

Students' views on the Appropriate Mode of Teaching and Learning in Open and Distance Learning: Case of Matabeleland North Regional Campus of Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore the views of undergraduate students at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University on the mode of teaching and learning that is appropriate to them considering their unique challenges. The traditional mode is characterised by use of the printed module while the modern mode by electronic learning (E-learning). Thus, students' views were sought regarding the two modes or the blended mode characterised by both. The case study design was adopted and a population that comprised undergraduate students during the July-December 2016 academic semester was targeted. A sample of 20 (N=20) students was conveniently selected to participate in the study and Questionnaires were used as the research instruments to gather data. Based on the findings, the study concluded that the use of the blended mode of teaching and learning at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU was preferable as it gave flexibility to students in using either the printed module or E-learning. Accordingly, the researchers recommended that for the sake of some disadvantaged students, the regional campus should retain the blended mode of teaching and learning to allow for option or choice between use of the print module or E-learning by students. It should embark on a fund-raising campaign to purchase more electronic resources for students, or at least secure loans for needy students to purchase smart phones, tablets and laptops which will enable them to access E-learning materials in consistence with the institution's current generational stage of ODL delivery where MyVista has largely been popularized. In addition, notwithstanding the success that the campus like other regional campuses of ZOU have scored in training students in the utilization of electronic resources; the regional campus in question still needs to reach out to other students who missed the training for one reason or the other; in order that they do not remain disadvantaged due to lack of E-learning skills.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, blended teaching and learning mode, printed module, electronic learning.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

'Open and Distance Learning', also referred to as 'Open and Distance Education' or simply 'Distance Education' seems a concept to most educators of today; particularly those only acquainted to conventional education. However, the concepts that form its basis are more than a century old. Certainly there has been growth and change in Open and Distance Learning in recent years; but it is the long traditions or generations of the field that continue to give it direction for the future.

This study was conducted at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). It sought to establish the views of undergraduate students at the regional campus on the appropriateness of the traditional, modern or blended mode of teaching and learning. The traditional mode is

largely characterised by the use of the printed module while the modern mode by electronic learning (E-learning). The ZOU is a multi-disciplinary and inter-faculty institution of higher learning that offers Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. It is a distance teaching and learning institution that was created by an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20) in 1999 with the broad vision of becoming a world class open and distance learning university [1]. It operates through a National Centre and 10 Regional Campuses dotted across all the country's provinces; with the virtual region being the institution's 11th Regional Campus.

In her article on Higher Education and Open and Distance Education as a Strategy for National Development, Kurasha [2] notes that;

The establishment of the Zimbabwe Open University was a culmination of research into the needs of the nation, needs of the economy and a clear sign of creativity by the stakeholders to provide an institution flexible enough to cater for the broad human resource needs especially at the dawn of the knowledge era.

The institution largely caters for students in Zimbabwe and different parts of Southern Africa, most of whom have other commitments such as work and family. This is essentially because of its major characteristic, namely, flexibility of study.

Notably, the ZOU is the leading ODL tertiary institution in Zimbabwe and second largest in Southern Africa after University of South Africa (UNISA). It now has six faculties all of which have embraced quality teaching and learning in order to produce competitive graduates in different areas including commerce, arts and education, social sciences, agriculture and ICT (ZOU Strategic Plan, 2015). The institution provides knowledge, competencies, values and dispositions that are for the development of competitive human resources; using well developed distance teaching and open learning methodologies. Lifelong learning for social inclusion in a dynamic and fast changing global village is ZOU's fundamental beacon [3, 4].

The origin and development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been characterised by different modes of teaching and learning, with the print module where study material is provided to learners been central. However, with time, ODL began to assume other modern modes of teaching and learning particularly electronic learning (E-learning) in order to fulfill the diverse needs of its clientele most of whom are geographically separated from the tutor or learn at a distance from the centres of study. Thus, ODL institutions of higher learning including ZOU have come to vehemently advocate for the adoption of E-learning in line with global trends. However, some students at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of ZOU tend to have mixed views regarding the development; mainly because of their unique challenges. With this situation perhaps affecting some students in other regional campuses, the ZOU has continued to uphold the blend mode of ODL delivery; which is defined by the CoL [5] as;

A blended teaching and learning approach that demonstrates a blend of different pedagogical methods; including the use of printed material, technologies and resources to improve student learning at a distance. Some examples of blended open and distance

learning teaching and learning are provision of printed study materials, online interaction complemented by face-to-face teaching/tutoring.

Thus, the ZOU has largely maintained this very blended mode essentially to satisfy its diverse student base in different parts of the country and the Southern African region. The continued use of the print module happens to be serving a big purpose to some students at ZOU who have no easy access to electronic resources with some staying in remote areas without Internet connectivity. It is against this background that the current study focused on exploring the views of sampled students at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU on the blended mode of teaching and learning that is characterised by use of the printed module and E-learning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Without taking away the global trend in open and distance learning underpinned by a shift from traditional methods to modern methods of teaching and learning, the problem at stake is whether students at Matabeleland North Regional campus of the Zimbabwe Open University are prepared to embrace the paradigm shift to E-learning or should resort to the traditional mode of printed module use or at least the blended mode of teaching and learning considering the unique challenges faced by some of them in accessing open and distance education?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to establish the views of undergraduate students at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University on their preparedness to adopt E-learning or retain the traditional mode of printed module use or the blended mode of teaching and learning in view of their unique challenges..

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following specific research questions:

1. What mode of teaching and learning is currently being used at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of electronic teaching and learning in ODL?
3. In what ways is the blended teaching and learning mode appropriate to students at ZOU's Matabeleland North Regional Campus?
4. How best can E-learning be promoted as the contemporary teaching mode at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings were meant to shed light on the most appropriate mode of teaching and learning at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University. This was in recognition of the broad global paradigm shift in ODL delivery from the traditional mode characterised by use of the printed module to the utilization of information and communication technology (ICT). It is envisaged that the findings will help institutional management to reflect on the underlying reasons for the supposed foregone preference for the traditional print mode by some students while others prefer the blended mode at the regional campus.

Thus, findings of the current study are expected to guide the institution's policy makers to look into the future and see if technologically supported teaching and learning should be the only mode of ODL delivery or at least retain the blended mode. Such decisions will be informed by the unique challenges faced by some of the students at the regional campus under study and perhaps other regional campuses with similar circumstances.

DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Conceptually, the study was restricted to the exploration of undergraduate students' views on the appropriate mode of teaching and learning between the traditional and modern or blended mode. Geographically, the study was restricted to Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University. The regional campus is in Matabeleland North Province which has a total population of 749 017 people; where 360 776 (48%) are males while 388 241 (52%) are females [6].

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The nature of 'Open and Distance Learning

The concept Open and Distance Learning is quite fluid in meaning, but can generally be defined through many approaches, including, the absence of a teacher, use of mixed media courseware, use of industrialized processes, correspondence, independent and home study as the key aspects" [2]. For her, this implies that the fundamental elements of this type of educational delivery are 'openness' and 'flexible distance' between the learner and the tutor or study site. The Commonwealth of Learning [5] says that;

ODL is a mode of teaching and learning characterized by separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place for most part of the educational transaction, often mediated by technology for delivery of learning content with possibility of face-to-face interaction for learner-teacher and learner-learner

interaction implying provision of two-way didactic communication.

ODL is also described as planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result, requires special techniques of course design, instructional techniques, methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements in order to suite the diverse geographical circumstances of learners [7].

Holmberg [8] echoed by Ibara [9] distinguish ODL into various categories all in sum comprising the mode of delivery and learning which is a learner-centered type of education, open learning with a wide range of choices to the learner; open access without restricted formal entry requirements and entrance examinations; flexible learning, distributed learning and of paramount importance ODL falls along the continuum of time and place. The ZOU 2012 Annual Report elaborates that:

Open and Distance Learning is an educational process where all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between tutors and learners being conducted through print or electronic media. It involves approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities" (p2).

This definition is also preferred by several ODL authorities including Cropley and Kahl [10] Gallagher and McCormick (2009).

In the same vein, Keegan [11] stresses that ODL entails any instructional arrangement in which the tutor and the learner are geographically separated to an extent that requires communication through some media such as print or other form of technology. It is in this context that institutions like the ZOU have resorted to the use of the print module and other E-learning platforms to effectively implement its ODL programmes. Thus, distance education has, thus, been blended to be described as open and distance learning (ODL) to imply an education system which provides access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both [12]. As noted by Ibara [9];

The demand on the conventional higher education delivery system in many countries in the developing world is high and ever increasing that the conventional system has been unable to accommodate the number of

candidates seeking admission, hence, the need to advance the prospects of ODL as an alternative system of education.

This trend in higher education, particularly in the developing world, has undoubtedly paved the way for the expansion of ODL, which has in practice seen the establishment and growth of ODL institutions such as the ZOU and UNISA.

Brief Review of Generational Developments in ODL Delivery and the ZOU's Situation

The evolution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has largely been characterised by different developments or generations, and many ODL authorities have written to try and espouse this critical phenomenon in ODL [1, 2, 8, 11, 14-16]. In Chimedza [14]'s wording;

The evolution of distance education has so far seen three generations. The first generation consisted mainly of correspondence learning where the learner learnt through the print mode only, without any contact with the tutor and with little or no meeting with other students. The module and tutorial letters were the only mode of delivery. In the second generation stage, besides the module and tutorial letter, other means of tutoring in particular, the face-to-face component was added. The tutor's voice and his/her support to the printed material became critical. This began to take place through face-to-face situations and through audiocassettes, videocassettes, television and other media. The student was afforded the opportunity to meet other students and share ideas and experiences. This mode encouraged interactive and cooperative learning with other students. The third and last generation stage in the evolution of ODL is characterised by e-learning. This involves the use of the Internet, the World Wide Web, E-mail, V-sat and so forth. In this modern mode, students continue to interact with the tutor and with other students but mostly electronically.

As in 2006, Chimedza acknowledged that "Zimbabwe Open University is currently in the second generation of the evolution of mode of delivery in distance education" (p6). For him, this implies that the institution uses a dual mode of distance education, with the printed module being the key teaching tool, and is complemented by face-to-face tutorials to assist learners to understand the course and clarify areas they do not understand as they study the course alone. Thus, the ZOU, like most modern educational institutions the world over, has since moved to the third stage

essentially characterised by embracing ICT in its teaching and learning processes.

A glimpse at a related study conducted at the ZOU by Mafa and Gasva [17] reveals that;

- Face-to-face tutorials and use of print modules are still dominant at the ZOU's regional campuses and in instances where students do not have hard copy modules, Regional Programme Coordinators (full-time tutors) emailed them soft copies for use.
- ZOU's regional campuses generally have functional computer laboratories and that most students accessed e-resources including e-books and journals from renowned regional libraries
- Regional Programme Coordinators at the ZOU encourage students to utilise technology for research and communication and the institution has since introduced Students Chat-groups to enhance this development
- ZOU has successfully adopted the use of Turnitin originality check as well as My-Vista which are both teaching and learning platforms for ODL.

Thus, though the printed module is still popular at the ZOU, such emerging E-learning opportunities have been embraced by the institution in line with the global trends where E-learning has largely taken center-stage in ODL delivery.

Revisiting the paradigm shift from the traditional mode to E-Learning in ODL

As noted by Mafa and Gasva [17] one area in which Information Communication Technology (ICT) has made enormous impact the world over is in education, more so in open and distance learning (ODL) mostly because of its nature. Considering the level of infrastructural decay in the conventional higher education system in most developing countries including Zimbabwe, ODL as an alternative system of education has become imperative for the realization of the primary objectives of education particularly higher education. This is particularly so considering that contemporary ODL does not necessarily require classroom settings or face to face interaction between the tutor and learners for its implementation. This is because students can still effectively study on-line through E-learning (i.e. accessing information from E-books, E-journals through Internet as well as communicating with their tutors and peers by e-mail [9]).

Barikor [18] resonates that the modern use of E-learning facilitates distance and independent learning by students through the extensive use of ICT, which consequently replaces traditional or conventional mode of course delivery, thereby creating a virtual community of learners sustainable across time and space. In adopting E-learning, the focus is shifted from

conventionalism to the education transaction in which amazingly large numbers of students are served from a distance and at low cost. In the same vein, Sharon and Spring (ibid, p121) notes that massive open online courses aimed at large-scale interactive participation by stakeholders and open access via the Web or other network technologies, are a recent development in ODL delivery.

Moore and Kearsley [7] say that;

Distance education technologies are divided into two modes of delivery, namely, synchronous learning and asynchronous learning. In synchronous learning, all participants are taught at the same time for through a virtual tutorial. In this regard, it somewhat resembles traditional classroom teaching methods despite the participants being located remotely. It requires a timetable to be organized. Web conferencing, videoconferencing, educational television, instructional television are examples of synchronous technology, as are direct-broadcast satellite, Internet radio, live streaming, telephone, and Web-based VoIP. Online meeting software such as Adobe Connect has helped to facilitate learning in ODL programmes.

The same source further notes that in asynchronous learning, ODL participants access course materials flexibly on their own schedules and students are not required to be together at the same time. Other approaches in asynchronous delivery technology include E-mail, video and audio tutorial recordings.

Sharon and Spring [12] however, note that many courses offered by open and distance institutions use mixed distance and campus based education, which can be described as the 'blended teaching and learning mode'. For them, most of these institutions generally use a blend of face to face, print learning modalities and technological pedagogies all under the umbrella term ODL. Thus, in modern times, access to and quality of ODL can also be increased by using interactive airwave instruction, online virtual platforms, digital games, Webinars, Webcasts and so on; all of which fall within the framework of E-Learning [15].

As noted by Ibara, [9], the widespread use of E-learning has made ODL even easier, more friendly and faster, and today, virtual institutions across the globe are able to deliver full programmes online. One example is the African Virtual University, whose operations are now domiciled in a number of African Universities and following Increasing Access to and Quality of Open and Distance Learning Programmes through the introduction of the Virtual University, the

share of students in distance education classes has expanded and the percentage enrolled in ODL programmes has also increased [17]. Thus, ODL's popularity and use has grown exponentially as more advanced technology has become available to learners and the implementation of the blended mode of teaching and learning championed by technologically compliant ODL mechanisms such as Internet forum, online discussion groups, online learning communities, MyVista and so on have contributed to a more effective ODL education. It is in the light that the current study sought to explore the views of selected students at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU on the blended mode of teaching and learning currently used by the ZOU though institutional favouritism seem to be shifting towards E-learning mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is basically the collection of methods, rules and principles by which a particular study or research is undertaken and reported [19, 20]. It, thus, largely includes the research approach, design, population, sample, instruments, methods of data collection and analysis. The current study was a qualitative study that used the case study design. Eisenhardt (2009:210) defines the case study design as:

An in-depth examination of an extensive amount of information about very few units or cases for one period or across multiple periods of time or a research strategy which focuses on understanding the social dynamics present within single cases.

In this study, the case of Matabeleland North Regional Campus was used and a population that comprised undergraduate students during the July-December 2016 academic semester was targeted. From the population, a sample of 20 (N=20) students was conveniently selected to participate in the study. In order to gather data, Interviews were preferred by the researchers and interview guides were used as the research instrument. Interviews allowed researchers to probe interviewees deeper which allowed for the gathering of more data [21, 22]. In harmony with qualitative inquiries, the researchers were the primary tools for the gathering of the qualitative data who were thus directly involved in the generation of research data [23]. Data gathered was presented in accordance with the interview questions, and summarily focused on answering the research questions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The major findings of the study were that;

- All the students 20 (100%) confirmed that the regional campus is currently using the blended mode of teaching and learning characterised by use of the printed module and E-learning

- A total 15 (75%) indicated that printed modules are easy to use in ODL as they do not strain eyes like E-learning and in addition, they can be used anytime; anywhere without any need for Internet connectivity or additional E-learning resources
- As many as 17 (85%) of the students were of the view that there are, however, several benefits that accrue through use of E-learning including the fact that;
 - Students can easily communicate with the institution and between themselves for learning purposes
 - It is consistent with modern times as it makes students members of the global knowledge community
 - It expedites the transmission of information and increases access to and quality of ODL
- Only 7 (35%) of the students have access to electronic resources, hence, these are the only ones who are comfortable with the adoption of E-learning as a teaching and learning mode
- As many as 13 (65%) of the students are from remote rural areas and consequently do not have Internet connectivity when they are away from the regional campus. These still largely prefer the use of the printed module
- A total 14 (70%) of the students indicated that they were generally incompetent in using the appropriate E-learning resources, hence; considered the printed module, without choice, as being the most suitable mode of learning
- As many as 16 (80%) of the students, however, preferred the blended mode of teaching and learning that is characterised by use of the printed module and E-learning since it gave them flexibility of choice between the traditional and modern mode.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study concluded that; notwithstanding the significance of the paradigm shift to E-learning in education in general and ODL delivery in particular, the use of the printed module needs to be retained or at least maintain the blended mode of teaching and learning currently in use at Matabeleland North Regional Campus of the ZOU as it accommodates disadvantaged students who do not have easy access to E-learning facilities. In addition, the blended mode is also good enough because it gives flexibility and choice to students of using either the printed module or E-learning.

Accordingly, the researchers recommended that;

- For the sake of some disadvantaged students, the regional campus should retain the use of the printed module or at least the blended mode of teaching

and learning to allow for option or choice between use of the print module or E-learning by students

- The regional campus should embark on a fund-raising campaign to purchase more electronic resources for students, or at least secure loans for needy students to purchase smart phones, tablets and laptops which will enable them to access E-learning materials in consistence with the institution's current generational stage of ODL delivery where MyVista has largely been popularized
- Without taking away the success that Matabeleland North Regional Campus like other regional campuses of ZOU have scored in training students in the utilization of electronic resources, the regional campus in question still needs to reach out and train other students who missed the training for one reason or the other; so that these students do not remain disadvantaged due to lack of E-learning skills
- The regional campus should increase its number of District Centres and ensure that all of them have Internet facilities in order to increase the uptake of E-learning in line with the institution and global trends in education in general and ODL in particular
- Future research on the appropriate mode of ODL delivery paying particular attention to the level of E-learning adoption and access should be conducted at institutional level to complement findings of this case study of one regional campus of the Zimbabwe Open University.

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