



THE ROLE OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN REFRESHING SKILLS OF THE ALUMNI: THE CASE STUDY OF THE MASVINGO REGIONAL CAMPUS, ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to interrogate the short courses that the Zimbabwe Open University Alumni suggest the university to introduce to fill in the gap of the professional skills created by distance learning which are thought to be provided through face to face learning and teaching methods in the form of short courses. A convenient sampling sample of 50 Zimbabwe Open University alumni members who had converged for the alumni Masvingo workshop in November 2010 participated in the study. The study used a qualitative research design whereby questionnaire with open-ended items were used to solicit the professional skills that the alumni feel should fill the gap between academic and professional skills using the short courses. Data was qualitatively analyzed thematically. Findings indicated that the Zimbabwe Open University should unleash a number of professional gap filling courses using the short courses mode to the former students. It also emerged from this study that the alumni expect short courses in supervisory skills, communication skills, time management, office management, dial a smile for the customer and mentorship. The study recommends that the university should introduce short courses in training of trainers' program, supervisory, communication, time management, dial a smile for the customer and mentorship.

Key Words: Short courses, Open and Distance Learning, work force, Open and Distance Learning technologies

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INTRODUCTION

Among different modes of imparting knowledge and skills in the higher education environment, Open and Distance Learning has increasingly become the best option for the alumni members in the history of the development of higher education. Most countries worldwide are experiencing and witnessing a variety of new problems and facing multidimensional challenges in the communities that require the higher education to provide some working solutions to these challenges on a daily basis (Needham and Dransfield, 1995). The major challenges of this nature are among others, changes in career paths, changes in work situations, the workforce unwilling to disrupt their normal work to return to institutions of higher learning to obtain a higher qualification or the necessary skills for a particular job and many others. Open and Distance Learning has proved in the past to be efficient in the provision of the academic skills but the professional skills provision has been the duty of the face to face means of imparting knowledge to the learners, (Kuruba, 2010). It is essential and of paramount importance for the Open and Distance Learning institution to adopt the open and distance learning technologies (Kumaran and Ganesan, 2011) which are capable of assisting a larger number of people and participants at an given time to enhance the professional skills of the alumni in the Open and Distance Learning scenario.

The major challenge that is faced by many world organizations right now is the imparting of skills on the job for their workforce without dislodging or disrupting their workers from their normal employment (Selden, 1998). Many workers are also feeling it necessary not to disrupt their work going to acquire an academic qualification as this implies a waste of time and resources. Training is the most important functions in any institution or organization. An organization can have brilliant systems and technologies (Meyer, 2011) but if that same organization has employees who are incompetent, there is little hope for survival in the Open and Distance Learning scenarios. The contemporary development of the concepts of Education, Training and Development in the organizations is of great significance for the output of any organization (Shuguang, 2008). There is nothing that can be showed by the organizations without the presence of training, education and development of the human capital (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010). Modern organizations have increased to recognize the need for skilled lab our force. Skills in people have the capacity of increasing productivity and economic growth.

Thus the role of training and education is essential in any situation hence the need for the Zimbabwe Open University alumni to access such training after acquiring their academic degrees so that they can contribute significantly to the growth and development of the shrinking economy, (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010). Human resources in many developing nations is underdeveloped, (Meyer, 2011) and the potential has not yet been fully realized in many of the organizations. Skills gap need to be eliminated to improve the ratings of performance of the organization and the satisfaction of the individual worker at their workplaces. Despite the positive development that are

brought by the training and development, skills development in management remains a necessity to the post graduates who are joining the field of work (Meyer, 2011).

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to determine gap filling strategies for the university alumni in their workplace through short courses provision by the university to allow the graduate to fit squarely in the work environment.

Statement of the Problem

Most countries worldwide are experiencing and witnessing a variety of new problems and facing multidimensional challenges in the communities that require the higher education to provide some working solutions to these challenges on a daily basis. The major challenges of this nature are among others, changes in career paths, changes in work situations, the workforce unwilling to disrupt their normal work to return to institutions of higher learning to obtain a higher qualification or the necessary skills for a particular job. Open and Distance Learning has proved in the past to be efficient in the provision of the academic skills but the professional skills provision has been the duty of the face to face means of imparting knowledge to the learners. Thus the problem can be stated as *“provision of the short courses as a gap filling measure for the alumni through Open and Distance Learning”*.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What short courses do the alumni of the Zimbabwe Open feel the university should offer them?
- How can the Zimbabwe Open University’s Masvingo regional campus provide the short courses to the alumni?

Significance of the Study

This study will help Zimbabwe Open University to keep itself abreast with the demand of the labour market in which its graduates end up landing after their studies with the university. This will help the university to be focused and tailor- make its programs and activities to meet the maximum satisfaction of the client after graduation. As the graduate gets a higher academic qualification there is need to fill in the gap that do exist in the alumni after completing their studies for them to match with the expectations of the work place.

Conceptual Framework

Short courses provisioning is one of the most dynamic features of the alumni’s emerging education and training. These courses are particularly associated with the just in time and just enough training

systems. The alumni may need instant training in some issues that they feel are gapping with time such as customer orientations and interaction, (Kongthon, 2009; Kay, 1997) at the workplace orientations. There is no way one can believe that completing an undergraduate or a post graduate qualification guarantees one to be fully fledged with knowledge and skills that are needed at the work place. Development and upgrading of skills and knowledge is an ongoing thing in the human life. We have to grapple with the acquisition of new knowledge and skills that we need to solve immediate challenges that seem to be new at the workplace.

The approach of using short course is plausible in areas where technology is ever-changing and even where the human capital is moving up the ladder to great heights in terms of knowledge and skills acquisition (Kathy, 2010). The main challenge management of the modern organizations has to grapple with is that of managing the complicated human capital. Modern human capital is in great search for new knowledge and skills for use at their workplaces. These skills and knowledge are of paramount importance as they develop in tandem with productivity per individual worker in the organization. However the most challenging thing is that of workers having to stop production and join colleges and university in order to acquire the skills and knowledge. This move has the danger of retarding productivity of the individual worker in the organization hence the need for a paradigm shift from conventional learning to Open and Distance Learning for those workers who have the academic excellence but need to keep abreast with the changes taking place in the global labor market (Hu, 2007). Provision of the short courses by Open and Distance modes is an approach that makes access to learning manageable and saves the employers and the employees' money, time, energy and resources.

In essence a short course is a type of short learning program through which a learner may or may not be awarded credits. This depends on the purpose of the program. A credit bearing short course is a type of short learning program for which credits, in relation to the courses' contribution to a particular program, unit standard or qualification is awarded. The Open and Distance Learning institutions can award the short courses in both situations where the short course is attached to some credits. This is the certification of the trained and developed individual with the organization assisting the workers develops the needed skills to accomplish certain tasks in the organization. This is a kind of specific training meant to boost certain things or operations in the organization and the individuals send for training are awarded with some certification for recognition by the organization.

A skills program is an occupationally based training. When people complete it will constitute credits towards a qualification registered in the national qualification framework. Provisioning of such training is undertaken by a training provider accredited by the training quality assurance in the country (Kuveya, 2001). Short courses allow individuals to take time out from their work routine and benefit from the provision of an environment and access to facilities that will enable them to enhance their professional skills and capabilities. The participants will always be from the group of

individuals who have the relevant degrees and a minimum number of years of relevant experience. In most cases the groups of those individuals who join the short course program are usually from a diverse faculties and experiences. Diverse skills of applicants will be taken into account so as to ensure an optimum mix of the disciplines therefore providing a good platform for the participants to share experiences.

Research methodology

The study used a descriptive qualitative design. The questionnaire used had open-ended questions that yielded qualitative data. Babbie, (1997) says, “Descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond”. Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed the former students to say exactly what they felt about the short courses and skills provision by the Zimbabwe Open University. Borg and Gall, (1989) say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. This was the primary goal in this study.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study was all the 180 Zimbabwe Open University graduates by 2009 academic year who worked within reach of the Masvingo regional campus of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Sample

A sample of 50 alumni, 30 females and 20 males participated in this study. Convenient sampling technique was used to draw the 50 participants from the four faculties of the university namely, Arts and Education, Commerce and Law, Applied Social Sciences and Science and Technology as the alumni visited the regional center for various issues with the university. The selected subjects were those alumni who visited the university and are known by records to have completed either their first degree or the post graduate degrees with the Zimbabwe Open University. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement was reached on what data to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

Data Gathering Instrument

The study used the questionnaire as the data gathering instrument. The questionnaire was administered to students as they pay sporadic visits to the university for any administrative issues like collection of transcripts and certificates.

Data Gathering Procedures

Respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire on the spot. This method was preferred because it ensured a 100 percent return of the completed questionnaire and it was cheaper and easier to

administer, while the processing of data was less complex than could be the case if, say observations were used (Babbie, 1997; Dumbu and Matanda, 2010).

Data Analysis

Data was organized and qualitatively analyzed according to issues or themes as raised by the respondents.

Results and discussion

Issues pertaining to the training and development of the skills of the alumni in the Zimbabwe Open University's Masvingo Regional Campus from the view of the heterogeneous student population characterized the responses.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Fifty students (N = 30 females, N = 20 males) completed the questionnaire on the short courses for refreshing the skills of the alumni. These respondents are the alumni who are working in the various capacities in the economy who have been empowered by the Zimbabwe Open University through Open and Distance Learning.

Professional Recognition to Boost Career Prospects

It cropped up in the study that the alumni demand the short courses because these courses enhance their professional and career prospects. The short course allow the alumni members to be abreast with the new information that is cropping up in their field of study and make sure that they are able to input the developments in the areas of work. Some of the respondents have the following:

- We are living in a time of technology where technology is upgraded every six month so we have to be abreast with those changes.
- Advancing with technological changes will make us live up to the breakthroughs of change in the industries where we are working.

Technology has been known to increase productivity and many jobs are being replaced with technology hence the need for the alumni members to increase their presence in the new knowledge (Sihua, 2009). Recognition of one's profession nowadays depends on one's dexterity on the information technology. The alumni have to allude to the changes in technological developments so that they are not left behind because the industries are transforming due the advancement of technology and techniques. The development of technology will affect the opening and closing of other industries so the short refresher courses are important for the alumni members to be prepared for an obsolete of the skills they acquired during their period of study (Solomon, 2010). Therefore the provision of the short courses by the Zimbabwe Open University will enhance the alumni a

chance of relevance in industries and an opportunity of staying relevant and move ahead and keeping pace with technology as it transforms the way the world works.

Refreshing One's Know How

The respondents in this study indicated that the short courses are of paramount importance to them because they afford them an opportunity to refresh their know-how. The skills they have learnt can rust if they do not continue revisit them and sharpen their skills through studying again (Zhongwei and Xiaobo, 2005). By constantly upgrading your knowledge and skills one can become a valuable contributor to the organizations which they work for. One of the respondents in the research retorts that:

- One might have so many years of experience at the work place but that is not enough because you must have the certification to endorse that experience.

What is implied by the above statement is that the alumni are starting to recognize the importance of certification of their experience at the place. Only being experienced is proving not important but the idea of having to continue with the process of gaining new knowledge and ideas is of essence in the corporate world. If one does not search for new knowledge that person become redundant in the industry.

Improvement of Skills and Endorsement of Capacity

The respondents in this study showed that the introduction of the short courses by the Zimbabwe Open University has the capacity to build one's skills and expanding one's knowledge. This also has the opportunity of providing certification one might need to move up in one's career. The short courses build on the gap that can be created between the time one is out of study and concentrating on the work (Turban, 2002). There are many chances that the person involved in work continuous might lose skills to concentrate in studies. Therefore the employment and the use of the refresher short course to workers can be another way to improve on their concentration rates. Robbins and Coulter, (1999) concur that employee skills are important to any organization. Those organizations that are employers of the Zimbabwe Open University alumni benefit a lot if their members receive training in form of short courses. Short courses afford those who left university studies to develop skills in interpersonal and problem solving. One of the respondents in the study said:

- Training in short courses offered by the University upgrade and improve our skills in job specific competencies because the majority of the jobs today are more complex than they were at the time we were at the university, hence the need for short courses to bridge the gap.

Short courses per se improve the interaction skills and to some degree those alumni who partakes short courses are likely to improve in the interaction with each other at the workplace. Productivity at the workplace depends on the employee ability to interact effectively with colleagues.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research concluded that the Regional Campus must provide training to the alumni members in for of the short course. It cropped up in the research that the short courses have the capability of improving the recognition of the workers by their employers, improvement of skills and endorsement of capacity and refreshing one's know how. The study recommended that the Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University should give short courses training to the alumni members because the short courses pull the diverse skills of the participants leading to sharing of information. The short courses should be conducted by experts in the areas chosen for development by the participants. The curriculum for delivering the necessary skills through short courses should adopt the concept of conversational leadership. This is so because there is an awareness of the fact that modern leaders should be conversant with their environment. Graduates will go on to manage and lead successful conservation projects with local and global organizations for the benefit of the whole world.

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