys alerts managers to potential problems and students intentions early so that action can be taken to prevent repercussions [35].

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for this study was alumni members and students who were gathered to celebrate the eleventh anniversary of the Zimbabwe Open University at Masvingo Regional Campus. A convenience sample of 58 alumni and 120 students was made. Park [36] identifies alumni as relevant population for study because they can share insight that has not been realized by current students.

Instruments

The alumni and students responded to an open-ended questionnaire. Self-completion was selected as the most appropriate tool because respondents have an opportunity to elaborate in issues raised [44]. Rather

than forcing respondents to choose between rigidly limited responses, the open-form questionnaire permits them to answer freely and fully in their own words [37].

Procedure

The researchers distributed the questionnaires to alumni and students of the Zimbabwe Open University at the onset of the celebrations. The completed open ended questionnaires were then collected at the end of the function. This was done in April 2010.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using the qualitative content analysis method.

RESULTS

Decentralization of centres

The majority of students pointed out that Zimbabwe Open University has to decentralize its service centre to districts so that it becomes accessible. Such sentiments were expressed in the following statements from responses to the open-ended questions:

Zimbabwe Open University should decentralize its centres to district to cater for the marginalized.

The distance to regional centres every month is too long and affects attendance in a country with poor infrastructure.

It is pertinent that Zimbabwe Open University has district libraries.

The idea of decentralisation appears to be in line with current thinking in the Zimbabwe Open University as evidenced by the strategic plan (2010-2015) whose thrust is to provide tertiary education especially to those Zimbabweans whom for various reasons, might have been disadvantaged and marginalized and rendered unable to attain university education. Its education is delivered in a flexible, affordable and learner friendly-made. For Zimbabwe Open University programmes to be friendly, they must be brought closer to the client. Economic hardships that are faced by most people are really a factor to consider so that the University considers getting closer to the clients in order to attract them. Maringe [5] argues that decentralization is a marketing model across university institutions.

Provision of learning resources in time

The findings of this research established that Zimbabwe Open University needs to provide learning materials in time. The following statement shed more light.

Zimbabwe Open University should provide modules in time. We need to get

full package at registration. We also need full use of the e-learning facility for internet services.

Kariem [13] appear to support the idea of making learning resources available on time when pointing out that within a new social context and in an increasingly interconnected world, law and policy makers, courts and scholars are in need to give adequate consideration to the exercises of legal jurisdiction that is able to operate adequately in an international environment full of challenges which include: electronic trade; international taxation and computer crimes, which make countries' governments across the globe currently face major challenges requiring national attempts combining governments and peoples to maintain distinctive regimes aimed at: enriching descriptive social and legal understanding by availing enough resources to educational institutions. Moore [38] appears to support the views of the students and alumni when he argues that educators have to expand their self-awareness in order to develop greater empathy and sensitivity to the needs and perspectives of distance learners. The module is the mode of delivery and students use the module as the main source of information. If there are delays in providing this to the students, then Zimbabwe Open University fails to compete on the marketplace for its share of client who were eager to learn at a distance.

The concept of price-flexible fee structure

The alumni and students expressed the need for Zimbabwe Open University to introduce a flexible fees payment structure and provide grants to the students. The following sentiments were raised in that regard:

Reduce fees, organize installments on monthly basis and provide us with grants whenever it is feasible.

There is need to introduce cadetship as is happening with other higher education institutions and revise fees structures which are currently too expensive.

The issues of fees was raised by Binsardi and Ekwukugo [11] who carried out a study and found out that the best way to attract more international students was to lower tuition fees and provide more scholarships. In Zimbabwe, students in conventional universities are offered grants and there is need to consider the students in the Zimbabwe Open University for that facility since it is the only university offering distance education. While this will improve the lives if the marginalize, this will also go a long way towards attracting students to the university.

Involving the alumni

Respondents raised the need to involve alumni in university programmes and in marketing Zimbabwe Open University programmes. The following sentiments were raised in support of this issue:

There is need to engage alumni in seeking university resources are reaching out to prospective students populations.

Alumni can write their experiences, their successes and their benefits from the university in order to promote the university image in the eyes of the prospective students.

Produce a who is who in the graduates of the university in order to show how graduates from Zimbabwe Open University have been absorbed in influential positions.

Alumni are the friends of the university and they can help to market and attract students. Binsardi and Ekwulungo [11] found out that the best promotional strategy of attracting students was via the alumni, friends and relatives. There is need for a close relationship between the university and its alumni. If Zimbabwe Open University wants to market its programmes and attract more students, there is need to involve the alumni in its programmes.

Image and reputation building through quality

The alumni and students expressed the feelings that Zimbabwe Open University has to improve its image and reputation in order to attract more students. This was raised from open ended questions by respondents as follows:

Engage quality lecturers who in turn provide value for money tutorials.

Lecturers should show commitment, enthusiasm and professionalism in their dealings with the university. In this case, a strong image and reputation of the university will be put in place.

Communicate events in time especially examination dates and tutorial dates. Avoiding missing results can help spruce the image of the university. Shorten the bureaucratic layers that stand in the way of students experiencing challenges. Being referred to the national centre for a temporary transcript is painful.

Sprucing the image of an open and distance teaching university appear plausible idea, as these findings are in line with Nguyen and LeBlanc [39], Ivy [40], Binsardi and Ekwulugo [11] 's findings that universities must seek to re-position themselves in order to improve their image and reputation. Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet [41] argue that universities need to re-position themselves in order to attract successive generations of students. Zimbabwe Open University should transform the mindsets of society and prospective students in terms of its image and reputation.

Customer service

Customer service is an area that there was a hum of consensus from the respondents. One student summed up the mood with this quotation:

'A satisfied customer tells three to four people. An angry customer passes the news to at least ten people.' (Student)

An alumnus concurred and stated:

'There is need to pay a lot of attention to good customer service. Definitely many among the staff require training in it.'

Investing in customer service was seen as a way of improving the reputation of the university which hangs on the observed behaviors displayed at the point of contact. Etzel, Walker and Stanton [42] have identified three critical conditions to be met in applying this philosophy to marketing in the education sector. First is a complete focus on students' needs in developing qualifications and programmes that satisfy those needs. This requires concerted market research as an integral aspect of the development of curriculum. Second is the need for an integrated effort through co-ordinated activities to ensure that different aspects of the university focus on the same mission: that of delivering students' needs. Third is the related issue of developing a goal achievement orientation. In marketing terms, the success, the quality, and the entire outcome of the university experience should be determined by the extent to which the institution has satisfied its customers.

Introducing of new programmes

Respondents raised the need to introduce new programme as a method of attracting more students. The following sentiments shed more light:

Introduce various Masters Programmes in commerce like M. Com Economic. Introduce Programmes that are scarce on the market and add computer literacy skills to these programmes.

There is need to introduce short course like diploma in Agriculture, HIV and AIDS Life

skills, disaster management and other courses that address current pertinent issues.

Have programmes and courses that cater for segments of the society, all people need staff development at their work place and distance is the answer

The idea of addressing felt students needs in programmes has been propounded by Soutar and Turner [43], who highlight that the university market is characterized by three main segments which are international students, mature students and high-school leavers and each segment considers different factors when making choices. Zimbabwe Open University should therefore take into cognizance programmes that cater for all these segments of society in order to attract more students.

Quality as a competitive advantage

Respondents raised the sentiments that Zimbabwe Open University should have:

Built –in mechanisms for enhancing, championing and monitoring quality in all its services, products and processes.

This finding is in line with Robbins and Coulter [3] who argue that if implemented properly quality can be a way for an organization to create a sustainable competitive advantage. That is why many organizations apply quality management concepts to get their operations in an attempt to set themselves apart from competitors. To the degree that any organization can satisfy a customer's need for quality, it can differentiate itself from competitors and attract a loyal customer base. Zimbabwe Open University can intensify its quality assurance process or continuous improvement in order to attract more students.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above findings, the following conclusions and recommendations were reached from this research:

- Zimbabwe Open University has to create a positive image and reputation by employing quality oriented practices in its processes.
- Zimbabwe Open University has to lower fees and make them commensurate with salaries earned by the majority of people.
- There is need to provide learning resources in time.
- Schedules should be communicated to students in time.
- Zimbabwe Open University needs to process certificates, transcripts results and

assignment in time for the benefit of the client.

- The centres have to be decentralized to districts to take the service closer to the client.
- Zimbabwe Open University has to involve alumni in marketing its programmes and thereby attracting new students.

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