



FACTORS AFFECTING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN ZIMBABWE. CASE OF ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe Open University has been in existence for over a decade and is the only institution offering open and distance learning in Zimbabwe. The institution when it started had the highest enrolment which was higher than four conventional state universities combined. Currently the university is on the enrolment decline. This is contrary to the fact that distance education is spreading to almost all areas of education and training worldwide. It is also against the background that the Government is channeling many resources towards the establishment of a fully integrated distance learning system which involves the development of course materials and providing student support and instruction. This exhibits negative forces acting against knowledge production as less and fewer graduates are produced. Therefore the purpose of this paper was to examine the key factors affecting open and distance learning in Zimbabwe. A descriptive survey design was adopted in form of a structured questionnaire which was used to collect data from 70 undergraduates, and 20 students post graduates. Also an interview guide was developed to carry out interviews to 10 staff members consisting of 2 Regional Directors, 2 Regional administrators, and 6 lecturers. Descriptive statistical analysis was a basic one which involves finding frequency of factors and converts them to percentages. This method was able to reduce lots of data into simpler summaries to present easily.

Key Words: Open and distance learning, Conventional university, Zimbabwe open university

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INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe Open University was established as an open and distance learning (ODL) institution in 1997. The main aim was to cater for the large population of citizens who were unable to gain access to colleges and other tertiary institutions. Initially the target population consists of mature citizens who are employed or engaged in other activities which make it impossible for them to enroll in conventional universities because of time constraints. Before the establishment of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) there little opportunities for these time constraint individuals, keen to improve themselves to advance themselves academically. Open Distance Learning represents approaches that focus on opening access to education freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and group learners (Nyaruwata, 2011).

ODL was received well by the Zimbabwean society as exhibited by ZOU's high enrolment levels during its formative years. However currently there is a significant decrease in enrolment levels and this is a threat to the institution as a centre of knowledge production. This unhealthy situation has pushed the researcher to find out the factors which affect knowledge production at ZOU. According to Galusha (1998) if a university cannot attract students it is doomed as knowledge production centre.

Knowledge Production

Knowledge production in universities means creation of new ideas to change all spheres of life (Pearson, 2000). According to Birnbaum, (2001) universities are considered as an innovative centre for new knowledge to drive economic change in any country. Research has proved that countries with universities that have proven academic excellence are doing well in economic performance. Universities are generators of knowledge needed for development. Through their research and teaching they help to produce expertise, manage development, engineer social transformation, and preserve social values and cultural ethos. In all modern societies, universities are considered the 'knowledge factories' and the longevity of a university is associated with its knowledge production processes (Birnbaum, 2001).

The production of knowledge occurs primarily through the medium of scholarly communication. Scholarly communication occurs when experts in particular areas present their ideas and these ideas are then evaluated, debated and then accepted, rejected or modified (Unesco, 2006). Scholarly communications comes in form of research work or human products (graduates) that are introduced into the market and improve the market's way of life. Zirkle, (2001) identified the students as cardinal to knowledge production in distance education. If the university fails to attract students to its programs its ability to produce knowledge ceases.

Zirkle, (2001) identified student enrolment and service delivery as critical in knowledge production processes of universities. The author identified factors that affect students' enrolment in distance learning institutions as program costs, scheduling, instructional concerns, resources availability, lack of technical, lack infrastructure and technology. Service delivery inefficiency in ODL according to Unesco, (2006) is associated to lack of resources and often work with outmoded information systems, too few staff with too little training, inadequate infrastructure to support operations, and crowded buildings.

FACTORS AFFECTING ENROLMENT IN ODL

Costs

According to Zirkle, (2001) costs (tuition fees, administration fee etc) play a critical role in student enrolment. ZOU main target is the adult population who did not get an opportunity to learn when they were young. This group is finding the going very tough as result of economic problems which faced the country in the past two decades. According to CSO (2005) extreme poverty increased significantly during the 1990s, with an estimated 20% of households living below the Food Poverty Line (very poor) in 1995, compared to 48% in 2003. Based on the total consumption poverty line (very poor and poor), households in poverty increased from 42% in 1995 to 63% by 2003. By the end of 2011 unemployment rate stood at 85% (PASS 2011). These economic problems may have a direct impact on enrollment levels at both secondary and tertiary level.

Scheduling

Scheduling ODL courses at specific times can be a difficult for adults who have other competing tasks which includes work and family time (Zirke, 2001). ZOU offers tutorials during the weekend-Saturday and Sunday. Many adults may find it difficult to get time to attend these tutorials hence they will end deciding not to enroll for ODL

Instructional Concerns

Learners and instructors are physically separated from each other in the ODL environment (Huang and Liaw, 2004). According to Levine & Sun, (2002) instructors directly influence the quality of education and the satisfaction of learners. The presence of the instructor in any ODL course discussion improves the quality of dialogue (Dennen, 2005). This is the reason why most students select conventional mode which enables face-to-face learning. Mayzer and Dejong (2003) posit that an instructor enables interactive communication environment.

Resources Availability

Education is entering a difficult period financially, as the country (Zimbabwe) is facing declining tax revenues and budget deficits as a result of economic problems the country experienced in the last decade. Education used to be the largest item in the country's budgets, and now it is not a priority. Cuts in this area are nearly unavoidable. From a national standpoint, the outlook is even

grimmer when a substantial amount of money is channeled towards drought relief to many provinces in Zimbabwe at the expense of education. Beyond this, interest rates on institutional funds have plummeted. The message is that colleges and universities are facing lower revenues and higher expenses. It will be difficult, under these circumstances, to sustain existing facilities, people, and programs, let alone try new initiatives.

Technology

Open and Distance Learning programming relies heavily on technical assistance. The lack of an effective institutional network of technical assistance is a significant barrier (Berge, 2002). Having technical assistance resources in place and maintained is a key to any successful distance education program (Cho & Berge, 2002; Galusha, 1998; Levy, 2003; Zirkle, 2003). The problem is common in most developing countries.

Statement of the Problem

The Zimbabwe Open University has been considered the biggest university in terms of enrolment in comparison to other state universities (Conventional ones). However 2011 enrolment showed a sharp decrease in student enrolment.

Table-1: Zimbabwe Open University Enrolment 2005-2011

| Year | Number of Students Enrolled |
|------|-----------------------------|
| 2005 | 20 582 |
| 2006 | 17 782 |
| 2007 | 19 694 |
| 2008 | 17 687 |
| 2009 | 16 295 |
| 2010 | 15 618 |
| 2011 | 9 497 |

Source: ZOU Statistics 2005-2011- Compiled by M. Damson

The decrease in enrolment may indicate that there are problems in the institution as a knowledge production centre, hence the need to establish the factors that affect knowledge production in the institution. These factors may have an impact on the enrolment levels.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research was carried out to establish the following objectives:

1. To establish factors affecting students enrolment
2. To determine the factors affecting service delivery

METHODOLOGY

The purposes of this research aimed at establishing the factors affecting the knowledge production in open and distance learning in Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Open University being the case study. In establishing the factors that affect knowledge production, this was achieved through two objectives: to determine the factors that are affecting student enrolment and factors that are affecting general service delivery at Zimbabwe Open University. Students are central in knowledge production in any university. The more the students are attracted to a university exhibits the quality of knowledge production of the institution. Also the way the university delivery its service affects knowledge production.

The research was conducted by means of qualitative research. A sample for the research consisted of 100 respondents comprising of 70 undergraduates, and 20 students post graduates, 6 Programme Coordinators, 2 Regional and 2 Regional Administrators. Convenience and judgmental sampling techniques were used to select students and staff respectively. From the two groups of students information was obtained through the questionnaire while staff members (2 Regional Directors, 2 Regional administrators, and 6 lecturers), information was collected through in-depth interviews. A descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyse data. Descriptive statistical analysis was a basic one which involves finding frequency of factors and converts them to percentages. This method was able to reduce lots of data into simpler summaries

RESULTS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Factors Affecting Student Enrolment At ZOU

The finding reveals that the factors that are affecting student enrolment at Zimbabwe University include the following:

- Skepticism of Open and Distance learning
- Credibility of Open and Distance learning qualifications
- Costs
- Some companies are alleged to be not recognizing ODL qualifications
- Negative attitude over ODL

Skepticism of Open and Distance Learning

90% of the sampled students indicated that most people are skeptical of Zimbabwe Open University. They said studying with an open and distance learning institution is more like corresponding and that frightens many people. They also say because of what people say on several times have thought of terminating studies with the university. This was corroborated by the all the sampled Regional Directors who say most people ask them if the Zimbabwe Open University qualifications are equivalent to those from the conventional universities. Kurasha and Gwarinda (2010) also confirm that most Zimbabweans are skeptical of degrees offered through ODL.

Probably the skepticism is as a result of lack of information. This is a serious threat to ZOU as a centre for knowledge production. If this skepticism is not reduced probably through aggressive marketing campaigns which include testimonials the enrolment will continue to go down.

Credibility of Open and Distance Learning qualifications

The results reveal that Zimbabwe Open University qualifications suffer credibility problems as indicated by 82% of the respondents (Students). The students highlighted the suspension of some Zimbabwe Open University programmes like Bachelor of Science in Counselling by the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) for allegedly not meeting basic requirements. The suspension of the programmes according to the results affected the credibility of other programmes being offered by the institution.

Cost

Costs in terms of tuition fees and other levies were also identified as one prohibiting factor. 95% indicates that they are struggling to pay for their tuition fee and other potential candidates are discouraged by the tuition fee which they regard as relatively high. Tuition fees are pegged at \$525 for undergraduates and \$900 for post-graduates. This may be a valid reason, considering that the average salary in the country is at \$350 (CSO, 2011).

Companies not Recognizing ZOU Qualifications

Most companies are alleged to be not recognizing ZOU qualifications preferring qualifications from conventional universities. This was confirmed by 64% of the students. The respondents allege that employees with degrees from conventional universities are easily promoted as compared to those who obtain degrees from ODL. Probably this is one of the major reasons why there is sharp decline in the enrolment numbers at ZOU. However this was not substantiated since companies were not considered in this study.

Negative attitude over ODL

Results show that the generality of people have a general negative attitude towards open and distance learning and this affects enrolment levels. This was confirmed by 64% of the students. According to Jones, and Pritchard, (2000) most people have got discriminatory attitudes towards ODL preferring the traditional education mode-the conventional way.

FACTORS AFFECTING SERVICE DELIVERY

Absence of Research Budget

This was found to be one of the major reasons affecting knowledge production in ZOU. The institution like any other state university in the country has inadequate funds to finance university operations. Lecturers are failing to access funds for research thus affecting research work. Knowledge production in universities is also measure by research works. The sampled Regional

Directors said they are finding it difficult to encourage their academic staff to write and present papers at regional and international conferences, as funds to travel are not available.

Infrastructure for Higher Education

ZOU according to results lack physical infrastructure. Most regions including the National Centre do not have its own offices. It operates from rented premises and move from one place to another. This disrupts operations and students lose confidence of the university. 100% of the respondents confirmed this. The respondents also highlighted that ZOU lack ICT infrastructure to support internet connectivity. Half of the Regional centres are not connected to the internet. This affects knowledge production and this confirmed by Galusha (1998), who said Distance Learning nowadays is driven by the internet.

Inadequate expertise in ODL

Results shows that 75% of the respondents interviewed indicated that knowledge production in ZOU is affected by lack of expertise in ODL. The bulk of the part-time tutors are borrowed from the conventional universities. Besides, they are not trained to conduct classes of distance higher education, and their attitudes towards distance education are not much different from the rest of the people who look at distance education as a second-class form of education. They said the tutors try to perpetuate what they do in conventional settings where contact time with students is high as compared to ODL where contact time with students is very limited. Also the respondents submitted that it is very difficult to attract highly qualified personnel especially PHD holders to an ODL institutions, hence the reason why ZOU has got limited PHD holders as compared to conventional universities such the University of Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSIONS

Comprehending the factors that affect knowledge production in ODL is very vital. The study sought to determine the factors that affect knowledge production in ODL. This was achieved through addressing two objectives: determining the factors that affect students enrolment and service delivery of ZOU. Factors affecting students enrolment were found to be: skepticism of open and distance learning, credibility of open and distance learning qualifications, Costs, some companies are alleged to be not recognizing ODL qualifications and negative attitude over ODL. Factors affecting service delivery include absence of research budget, infrastructure for higher education and inadequate expertise in ODL.

The major reason for the skepticism and credibility of ZOU qualifications is associated to lack of information and therefore this study recommends ZOU to provide information to all important stakeholders. Though the university has got a communication and public relations department, the information availed to the public may not be accurate or believable. The university should hire a well known and credible public relations character to window dress its communication centre.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The study also recommends a study to be done on how ZOU undergraduates are performing at Masters Level in comparison to those coming from conventional university. If the study reveals that ODL graduate's performance is the same or better than conventional graduates, this improves the credibility of ZOU qualifications.
- Research and publication support must be available for lecturers and should include computers, library resources and Internet facilities.

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