

**ASSESSING THE RECEPTIVITY OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES
AMONG ORDINARY AND ADVANCED LEVEL STUDENTS:
A CASE OF THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

The present study was undertaken to establish Ordinary and Advanced level students' receptivity of Open and Distance Learning Programmes offered by Zimbabwe Open University. With the proliferation of several higher education institutions, which include among them the eleven universities in the country and at one polytechnic in each of the ten provinces of Zimbabwe, competition for students has become stiff as enrolments in some of these institutions continue to plummet. There was, therefore, need to establish how receptive these young adults were of the ODL mode, in light of the introduction of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme (ETP) as an innovation in the ODL system at the Zimbabwe Open University. A total of 100 student respondents made up the sample which consisted of 64 (64%) male and 36 (36%) female students whose age range was between 16 and 22 years. These were drawn from rural and urban schools located in Chegutu district. Results show that a slight majority of 56 students preferred to study with the ZOU because of their area of residence which was prohibitive for them to enrol at a conventional college. The respondents overwhelmingly rejected the notion that there was poor quality of education at the ZOU. Because ODL had a lot of flexibility and was convenient, the majority of the respondents preferred to study through the ODL mode. Some preferred the ODL mode because while some conventional institutions required above 10 points at Advanced level, ZOU only required 5 Ordinary level subjects, including English language, passed with a grade C or better. However, the most prohibitive factor as indicated by the majority of the students was lack of access and competence in the use of the internet and other forms of technology since their understanding of the ODL mode entailed the use of modern technology, which is not currently the situation at ZOU. Also inhibitive for most respondents, was the argument that there was little time for face-to-face interaction. These young adults needed to make and meet new friends and socialize with colleagues from various socio-cultural backgrounds, an adventure not always possible in ODL systems due to geographical distances apart.

Key Words: Open and Distance Learning, Ordinary and Advanced Level Students, Enhanced Tutorial Programme.

INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe Open University intends to introduce the Enhanced Tutorial Programme (ETP) which is meant to target Ordinary and Advanced level graduates who are predominantly young adults and who, after completing their studies at the two levels have basically two options at their disposal: looking for employment in the various sectors of the economy or opt for career development in the various tertiary institutions available in the country. Faced with a wide selection of tertiary institutions, which include among them the eleven universities in the country, there is need to establish how receptive these young adults are of the ODL mode, in light of the introduction of the enhanced tutorial programme as an innovation in the ODL system in Zimbabwe, as a means through which to attain their professional qualifications. The current study aims at establishing the students' perceptions and their views on why they would or would not enrol in an ODL institution for their professional development now that the latest ETP innovation seeks to address some of their concerns such as little contact time with tutors.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Distance education has been viewed as the panacea to the Third World woes of not being able to meet skilled labour deficits in the economic sectors of the affected states. In developing countries such as India, Nigeria, Tunisia, Zambia and Ghana, the distance education method has been adopted to circumvent the vacuum created by inadequate formal education systems (Agyeman and Dadzie; 2010). Yet in others, distance education is often hailed as the answer to African governments' problems of educational provision and claims have been made that distance education can improve the access to, and quality of, educational provision and at a lower unit cost. Also distance education been chosen because of its power to stretch educational resources and that it provides greater access to quality education at a lower cost than conventional education (Richardson; 2005).

Zimbabwe is no exception as the country has realized drastic changes in the employment sector as educated professionals compete for highly skilled jobs as opposed to the previous scenario whereby expatriates were hired, particularly soon after independence when foreign manpower sceptical of the new dispensation began packing their bags. Distance education has hitherto been credited for having churned out thousands of highly skilled professionals, many of whom have migrated to regional and international job markets where their expertise has been held without question.

However, despite all these good intentions, perceptions on distance education appear to continue to be negative. In Zimbabwe, the only accredited university to offer distance education is the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The Zimbabwe Open University is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution which was established to cater for a substantial component of people who, by design or unintentionally, could not be accommodated in conventional universities, by offering them the opportunity to study in their homes and in their workplaces through distance education. The ZOU was established on 1st March 1999 through an Act of parliament (Chapter 25:20), with an initial enrolment of 624 students registered for the Bachelor of Education degree programme. Between 1999 and 2001, ZOU had a student enrolment of 25000. By 2004 ZOU had become the largest university in the country and second largest in Southern Africa compared to University of South Africa (UNISA). However, between 2002 and 2008 there was a drastic downturn in terms of enrolment figures which saw student enrolment figures hovering at around 13 000. In 2010, however, the student population has started to pick up.

During the time of this study, in 2010, ZOU had four faculties as presented below:

- the faculty of Arts and Education,
- the faculty of Science and Technology

- the faculty of Commerce and Law and
- the faculty of Applied Social Sciences

These faculties are offering more than 30 undergraduate degree programmes, over 3 diploma courses, over 5 masters` degree programmes and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in all the four faculties.

ZOU has trained personnel currently holding forth in most sectors of the economy: banking and finance, education, mining and most parastatals and government owned enterprises are staffed with ZOU graduates. In the SADC region, ZOU comes second to the University of South Africa in terms of student numbers and popularity. ZOU`s record in the region and beyond speaks volumes about the success of distance education in Zimbabwe. With all these achievements, it was hoped that by now negative perceptions among the citizens about distance education would have changed. However, observations reveal that prospective students, particularly the young adults, still remain sceptical of the ODL mode of delivery as gateway to a professional qualification. These have remained conspicuously absent from the ODL system as they opt for conventional or parallel programmes offered by other tertiary institutions in the country and outside. With this scenario in mind, coupled with an unprecedented fall in enrolment, the Zimbabwe Open University has come up with an innovation yet to be tested in distance education in Zimbabwe.

As stated by Rekkedal and Dye (2007), distance education has developed in two major directions: the individual flexible teaching model and the extended classroom model. The former allows students to start the class at any time, study in isolation and communicate with instructors and classmates through asynchronous tools. The latter organizes students into groups, requires them to meet at local study centre, and allow them to use interactive technologies and meet face to face quite often. The ZOU has therefore, over and above sticking to the former, added the latter to its delivery mode for the specific purpose of making the programmes more appealing to the school leavers. This arrangement has been referred to as The Enhanced Tutorial Programme (ETP), which is a hybrid combination of distance and traditional education and as such flexible learning and hybrid learning systems have enlarged the scope and changed the nature of earlier distance education model.

The major features of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme (ETP)

All other basic tenets of ODL programmes are accommodated in this innovation. The main difference is that while the traditional ODL path at the ZOU requires only 3 hours of contact time per semester per course, the ETP would require that students have 36 hours per semester per course. This implies more contact hours with course tutors at the regional centres. However, there is still flexibility in that these contacts can still be arranged between course tutors and students. Whether they choose and agree to hold the tutorials during week days or over the weekend is entirely their decision as long as the 36 hours are made use of. What still needs to be borne in mind is that, unlike the traditional mode, this new mode has been put in place to accommodate the young adult who is just out of school and intending to pursue an identified career since there has been a general belief that distance education is for the working and family populations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

To some sectors of the citizenry, distance education plays second fiddle to conventional education. In Zimbabwe, traditionally known as correspondence education, has been regarded in low esteem following the pronouncement of the Rhodesian government in the 1966 African Education Plan. The plan meant that 50% of those African children graduating from Grade seven in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) would fend for themselves in terms of educational finances, through correspondence if they so wished to continue with their education since the regime had no education plan for them. Since then, therefore, a negative political connotation has been attached to the distance mode of education thereby denting the good intentions of ODL. However, with the success scored ZOU in the provision of education through the ODL mode one would have expected some sizeable change of perceptions among the people. This present study therefore, seeks to establish the extent to

which the Ordinary and Advanced level students are receptive of the Open and Distance Education programmes offered by the Zimbabwe Open University.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study was undertaken to establish Ordinary and Advanced level students' receptivity of ODL programmes offered by ZOU. The following research questions were answered in an attempt to answer the main research question:

1. What influences the Ordinary and Advanced level student to choose between conventional and ODL institutions?
2. What are the perceived benefits/advantages of an ODL programme?
3. What are the perceived flaws of an ODL programme?
4. What characteristics of an ODL programme makes it attractive to the young adult?
5. How can ODL programmes be made more attractive to the young adult?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study was aimed at establishing the young adults' (also referred to as school leavers or Ordinary and Advanced level students) perceptions and opinions of ODL programmes offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. The study was meant to unearth their level of acceptance of ODL and to make recommendations on how to improve the receptivity of ODL mode of learning by school leavers who traditionally have opted to study with the conventional institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students' perceptions of the gains of ODL Programmes

Different people perceive the advantages of ODL differently, and their perceptions have influenced attitudes towards acceptance and use of ODL in the education system (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2006). The kind of attitudes and perceptions that students have toward a programme plays a very crucial role in assessing or evaluating the impact of the program and the effectiveness of the program (Smith 2001), but according to empirical evidence, however, there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained at traditional institutions versus distance learning (Verduin and Clark; 1991).

There remains concern, however, about the effectiveness of distance education for learners who may be considered less independent and thus may require direct interaction throughout the instructional process (Schmidt and Faulkner 1989). More often than not, perceptions of the distance learning system in the instructional process is influenced by an individual's beliefs about the advantages of distance education, for himself, as a student, as an employer (whose employees are also distant learning students), or as an educational planner (desirous of providing potent solutions to educational problems).

WHAT ENTICES THE YOUNG ADULT TO ENROLL WITH ODL INSTITUTIONS

Factors leading to the young adult's choice of distance education as opposed to the conventional system may range from personal, social, academic to situational. These factors may influence students' intention to enrol for programmes offered by ODL institutions (Walker and Lowenthal, 1981). Findings from a study by Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) study reveal that prospective and current learners in Nigeria are favourably disposed to Open and Distance Learning institutions. The respondents to that survey indicated their interest in the unique features that make-up ODL institutions, such as open access, opportunity for flexible learning, provision of quality learning materials, and the use of multi-media and ICTs. Researches on the efficacy of these features and others to attract prospective students are discussed hereunder.

Geographical location of the prospective student

Although research findings elsewhere suggest that situational factors are the most significant inhibitory characteristics, they also suggest that institutional factors still affect students. This is in keeping with Thompson's (1998) finding that, "traditionally, distance education has attracted students whose geographic distance from a higher education institution discouraged or prevented enrolment in on-campus classes. A higher percentage of respondents in a research by Hunte (2010) identified the pedagogical issue of preferring small group interaction as a reason for studying at a distance. ODL institutions are in an excellent position to build positively on the favourable perceptions already held by many distance learning students. ODL can be everything to more people (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2006)

Failure to get places in conventional colleges

Owing to the existing great demand for places in conventional tertiary institutions, some students opted to study at a distance because they did not get accepted at a face-to-face campus and this suggests that there is a distinct group of individuals whose specific tertiary educational needs are being met effectively through distance education (Hunte; 2010). However, for some, getting the places at conventional colleges would not have counted as these do not have the time to study full time due to some pressing commitments (Sahoo and Khan; 1998)

CHARACTERISTICS OF ODL PROGRAMMES THAT ATTRACT THE YOUNG ADULT

Flexibility of the programmes

Findings by Ojo and Olakulehin (2006), point towards more relaxed entry point requirements in ODL, and students having the opportunity of deferring, programmes, and even examinations courses up until when they are ready, as some features of ODL that have attracted students to join. Stewart (1987) suggests that distance education students have greater freedom which entails that the student make a number of important decisions which would normally be made for them. Such flexibility is very difficult to achieve in the conventional universities because their activities and management systems are more rigid and thus restrictive by design. Various researchers have established that flexibility and convenience (time-shifting and associated advantages of time management) have often enticed students to enrol in ODL institutions. It was found out that a large number of distance education students were either already registered in regular classes, or were trying to work full- or part-time while earning degrees (Guernsey; 1998). Logistics was the second most common reason for enrolling in OD courses (Richards and Ridley; 1997). To a large extent, students felt that the ODL courses were "more convenient" than traditional courses (Hiltz; 1998). Richards and Ridley (1997) found out that to some students distance education was the only alternative hence these students enrolled in ODL courses.

Quality of education and materials used

According to Ojo and Olakulehin (2006), the tutorials in use in ODL were found to be as effective as the lecture methods used in the conventional system and this indicates that there was little difference in students' perceptions of lectures or tutorials used in the conventional institutions versus ODL institutions. This, therefore, suggests that students engaged in ODL would likely achieve learning outcomes similar to those offered by conventional educational methods. The counselling needs of learners were also better met in ODL than in the conventional higher education. Studies have found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning versus conventional university classroom settings. Students perceived that the course materials used in their ODL study are of higher quality than the lecture notes provided by lecturers at conventional institutions. Studies have also shown that students taking distance learning courses perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods (Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002). In Pakistan, a large number of students were of the opinion that the delivery of material was in time, the contents of the courses were in a logical sequence and the printing quality of material was good and satisfactory. The respondents were of the opinion that course material of was relatively easy to understand and self-

explanatory. They were of the opinion that the material is according to the needs of distance learners. The quality of tutorials supported and facilitated understanding of the courses on offer. The tutorials were also helpful in motivating the students as they helped in removing difficulties and additional information and providing feedback (Gujjar; 2007). Owing to these factors, therefore, students held favourable perceptions towards ODL. However, some researchers have argued that owing to the high drop rates experienced in ODL programmes resulting in lower success rates in some courses, this disqualifies distance education as a high-quality option to traditional education (Perspective 2001) and Allsop (2008) concurs by remarking that the use of supplementary study material is often poor in distance education. However, according to Watkins (1991), the student who has prepared a certain number of lessons in the distance education institution knows more of the subject treated during lessons, and knows it better, than the student who has covered the same ground in the classroom. However, comparisons between distance education delivery methods and traditional forms of educational delivery have shown that there is “no significant difference” in student achievement (Meyer, 2002).

Better accessibility to the course tutors

Students perceive that they receive more individual attention from instructors. Some studies have shown that student attitudes toward distance education can be significantly affected by facilitating some degree of interaction among students and teachers. Hiltz (1998) found that 71% of students who had just completed an online course felt that ODL programmes provided better access to tutors. Students perceived that they would get better grades than in a face-to-face course (Valenta, Therriault, Dieter and Mrtek; 2001). Koch (1998) states that distance education students earned higher grades than students in conventional versions of the same classes due to constant contact with the tutors. These perceived benefits were enough to entice prospective students to opt for ODL programmes.

Other reasons for enrolling with ODL institutions are enumerated hereunder:

- Getting the opportunity to do the job and study simultaneously
- Being able to put the learnt material to immediate use while on the job
- Acquiring both experience and the professional qualification at the same time on the job
- Learners pursue their studies without withdrawing their services, as it tends to be the case when serving employees are admitted in a conventional face-to-face program (Sahoo and Khan; 1998, Chakwera and Saiti; 2005)

THE PERCEIVED FLAWS OF ODL PROGRAMMES

Perceived poor quality of education

Despite the rapid growth and increased popularity of distance learning, the quality of higher learning via distance education has been called to question (Dede 1996; Harrison 2001 as cited in Peat and Helland, 2002). There is “scepticism garnished with ridicule and hostility” of distance education universities (Young 1994). According to Allsop (2008) some employers have been misinformed about the perceived poor quality to the extent that some have become wary of hiring ODL graduates. However, according to empirical evidence, there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained at traditional institutions versus distance learning (Verduin and Clark 1991).

Lack of face-to-face interaction

Guernsey (1998) established that younger students had difficulties, particularly when ODL programmes were offered online. They rather opted to be with a “live person.” Larson (1967) asserts that some students’ need for face-to-face interaction. There remain concerns, however, about the effectiveness of distance education for learners who may be considered less independent and thus may require direct interaction throughout the instructional process (Schmidt and Faulkner; 1989) Hiltz (1998) reported that the majority of students felt that they made new friendships in courses with a face-to-face element, whereas this was not possible in the virtual

classroom. In the conventional system, students remain in close and easy contact with the institution, but in the distance education settings students are often isolated and contact with their university is, at best, infrequent and more often than not takes place at a distance. However, other distance education researchers (Keegan, 1988; Lewis, 1988) have questioned the need for too much face-to-face student and instructor interaction. These argue that a large amount of interaction as inhibiting the independence of the learner.

Cheating in ODL

A large percentage of the respondents taking part in a significant number of researches agree that ODL institutions provide ample opportunity for cheating (Keegan, 1988). This might be attributable to the fact that ODL students are at liberty to answer the Tutor Marked Assignment given to them in course materials provided. However, the same can be said of conventional universities in which students are required to answer questions in a face-to-face classroom setting. There is more room for academic cheating in ODL institutions. ODL students may cheat by hiring someone who has a greater understanding of the topic to write their assignments for them. Indeed, no one is there to watch over them and monitor their learning as is the case in conventional universities (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2006). Allsop (2008), therefore, attributes this factor to the poor take up of training vacancies in ODL by the young adults.

Technological Problems: Issues of access and capacity

Students new to a particular technology may initially exhibit some concern about the role of technology in the learning experience. If this occurs, these students typically demonstrate a reluctance to actively participate in the distance classroom areas (CEDL 1999). Mastrian and McGonigle (1997) found out that the most frequent negative comment related to the overall experience was the early frustration with the use of computers and other related technological gadgets, which in other instances may not be available. Most ODL institutions and students grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide; access to instructional technology and capacity to use such technology is negligible compared to those of developed nations (Yusuf and Falade, 2005).

Other challenges confronting prospective students

Although more flexible, the fact remains that this educational approach demands a great deal of personal sacrifice on the part of learners. It requires students to have good study skills, discipline, and self-motivation - attributes needed to attain learner autonomy (Collis, 1996). These attributes, in addition to learners' socio-cultural backgrounds, previous knowledge and learning experiences attained at conventional institutions, will likely influence their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, ODL. In many respects, however, ODL remains an alien system of inculcating knowledge to students in ODL because they tend to be more accustomed to conventional universities. Thus, because students are new to ODL and its innovations, opportunity for confusion exists (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2006, Collis; 1996). It, therefore, remains to be ascertained whether these and other factors impact on Zimbabwean youths' acceptance of ODL mode of professional development.

POTENTIAL REMEDIES FOR MAKING ODL PROGRAMMES MORE ATTRACTIVE

A number of possible solutions have been put forward as remedies for changing perceptions of all categories of potential and current students so that they view ODL and related innovations in good light. According to Valenta, Therriault, Dieter and Mrtek (2001), the success of long-distance learning hinges on its capacity to simulate a dynamic campus classroom. Students are not willing to sacrifice that shared experience merely for the convenience of studying at home.

There has also been much debate as to whether distance education produces quality learners as compared to the traditional mode. Some researchers have established that ODL delivered systems play second fiddle to the traditional systems. Effective organization and management measures must be adopted to expand and enhance the provision of quality distance education through ensuring the timely development and delivery of

quality course materials and improved student support services (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2006 Keegan, 1988; Lewis, 1988).

Distance education has been shunned due to the perceived poor quality and this has had a devastating effect on its ability to lure students. Addressing quality concerns in ODL should be the first port of call if it is to regain its original credibility. One way of doing it, is through the administration of end-of-semester exams that are proctored in face-to-face settings as opposed to on-line exams. In short, the use of proctored examinations will help ensure ODL students' assessment of learning outcomes is 100 percent reliable (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This current study was a survey of schools in Chegutu District targeted at Advanced and Ordinary level students currently in their final years in the two different levels of secondary education. The descriptive survey design was the most preferred since this present investigation was concerned with the perceptions of respondents.(Leedy; 1996) The study aimed at tapping their opinions on how they perceived the newly introduced Enhanced Tutorial Programme at the ZOU, as a better option through which to attain a professional qualification. In order to solicit for data from the respondents, an interview schedule was made use of. Ten assistant researchers were employed, each being assigned to a section of the schools. Since a lot of marketing of the innovation had been done, the students already had an understanding of the ETP programme, making it easy for the researchers to extract the much needed data. However, other means of collecting data could have enabled the researchers to authenticate and validate the data. All the targeted 100 students were interviewed and data collated and analyzed.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population for the current study consisted of 3200 secondary school students drawn from 34 secondary schools which included rural, peri-urban and urban high schools. In order to accord each school category a proportionate chance of being represented in the study, sampling of the schools was done through stratified random sampling. Three strata: one for the rural, the other for the peri-urban and third for the urban schools were established. Each stratum contributed to the sample of schools as follows: rural schools = 8, peri-urban schools = 5 and urban school =3. These contributed to a total of 100 students who were the respondents to the study. The student respondents were chosen through systematic sampling through the use of class daily attendance registers kept in each of the schools.

DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Demographic data of respondents

The respondents consisted of 64 (64 %) male and 36 (36%) female students whose age range was between 16 and 22 years. The 16 to 18 years age range was predominately composed of "Ordinary Level" students in their final year (form four) and the 19-22 range had the Advanced Level students in their final year (form 6) in the majority. Out of the 100 (100%) respondents 60 (60%) were Ordinary Level students while 40 (40%) were Advanced Level students. Of these students 15 (15%) preferred to undertake careers in sciences, 63(63%) preferred commercials whilst 22 (22%) wanted to pursue Arts. All the areas are offered by ZOU through distance education. Forty-eight (48%) were currently located in rural schools, 35 (35%) in urban schools and 17 (17%) in peri-urban schools.

Table 1: Respondents' views on factors enticing them to enrol for ZOU ODL Programmes offered through the Enhanced Tutorial Programme

FACTOR	YES	NO
Geographical location of residence in relation to the location of conventional colleges	56(56%)	44(44%)
Failure to get a place at a conventional college	3(3%)	97(97%)
Flexibility and convenience of ODL	86(86%)	14(14%)
Relaxed entry points for enrolment in ODL institution	80(80%)	20(20%)
One can learn whilst he/she earns	90(90%)	10(10%)
Quality materials are offered, for example, modules used	86(86%)	14(14%)
Course content is of high standard	84(84%)	16(16%)
There are now more tutorial hours through ETP unlike in the traditional ODL mode	95(95%)	5(5%)
Low cost tuition	93(93%)	7(7%)
High pass rates in ODL	54(54%)	46(46%)

Table 1 above shows that a slight majority of 56(56%) students preferred to study with the ZOU because the location of their areas of residence was prohibitive to allow them to enrol at a conventional college. The majority of such responses were from the rural school based students who could not afford accommodation rates in residential areas around the conventional colleges, now that some of these conventional colleges were no longer providing college accommodation for various reasons. Only 3(3%) indicated that failure to secure a place at a conventional college would make them opt for ODL programmes. Findings elsewhere concur that distance education has attracted students whose geographic distance from a higher education institution discouraged or prevented enrolment in on-campus classes (Thompson; 1998). To the contrary, in South Asia, ODL students are most likely from the large pool of those unable to obtain places elsewhere, that is, in traditional conventional colleges (Allsop; 2008).

Because ODL had a lot of flexibility and was convenient, 86(86%) respondents preferred to study through this mode. Some 80(80%) preferred the ODL mode because while some conventional institutions required above 10 points at Advanced level, ZOU only required 5 Ordinary level subjects passed with a grade C or better. ZOU also offers tuition to mature students with experience in a given field despite not holding the pre-requisite Ordinary level subjects. ZOU also offers the Accreditation of Prior Learning to potential students who might have had some training in the areas they intend to study with the university. An overwhelming majority of 90(90%) respondents got attracted by the idea of earning while learning. There are perceived possibilities of combining employment with education which allow the students opportunities they might not otherwise have had (Allsop; 2008). Only 10(10%) did not get enticed by the idea at all. These felt they were too young to get employment since their age ranged from 16 to 18. Eighty-six percent of the students remarked that ZOU had good quality modules which they were using for their Advanced Ordinary level studies particularly the arts and commercial students. These students regarded the content in the modules as detailed, easy to understand and well illustrated. This agrees with the findings of Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) in which ODL students thought that the course materials used in their ODL study are of higher quality than the lecture notes provided by lecturers at conventional institutions. Sixteen percent thought otherwise. However, some studies have shown that students in ODL programmes perform as well as students taking courses via traditional methods (Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002). There was a resounding appreciation of the ETP's increased tutorial hours. Ninety-five percent of the students indicated their willingness to study through the ETP because of the long duration of contact. This would result in them interacting more than would have been the case in the traditional mode that only meant three hours of contact time per course per semester.

Asked if tuition fees charged by ZOU were motivating enough to make them enrol with the institution, 93(93%) agreed while a minority of 7(7%) indicated otherwise. Currently, ZOU charges USD\$340 per semester for

undergraduate new students and USD\$320 for the undergraduate returning student. A flexible payment plan is available in which the two groups of students pay USD\$430 and USD\$410 respectively (Accounts Department fees Document dated 18.11.2010). Conventional universities, on the other hand, are currently charging in excess of USD\$500 for the same service, excluding accommodation and meals. The majority of families in Zimbabwe live below the poverty datum line and affording such an amount is just but a dream. Given such a scenario, these prospective students found it appealing to study through ZOU's ETP. Distance education can, therefore, be at an economic advantage over conventional provision. In countries such as Nigeria acquiring initial professional qualifications by distance education has lower costs than conventional programmes (UNESCO; 2001). On the contrary, private costs taken on by students in most distance education institutions are high, limiting accessibility (Allsop; 2008).

The majority of the students, 54(54%), attributed their desire to study with the Zimbabwe Open University under the ETP because of the envisaged high pass rates. This perception can be attributed to the negative notion held by the general public that ZOU degrees are easy to attain. Students perceived that they would get better grades than in a face-to-face course and that they would earn higher grades than students in conventional versions of the same classes owing to the openness of the programmes which were prone and susceptible to cheating (Valenta, Therriault, Dieter and Mrtek; 2001., Koch; 1998). The remaining 46(46%), however, were not motivated by the pass rates.

Table 2: Respondents' views on the factors that might inhibit their enrolling for ZOU ODL Programmes offered through the Enhanced Tutorial Programme

FACTOR	YES		NO	
	Number	%	Number	%
Perceived poor quality of education	20	20	80	80
Little time for face-to-face interaction	73	73	27	27
The need to socialize with peers from a wide socio-cultural background	84	84	16	16
Cheating which is rampant in ODL institutions	2	2	98	98
Lack of technological capacity /Web and e-mail incompetency	83	83	17	17
Lack of access to technology	60	60	40	40
Prohibitive Costs	14	14	86	86
Geographical location of the tutorial and regional centres	71	71	19	19
General apathy to ODL programmes	43	43	57	57

Results presented in Table 2 help to unearth the factors that may inhibit school leavers' aspirations of undertaking studies in an ODL institution. Eighty (80%) of the respondents overwhelmingly rejected the notion that there was poor quality education at the ZOU, a factor that could deter prospective students from enrolling and employers from engaging employees trained through the ODL mode. However, most respondents were of the opinion that little time for face-to-face interaction and the need to make and meet new friends and socialize with colleagues from various socio-cultural backgrounds (84%) in conventional colleges, were very potent militating forces against their desire to enrol for studies through the ODL system. Guernsey (1998) states that younger students had difficulties with distance education courses especially on-line learners and felt that they needed to be with a "live person." Larson (1967) established that some students need face-to-face interaction regardless of whatever material is available. Garrison (2000) questions whether an inert learning package, regardless of how well it is written, is a sufficient substitute for real communication with the teacher.

The majority of students felt that they made new friendships in courses with a face-to-face element (Hiltz; 1998). In spite of the existence of the face-to-face arrangement, Hiltz (1997) established that distance education students had better access to their professors and were appreciative of the convenience of learning from a distance (Hiltz, 1997).

Asked whether cheating in ODL made them shun the system, the majority (98%) disagreed. This could probably be due to ignorance of the ODL systems particularly on-line courses where students are at liberty to use any resource material available even in examinations where no invigilator is in attendance. Due to the openness of the programmes in ODL, the systems are often prone and susceptible to cheating (Koch; 1998). The majority of the students (83%) indicated that lack of access and incompetence in the use of web and other forms of technology were an inhibiting factor towards their joining ZOU. Zimbabwe, like any other Third World country, where most students grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide; access to instructional technology and capacity to use such technology (Yusuf and Falade;2005), still lags behind in ICT and the Zimbabwe Open University, despite attempts to put in place the ZOU on-line ITC facility, a lot needs to be done. Some students were confronted with early frustration in the use of computers and other related technological gadgets (Mastrian and McGonigle; 1997). However, in some countries, the use of instructional technology is one of the reasons leading to favourable findings on why students indicated their preference towards ODL (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2005). In the USA, twenty-four percent of distance students have high speed bandwidth at home (Gunawardena; 1988).

According to table 1.2, the costs were not a factor against school leavers` intention to join ZOU`s ETP. Of the 100 respondents, 86(86%) indicated they were not swayed by the prohibitive cost of attaining education through the Zimbabwe Open University. These costs incurred included transport to and from the venue, tuition fees and other expenses. However, very often really effective distance education courses can be more expensive than the traditional face-to-face programmes (Hiltz; 1997).

The geographical location of the tutorial and regional centre was an inhibiting factor for the majority (71%) of the students. The present study was carried out in Chegutu district where some schools are located over 100 kilometres from Chegutu town centre. This, therefore, implies that students from such locations would be required to travel to Chinhoyi town, the Mashonaland West ZOU Regional Centre, located some 97 kilometres from Chegutu for tutorials and other services offered by the institution. In terms of costs, as established from 14(14%) of the students, this would curtail their endeavours to study with the Zimbabwe Open University through the Enhanced tutorial programme which entailed travelling for more hours than the traditional ODL programme mode. Forty-three (43%) indicated that there was general apathy towards studying with ZOU even with the advent of the ETP. Probed to detail their reasons for the apathy, the majority stated that they had a belief that learning entailed getting into a classroom and interacting on a day to day basis.

Table 3: Respondents` views on the possible remedies intended to make the Enhanced Tutorial Programme more enticing

REMEDY	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	
	Number	%
Decentralization of programmes to district and circuit centres	89	89
Reduction of tuition fees	38	38
Combative marketing strategies of programmes	36	36
Education campaigns on the merits of studying through ODL	49	49
Reduction in term length of the programmes	60	60

As the number of innovations the ZOU continues to increase, there appears to be a downturn in the numbers of students enrolling in the various programmes, hence the introduction of the ETP. It is against this

background that the O and A level students were asked to provide the researcher with their perceived remedies, which when implemented would pave way for an upsurge in enrolment figures particularly from the school leavers who traditionally are given to enrolling in conventional colleges and universities. Table 1.3 above shows that these prospective students were very much in favour of a decentralized system whereby tutorials and other services including writing examinations, were done at district and circuit centres as opposed to having all these services provided at regional centres. These regional centres were located in towns and cities not convenient to most of the students. Reduction of fees, as a measure to entice the prospective students was not a popular remedy as only 38(38%) indicated their desire to have fees reduced. These felt that fees were high. However, compared to fees charged in conventional colleges, ZOU fees were very low, an indication as to why the majority of the students did not put forward this aspect as a remedy. The majority (60) of the students felt the duration of study was very long and tended to discourage their joining of the ZOU. All ZOU undergraduate degree programmes are attainable after a period of 4 years. Only diploma courses are completed in three years.

CONCLUSIONS

This current study was undertaken in order to establish the receptivity of the Zimbabwe Open University's new innovation of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme that has just been introduced for the benefit of the young adults who are school leavers and decide to study through distance education. Findings from this study reveal that this breed of prospective learners has generally embraced the ETP as one that may help them acquire qualifications that appear to be illusive in light of the exorbitant fees in other learning modes. The majority of the respondents were positive and welcoming to the introduction of the programme. The most appreciated characteristic of the ETP was the number of tutorial hours that was raised from 3 to 36 per course per semester. This would mean more time for associating with peers and interacting with tutors.

Students preferred to study with the ZOU through the ETP because of their area of residence which was prohibitive for them to enrol at a conventional college. The majority of such responses were from the rural based students who could not afford accommodation rates in residential areas around and near colleges since some of the colleges were no longer providing college accommodation services by government and university authorities.

As is the case with the traditional ODL mode at the ZOU, an overwhelming majority fell head over heels with the idea of earning while learning. Among the other features of the ETP that help entice the respondents were the following: high quality of learning material, flexibility and convenience. However, areas of contention still do exist. Although a minority of the respondent was scornful on the idea of studying through distance education, the following aspects prohibited them from undertaking courses through the ETP. Prominent among these were lack of technological/web capacity, little face to face contact and lack of socialization and the distant location of tutorial venues.

IMPLICATIONS

The trust and acceptance of the ZOU innovation of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme has a lot of implications for the future growth of the institution, if we are to realise the much needed gargantuan increases in student enrolments, particularly from the school leavers. Steps must be taken to adopt and introduce ICT courses to those intending to enrol so that prospective students do not get scared off by the technology once they enrol. This will also enable the introduction of on-line courses to an ICT literate population. Introducing ICT is seen as a step forward towards motivating the young adult since the current young generation has been found at the centre of ICT usage, particularly in instances where games and emailing are concerned. Cognizance should also be taken on the view that what motivates adult learners does not necessarily motivate the young learners. Appropriate and suitable activities must be introduced, however not deserting the principles of distance

education, all in the name of bringing on board the young adult. Conditions should be created to reinforce the positive perceptions manifested in favourable responses provided by the students. Parents and the community need to be educated about the facets of the ETP distance education mode and its advantages in terms of cost, flexibility and convenience. Decentralization should also be seen as a potentially enticing factor for the prospective ETP distant student. The institution should invigorate its efforts to establish study centres in districts, zones and circuits in an attempt to reduce travelling costs as well as travelling time to the regional centres, subsequently bringing the ETP of Open and Distance Learning to the student's doorstep. Thus the Enhanced Tutorial Programme becomes the number one choice of learning mode for the young adult.

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