

An interesting dichotomy: From plummeting to swelling of students enrolments in ODL: ZOU Midlands Region 2013-2015.

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Abstract: Open distance learning (ODL) has been making milestones in endeavours to make education accessible to all people. Distance education as an educational process in which a significant proportion of teaching is conducted by someone far removed in space and, or in time from the learners. The flexibility has been increased with advancement and use of Information and Communications Technologies. The purpose of the study was to investigate factors contributing to the dichotomy from plummeting and swelling of enrolments in ZOU Midlands region. All the participants of this study were purposefully selected in line with qualitative research approaches. The participants of this study were students, lecturers and the support staff. The researcher employed document analysis, focus group discussions and, face to face interviews to collect data. Transcribed data from focus groups and individual interviews were thematically analysed. The study revealed that several factors including increased publicity on lifting of suspended programmes, SSB and Edu-loan facilities to ODL students, slashed fees, Ministry' of Secondary and Primary School promotional policies which made it imperative for all teachers to have theory of education, amicable ZOU terms of fees payment and UNICEF fees payment programmes for teachers contributed to enrolments swelling in ZOU Midlands region. This study recommends providing financial support schemes to ODL students by government, especially students who are not civil servants and are not covered by SSB and Edu-loan, institute continuous monitoring and evaluation of the ODL programmes in the country to facilitate its effective implementation nationally and marketing of ZOU programmes must be intensified.

Keywords: Open Distance Learning (ODL), students. enrolments, education.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of Zimbabwe independence in 1980 came up with major reforms in education and the great social demand for education was met by making education a universal human right. The government of Zimbabwe democratised education which was devoid by the former colonial master. Various educational delivery approaches were aligned to enable all citizens to benefit from this public good. The reforms in education were undercutting from primary and secondary education to colleges and universities to avail the good by public demand. This led to the introduction of Open Distance Learning to cater for the cross section of the marginalised. ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place and offering learning opportunities to

individuals and groups of learners UNESCO[1]. At its inception in 1999 Zimbabwe Open University registered phenomenal growth in terms of student numbers Mupa [2]. According to 2007 statistics, ZOU had a total number of 19 676 registered students, enrolled in all its faculties Kurebwa [3]. However from the period 2005 to 2013 enrolments in ZOU plummeted from above 20000 to just above 5000 nationwide Kabanda [4]. In ZOU Midlands Region, 2007 second semester a total 1235 students registered in all programmes. A significant decline of 49.87 % in student registration was observed from 2007 second semester up to 2013 second semester Kurebwa [3]. This became a cause for concern (Kurebwa [3]). However since 2nd semester 2014 the Region has seen an increase in enrolment all programmes as follows;

Table 1: Student Registration Statistics for the Period 2013-2015.

Semester	Year	Total Enrolment	Average Yearly Enrolment	Percentage Increase
1	2013	640	629	-
2	2013	619		
1	2014	667	666	6
2	2014	665		
1	2015	909	909	39
Total percentage increase from 2013 to 2015				45

Cognisant of an increase of 6 % to 45% during the study period, this study attempted to establish the factors leading to the phenomenal increase in student enrolments.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to establish the factors that lead to a student increase in ZOU Midlands Region.

Statement of the problem

In today's world education has become one of the most important facet of life upon which it is taken as the panacea to solve human problems. The young and old, together meet in the quest to acquire education which is indispensable. The critical social demand for education has opened ways to Open Distance Learning which has eased shortage of places in conventional institutions. Despite the high appetite for education ZOU Midlands Region has been suffering low enrolment and completion rates since 2005 Kurebwa [3]. Contrary to the poor enrolment rates as was the norm, the current trends in ZOU are that enrolments are registering an increase in numbers. This study justifies the need to opine the factors underlying the plummeting to swelling of ODL students in ZOU Midlands region.

Research Objectives

- To establish the factors responsible for an increase of student enrolments in ODL?
- To proffer interventions to maintain student growth.

Research Questions

- What could be the factors responsible for an increase of student enrolments in ODL?
- How can the factors responsible for swelling of student numbers in ODL be maintained or improved on?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Open Distance Learning (ODL) is now considered as a reputable method of education as evidenced by the establishment of numerous ODL institutions worldwide and increasing enrolment of students in these institutions Fozdar, Kumar, and Kannan [5]. Many distance learning institutions are battling against low and poor retention and completion

rates. Relevant studies have shown that one of the major factors affecting dropouts is the number of modules completed by a student Parker, 1999[6]. External factors such as organizational supports, financial problems, and time constraints have been known to be crucial obstacles to adults' participation in learning because adult learners are associated with various roles in their lives Darkenwald & Merriam[7]; Johnstone & Rivera[8]. Student drop out emanate from a combination of entangled factors and these factors define the nature, situations and characteristics of human existence.

Other factors that could influence students' perceptions are also family and intrapersonal influences Bull [9]. Okopi [12] posited that the factors that lead to dropout also include difficult course content, socio-economic status, quality of student learning packages, difficulty in combining work and family life with study, rejoining academic after a long break and lack of confidence. Moreover, course and tutor-related factors give students daunting challenges to cope with distance learning. Nihuka & Voogt [13] opine that pain staking challenges include lack of effective communication and interaction between instructors and students and delays in delivery of study materials assignments. Also researches have highlighted media and the tutor contact Whittington [14] the modules' workload Garg et. al, [15] and the number and difficulty of written assignments Baath[16]. Internal factors that can be used as dropout predictors are the course difficulty as perceived by the students, the motivational levels and the persistence levels Chacon-Duque, [17]. Willging and Johnson [18] claimed that external factors such as family issues, lack of organizational support, changing job, and workload are the main factors affecting the decision to drop out of online courses. Besides, network challenges especially in the rural areas have proved to be a drawback in the provision of internet services thereby hampering collaborative e-learning Kurebwa and Nyaruwata [19]

There are difficulties and challenges with access to adequate technologies so that students can enrol in the programs Oladele [20]. The literature has all this information clearly skewed to factors leading to dropouts but there are positive fortunes underlying certain learning environments as such the study would

primarily need to establish some factors that have propelled the swelling of enrolments in ODL since ODL is rapidly gaining ground around the world Glickman [21] including in Zimbabwe Midlands region. Learner support is therefore pertinently indispensable in assisting the ODL learners to cope with academic and social pressures in such a way that they achieve the requisite level of academic and social integration Badza & Chakuchichi [22]. Therefore programme retention plays a critical role in obtaining successful completion rates in ODL. For course completion the rate may increase to about 50% of the original cohort Huelsmann [23]. Woods et al cited in Sukati [24] emphasize that a key success factor for distance learning courses to meet the needs of the consumer is the quality of instructional materials. Such a move is perceived to have an aggravating effect on student learning attraction and inevitably increases the enrolments. Many Universities are feeling the pressure to control their costs, improve quality of instruction, focus on customer needs, and respond to the competitive pressures Horgan [25]. This kind of stance is able to help distance learners' problems be lessened and give a motivating effect to improve retention and minimise attrition.

While drop out of students has remained a thorn in the flesh to administrators it is also imperative to establish factors underlying the fortunes to ZOU Midlands region as the students enrolments are now swelling. Respectively, second semester 2013 students were 619 and in 2014 second semester they were 665 and in 2015 first semester they were 909. There is now a trend of students increasing numbers in registration, in fact from plummeting to swelling enrolments in ZOU Midlands region. This increase of 45% enrolment made it imperative for this research to unravel the underlying factors accountable to this scenario. Lessons can be drawn and notes can be taken from the empirical results of this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative interpretive research approach. A qualitative approach was preferred because it allows the researcher to gain understanding of the social phenomenon from the participants' perspective in their natural setting McMillan and Schumacher [26]. All the participants of this study were purposefully selected. Zint and Montgomery [27] state that, "Purposive sampling is a non-random method where the researcher selects information rich cases for study in-depth." Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 students 8 lecturers and 5 support staff members in this study. Two focus groups of eight students each were also conducted. Furthermore ZOU documents pertaining to students' statistics were perused. It is better to select a variety of research methods when approaching a problem than rely on one single method Creed [28]. Data was analysed through the use of analytic techniques derived from qualitative

research, primarily thematic analysis Manning and Luyt [29] Data analysis involves breaking up data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships Mouton [30]. Themes that emerged from the data were identified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While the literature has intensively discussed the factors leading to plummeting of enrolments it is also the subject of this study to discuss the factors leading to swelling enrolments at ZOU Midlands region. The factors to be discussed are categorised into themes.

Fees affordability

This study obtained that financial support is a cornerstone especially to achieve successful completion rates in university education. According to Macgregor [31] financial difficulties are largely blamed for dropout among black students. At ZOU Midlands region the enrolments in ODL have taken a new twist and the figures are now increasing. The sponsorship of this vital good has made a positive effect and more students are enrolling. The following claims were made by the students who were at least able to afford the fees payment.

"We are as happy as other students in traditional mode of learning. To begin with we cherish very much the idea made by our university. It was not easy but a sacrifice to slash \$100 to make our education dream a success."

"There is also an education loan facility through Salary Service Bureau (SSB) and Edu-loan which makes affordable monthly deductions. This has lessened the problems of affording the cost of the programme just from our personal savings."

"Besides the payment plan that is in place helps us a long way to manage the payment of fees. ZOU has become quite user-friendly and flexible thus why quite a number of students now opt for the mode of learning through ZOU. For example, a student has the discretion to choose to do a few courses than the full package this makes everything viable."

The student participants echoed several positive statements that welcome such reforms meant to improve students' completion rates at ZOU Midlands. The move has been received with motivation and jubilation. It emerged that most of the students now register for the programme with high motivation and this has realised the increase in registration numbers. The student affairs department and staff in the accounts department also affirmed these findings and highlighted that they believed that the majority of the students are taking up new programmes due to the financial leverage now in place. One participant reaffirms that, "Unlike in the past

when I used to compete for fees with my children who are also in conventional institutions, today I can manage at my pace, my time, my job, my home and my comfort.” Priority to education was given to children because of loans both the parent and the child accessed education which lessened barriers. Of the interviewed participants, 80 % were working at the same time studying. A former dropout participant expressed that he had left the institution four years ago and had re-registered to complete the remaining courses. Perusing some university documents it was discovered that some students who had dropped had re-registered and that seemed to confirm that financial problems were major obstacles to university education. Also the UNICEF programme which paid fees for distance learners who enrolled in different education programmes led to the increase in enrolments. “Receiving sponsorship from UNICEF is just getting education to my door step so I cannot just waste this grand opportunity,” said one delighted student.

Positive Image

Positive image of ZOU is one of the factors that were mentioned by participants as leading to swelling of enrolments in this institution. ZOU had suffered negative publicity especially through the print media and some of its programmes had been ceased and the ban was lifted towards the end of 2014. The negative perceptions were exacerbated by the publication of the suspension of the Counselling degree and Diploma in education by ZIMCHE (Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education) during the period 2011-June, 2013 Kurebwa[3]. This affected motivation of students especially those who were taking up counselling programmes. Such comments were made by the participants.

“We thought ZOU is a reputable organisation and to hear the bad publicity through the press was shocking news to us. We suspended our studies in some areas because the communication to the suspension of counselling programmes was not adequately communicated to us.”

“I was heartbroken when I got the news of the banning of counselling programmes, I became a laughing stock at my school automatically I quitted the programme.”

“The situation was restored to normalcy when Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) uplifted the banned programmes last year. Also ZOU has been listed among better performing institutions and this proved to us that the university is still a brand to go for.”

The above statements seem to suggest that ZOU had experienced some dropouts and suffered the completion rates due to bad publicity Kurebwa [32]. While the institution suffered from negative publicity,

loss of students the learners themselves had developed cold feet and abandoned the programmes. McGivney [33] confirmed this and said that, “Dissatisfaction with a course or institution is also a common reason for non-completion, and if this is on top of a range of external constraints and pressures, there is a strong likelihood that students will abandon a programme before completion”

It was then after pronouncement of the lifting of the ban the participants professed having positive feelings on ZOU degree programmes.

Education policy statement

This research revealed that the number of distant learners is increasing owing to a number of reasons. One such prime reason is a result of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education which required that all teachers with ought teaching qualifications were to acquire the needed qualifications. *Zimbabwean education is on the rise according to one participant and no one wants to lag behind.* The admissions department confirmed that many of the enrolments this year were new entrants. It is also confirmed that the alarming numbers are in the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Most of the participants interrogated offered the following sentiments.

“All of us here are graduate teachers but we do not have theory of education. Our jobs are at risk because it is the policy of education that we must have education component or we quit. So the best format is to get the qualification through distance learning and apparently ZOU has that facility to learn at the comfort of our jobs.”

“Promotions in education are on the basis of merit. To get to the rank of a deputy head you need to have a degree.”

“ZOU has also a component in which one can train from scratch to become a teacher, it is now the survival of the fittest. Nowadays you cannot be taken on temporary basis to relieve a teacher on leave unless you hold a diploma or a degree.”

The above scenario seems to suggest that ZOU’s intake numbers were inevitably on the rising trend. On perusing some of the documents of the participants in the admissions department some students had degrees in Marketing, Business Management, Accounting, Information systems, Economics, Banking and Finance and many others but they were all teachers seeking the education qualification. If this inference is correct, maintaining and expanding opportunities to

enrol in ZOU is important in broadening access to higher education for students from all backgrounds.

Additionally, some participants presented their positive perceptions about the ZOU programmes. For example, six participants thought that the courses were useful. Some participants mentioned advantages of distance learning programme; for example, one participant expressed that saving time was the biggest advantage. These views tend to suggest that ZOU's enrolments were poised to increase due to all the push factors mentioned, to this effect customer retention strategies must be the way to go.

Other factors related to increasing enrolments

Zimbabwe Open University is gaining millage in winning students even those who have failed to get places from other institutions due to better logistics and improvements in operations. Students had the following to say:

“The cost of studies is now affordable, it is fairly easy to get admission at ZOU, study materials and supplementary readings are provided in both print and electronic media and we sometimes attend tutorials although on a limited time basis.”

There is development of positive perception about ZOU and many potential learners were likely to pursuing their studies with ZOU. Some participants commented that the university is ideal because of its learning flexibility. Some of the staff said, *“Now it is easy to assist students as one can just access the information needed via internet although internet is sometimes not accessible.”*

According to Jones [31] the University of London lifelong learning institute has experienced a phenomenal growth rate of 30% in student retention by augmenting its learner support through comprehensive communication plan with all students, standardisation of correspondence, and the availability of course material and increased access to tutors.

Furthermore participants affirmed that ZOU numbers were set to continually rise as many people have the great learning appetite. One student reiterated that, *“Education is the panacea to solve human problems without a degree in Zimbabwe you are nothing.”* This sentiment makes one to conclude that people in Zimbabwe consume education as long as they want better earning jobs. In fact, 75% reported that completing the ODL programme gave them a stronger feeling of professional competency, followed by professional advancement, a promotion, or more responsibility, a new job that better corresponded to their personal aspirations, and a higher salary.

Also in Zimbabwe there is a culture of competition and no one would want to lag behind. Such opinions have placed education and qualification a priority of life. Finally, a lot were thinking about taking more training to improve their qualifications, which suggested that most respondents viewed their ODL programme as just one step in a lengthy career path.

CONCLUSIONS

From the study findings, it is clear that there were various factors that contributed to the increase in student numbers at ZOU Midlands region. The researcher is of a belief that such factors can be exploited in order to continue to enrol and register a phenomenal growth in enrolment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the study comes up with the following recommendations:-

- The government need to provide financial support schemes to ODL students who are not in the public service as well.
- Need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of the ODL programmes in the country to facilitate its effective implementation nationally.
- Need to continually and rigorously marketing of ZOU in order to spruce its image as well providing the general populous with accurate information about ZOU programmes .
- The results of this study may not be generalised since the study was only confined to Midlands region. Factors leading to scenario of increasing of enrolments may differ from region to region hence a national survey research may unearth how open distance takers are affected in their various environments.

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