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Making Open and Distance Learning Appealing to Ordinary and Advanced level students: a case of the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

The proliferation of several universities in Zimbabwe has led to stiff competition for students. As some conventional colleges shift to being bimodal, the belief among Open Distance Learning faculty was that there was also need to adopt the same trend in ODL. However, before instituting such measures, there was need to establish how the Zimbabwe Open University could make its programmes receptive to Ordinary and Advanced level graduates, who were the target population for the innovation. The model introduced in this study is the Enhanced Tutorial Programme (ETP), whose receptivity was put to test in a study carried out with 100 student respondents drawn from secondary schools in Mashonaland East. The majority indicated their preference for this model since it meant more contact hours and improved quality due to the increased tutorial hours. Students would have more time for socialization as they come for tutorials. Because of the internship and community service aspects, respondents preferred it to a great extent. While conventional institutions required above 10 points at Advanced level, ZOU was most preferred because only 5 passes at Ordinary level were required. The most prohibitive factor for the majority was lack of access and competence in ICTs.

Introduction

Facing stiff competition from the various colleges and universities in the country, the Zimbabwe Open University must seek measures that better places it in a bid to woo clients. One way of luring potential customers is to go bimodal and provide tuition to a diversity of customers rather than wait for the traditional old folk to enroll for the programmes now that most universities and colleges have also gone to introduce some forms of open and distance education by the name Block Release Programme. One such innovation would be what this study refers to as 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, which as stated above have introduced distance education in the name of block release, there is need to establish how receptive these young adults are of the ETP mode. The current study aims at establishing the students' perceptions and their views on

why they would or would not enroll for the Enhanced Tutorial programme since it addresses some concerns leveled against the traditional ODL mode.

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 skeptical 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 and the majority of school leavers in particular have detested enrolling for the ZOU programmes. In Zimbabwe, the only accredited university to offer degrees through 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 plummet to around 13 000.

During the time of this study, in 2011, ZOU had four faculties: 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 60 degree programmes and over 3 diploma courses.

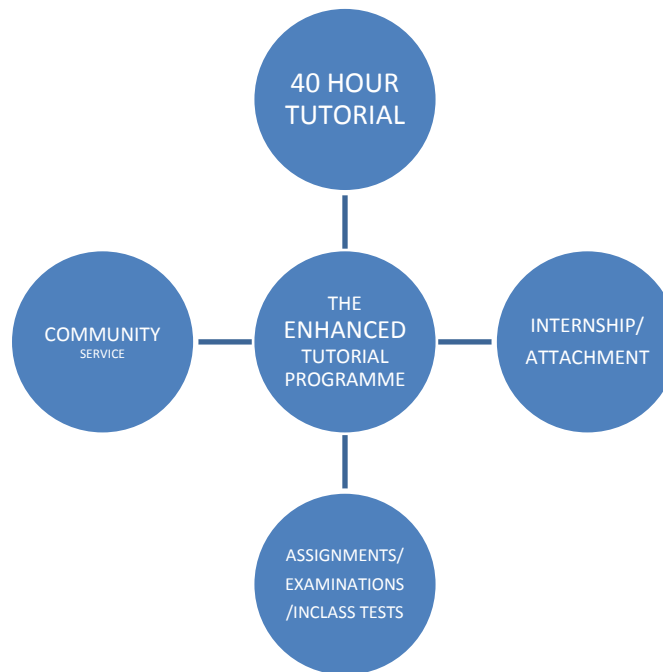
ZOU has trained personnel currently holding fort in most sectors of the economy: banking and finance, education, mining and most parastatals and government owned enterprises are staffed with ZOU graduates. In the SADC region, ZOU comes second to the University of South Africa in terms of student numbers 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 skeptical 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 therefore, has to come up with an extended classroom model that requires students to meet at local study centres, and allow them to use interactive technologies and meet face to face quite often. This arrangement which is a hybrid combination of distance and traditional education would enlarge the scope and change the nature of the traditional distance education model the ZOU, thereby appealing to a large clientele.

The Enhanced Tutorial Programme (ETP) - Basic tenets and Assumptions

After wide consultation and careful thought, the researcher came up with a model of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme. Admitted, however, is the fact that while the other basic tenets of the traditional ODL mode at the Zimbabwe Open University are accommodated in this innovation, the bulk of the features of the innovation are relatively new.

Fig 1: Components of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme Model



The Enhanced Tutorial Programme has four major components as depicted in the figure above. There is an attachment component, also referred to as internship. This programme entails that all students for the ETP should undertake to be attached to an organisation in which they experience hands on practice of the material they learnt during their tutorials. The attachment/internship programme entails students undertaking a two week hands on experience programme in an organisation which is their prospective employers should

they graduate. Banking and Finance students for example get attached to the banking and finance services sector.

The concept of community service is also a crucial component of the ETP. Students are required to offer their services to a community of their choice over a period of two weeks when they are off session from their tutorials. For example those enrolled in agriculture courses can go into the farming areas providing lectures on certain agro-based projects such as chicken rearing. Each student identifies an area in which he/she undertakes to provide community service.

Over and above the semester examinations, there would be in-class tests written under examination conditions. Open book assignments would be given for each course on offer as is usual in the traditional ODL programme. All these aspects are carried out within a given semester.

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 40 hours per semester per course. This implies more contact hours with course tutors at the district and 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 40 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.

Weighting for different aspects of the course per semester

Internship/Attachment	10%
Community service	10%
Semester examinations	50%
In-class tests	15%
Assignments	10%
Attendance at tutorials	5%
Total	100%

Statement of the problem

In Zimbabwe, ODL has been regarded lowly by different communities among which are school leavers who have been very conspicuous by their absence at the university. However, with the success scored by 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, sought to establish the extent to which the Ordinary and Advanced level students were receptive of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme to be introduced at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research questions

The present study was undertaken to establish Ordinary and Advanced level students' receptivity of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme should it be offered by ZOU. The

following research questions were answered in an attempt to answer the main research question:

1. What are characteristics of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme makes it attractive to the young adult?
2. What are the perceived flaws of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme as an innovation?
3. How can the Enhanced Tutorial Programmes be made more attractive to the young adult?

Purpose of the study

This study was aimed at establishing the young adults` (referred to as school leavers or Ordinary and Advanced level students) perceptions and opinions of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme if offered by the Zimbabwe Open University. The study was meant to unearth their level of acceptance of the innovation and to make recommendations on how to improve the receptivity of the Enhanced Tutorial mode of learning by school leavers who traditionally have opted to study with the conventional institutions. The assumption was that due to shortcomings inherent in the conventional system and those that affect the traditional open and distance learning, the Enhanced Tutorial Programme would be accepted on the basis that it, in a way tries to bridge the gap between the two systems to the advantage of the student.

Literature Review

Students' perceptions of the benefits of ODL Programmes

Different people perceive ODL differently, and their perceptions have influenced attitudes towards acceptance and use of ODL in the education system (Ojo and Olakulehin; 2006). 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 enroll for programmes offered by ODL institutions (Walker and Lowenthal, 1981). The kind of attitudes and perceptions that students have towards a programme plays a very crucial role in assessing or evaluating the impact of the program and the effectiveness of the program (Smith, 2001), hence this study sought to assess the students` perceptions of the ODL innovation of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme under the following headings: characteristics of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme which makes it attractive to the young adult the perceived advantages of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme, the perceived flaws of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme as an innovation, and how the Enhanced Tutorial Programmes be made more attractive to the young adult.

Characteristics of Enhanced Tutorial Programme that attract the young adults

As pointed above, the features of the traditional ODL remain the same for the ETP, save for those that have been given in figure 1 above. It follows, therefore, that, issues of flexibility, quality of education and materials used in ODL and increased accessibility to the course tutors feature in both forms.

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 have often enticed students to enroll in ODL institutions. 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).

The introduction of internships/attachment programmes

Internship programmes are popular with students and employers and this seems to indicate that internships are beneficial to both students and employers. Internship programmes hold the following benefits for students: exposure to accounting techniques and problems not encountered in a classroom environment, enhanced understanding of the business world, and improved ability to evaluate and assimilate classroom experiences. Over and above these benefits, the interns get attracted by the excitement that goes with working outside the school/college campus (Dale, Martin and Wilkerson, 2006).

Lowe (1965) reported that former interns felt their internships clarified certain points of accounting theory previously studied and that 66% believed that courses taken after the internship were more “meaningful” due to their real world working experiences. Koehler (1974) suggested that internships motivate students to work hard early in their academic programs to improve their chances of being offered internships, and result in improved grades upon conclusion of those internships. The Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC, 1990) suggested that students benefit from an internship by acquiring first-hand experience in applying accounting and auditing knowledge to solve real-world problems. The AECC also identified other abilities and knowledge that are an inherent part of an internship experience: working with others, organizing and delegating, resolving conflict, understanding the internal workings of an organization, and gaining an understanding of interpersonal and group dynamics in business.

In addition to the student benefits, numerous advantages have been cited for the sponsoring institution (AAA, 1952). The school is said to benefit because of the opportunity to evaluate the content of its academic curriculum against the actual practices experienced by its student participants. The school also profits from the increased cooperation and communication between itself and the business entities participating in the program. These relationships can potentially result in higher placement rates for future graduating students. Internships/attachment programmes, as stated above, have been included as a key feature of the ETP.

Introduction of community service for students

Findings from a study by Bauer et al (2007) at the Colorado School of Mines (CSM), suggest that students believe that their careers can directly benefit from participating in community service. However, females display a greater awareness with regard to community service than their male students (Lopez, 2002; Bauer et al (2007)). On the hand, older students recognize the positive impact that community service on others than are younger students. To the contrary, however, young people are not in support of requiring high school students to complete some community service especially when it is a requirement for high school graduation (Lopez, 2002).

The community service programme at CSM was meant to help engineering students to understand the ethical, cultural, historical, and technical dimensions of engineering work applied to community development in the U.S. and abroad. Its major aim was to create a culture of acceptance and value of community and international service activities. Some organisations have recognized the importance of seeking a “social license to operate” and have identified the need for graduates educated with enhanced social and cultural awareness to better meet the challenges associated with sustainable development for the corporation and their stakeholders through community service (Bauer et al, 2007).

In a study of pedagogies in general education courses and their impact on civic engagement community service was found to positively impact student learning outcomes (Spiezio, Baker, and Boland 2005). Community service, as alluded to above, has been included as one of the key features of the ETP.

Quality of education and materials used

The tutorials 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 (Ojo and Olakulehin, 2006). This, therefore, suggests that students engaged in ODL would likely achieve learning outcomes similar to those offered by conventional educational methods since counseling 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 such as modules, used in their ODL study are of higher quality than the lecture notes provided by lecturers at conventional institutions (Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002). Students were also of the opinion that course material 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.

Increased 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 given the increased numbers of tutorials (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. With the 40 hour tutorial per course per semester through the ETP programme, this could probably be an enticing factor towards the acceptance of the innovation.

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 enrollment 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).

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 "skepticism 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).

Perceived lack of face-to-face interaction

Guernsey (1998) established that younger students had difficulties with ODL programmes if offered online but 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 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. However, with the ETP it remains to be seen how students' perceptions change owing to the increased number of tutorials in a face to face situation.

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. Considering the age groups of those expected to take up the ETP route, one would shudder to think how the young adults would fare where the elderly folk struggled. ODL 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, will likely influence their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, ODL. Also 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 ETP mode for their professional development.

Potential remedies for making ODL programmes more attractive to the Ordinary and Advanced level graduates

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.

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 the 10 districts of Mashonaland East Region targeted at Advanced and Ordinary level students currently in their final years. The descriptive survey design was adopted for the current study since the investigation was concerned with the perceptions of respondents (Leedy; 1996). The study aimed at tapping the respondents' opinions on how they perceived the model of the Enhanced Tutorial Programme if it was to be introduced at the ZOU. In order to solicit for data from the respondents, a questionnaire was used. Twenty assistant researchers were employed, two per district, each being assigned to a section of the schools. To begin with, the model was designed and subjected to rigorous testing and scrutiny. After satisfying himself of the characteristics of the design and its potential efficacy to entice the young adults, the model was introduced to the students. This was done at career days, functions where prospective employers from different sectors of the economy are invited to present career prospects and guidance to school children particularly those about to go out into the world of work. The research met and briefed the students at Makumbi Visitation High School, All Souls Mission and Hwedza High. Career days at these venues were well attended by schools from across the province. Since a lot of familiarization for the innovation done extensively so that the students would have a thorough understanding of the ETP programme, making it easy for the researchers to extract the much needed data from them. All the targeted 100 students successfully returned their questionnaires and the collected data were collated and analysed.

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 students from each of the schools were chosen through systematic sampling through the use of class daily attendance registers kept in each of the schools.

Presentation and discussion 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 4) 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.

Table1.1: Respondents` views on factors enticing them to enroll with the Enhanced Tutorial Programme

FACTOR	YES	NO
More tutorial hours through ETP unlike in the traditional ODL mode	95(95%)	5(5%)
Community service aspect very attractive	96(96%)	4(4%)
Relaxed entry points for enrolment in ODL institution	80(80%)	20(20%)
Quality materials are offered, for example, modules used	86(86%)	14(14%)
Flexibility and convenience of ODL	86(86%)	14(15%)
Internship/attachment system very enticing	100(100%)	0(0%)
The establishing of learning centres in the students` vicinity very welcome	99(99%)	1(1%)

Table 1.1 above shows that 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. The majority of students felt that they made new friendships in courses with a face-to-face element (Hiltz; 1998).

Community service also was welcome by a majority of 96(96%) of the students. The findings collaborate with those by Bauer et al (2007) which suggest that students believe that their careers can directly benefit from participating in community service. However, they contradict findings elsewhere where young people are not in support of community service especially when it is a requirement for high school graduation (Lopez, 2002).

Because ODL had a lot of flexibility and was convenient, 86(86%) respondents preferred to study through this mode. These findings concur with those by Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) who established that more relaxed entry point and students having the opportunity of deferring, programmes, and even examinations courses up until when they are ready were some features of ODL that have attracted students to join.

Some 80(80%) preferred the ETP 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.

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).

All the 100(100%) respondents felt enticed by the internship/attachment programme. The interns get attracted by the excitement that goes with working outside the school/college

campus (Dale, Martin and Wilkerson, 2006). These findings concur with previous studies which established that courses taken after the internship were more “meaningful” due to their real world working experiences (Lowe, 1965, Koehler, 1974). The internships motivate students to work hard early in their academic programs to improve their chances of being offered internships, and result in improved grades upon conclusion of those internships (Koehler, 1974).

Establishing of learning centres in the vicinity of the students was welcome by an overwhelming majority of 99(99%) since their areas of residence were prohibitive to allow them to enroll at conventional colleges particularly the rural based students. They 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. Findings elsewhere concur that distance education has attracted students whose geographic distance from a higher education institution discouraged or prevented enrollment 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).

Table 1.2: Respondents` views on the factors that might inhibit their enrolling for the Enhanced Tutorial Programme

FACTOR	YES		NO	
	Number	%	Number	%
Perceived poor quality of education in traditional ODL	20	20	80	80
Less time for face-to-face interaction	27	27	73	73
No socialisation with peers from a wide socio-cultural background	84	84	16	16
Lack of Web and e-mail competency	83	83	17	17
Lack of access to ICTs	60	60	40	40
General apathy to ODL programmes	43	43	57	57
In-class tests are a terrifying feature of the ETP	45	45	55	55
Geographical location of tutorials	59	59	41	41

Results presented in table 1.2 help to unearth the factors that may inhibit school leavers` aspirations of undertaking studies through the ETP. 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. Some studies have shown negative attitudes by stakeholders towards the quality of distance education programmes (Dede 1996; Harrison 2001 as cited in Peat and Helland, 2002) thereby going contrary to the findings of the current study. The current study therefore replicates those by various researchers who established that there is no significant difference between learning outcomes that can be attained at traditional institutions versus distance learning (Verduin and Clark 1991; Young 1994; Allsop, 2008; Dede 1996).

Most respondents were of the opinion that more time had been penciled in for face-to-face interaction but the need to make and meet new friends and socialize with colleagues from various socio-cultural backgrounds as in conventional colleges still needed to be addressed through an increase in the tutorial hours and more face to face with the tutors.

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 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 Olakulehjin; 2005). In the USA, twenty-four percent of distance students have high speed bandwidth at home (Gunawardena; 1988).

In-class tests were not a deterrent towards enrolling through the ETP. The majority of the students did not feel threatened by the tests since these were the same as those they wrote at school. The geographical location of the tutorial and regional centre was an inhibiting factor for the majority (59%) of the students. The present study was carried out in Mashonaland East, where some schools are located over 100 kilometres from Marondera town centre. This, therefore, implies that students from such locations would be required to travel to Marondera, the Mashonaland East ZOU Regional Centre, for tutorials and other services offered by the institution. In terms of costs, distances to the regional centre would curtail students` 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 1.3: Respondents` views on the possible improvements intended to make the Enhanced Tutorial Programme more appealing

REMEDY	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	
	Number	%
Decentralization of programmes to district and circuit centers	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
Establishment of linkages with prospective employers	75	75

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 enrollment figures

particularly from the school leavers who traditionally are given to enrolling in conventional 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. Most regional centres were located in towns and cities not convenient to most of the students. However, in order to respond to the students' needs, the Mashonaland East Region has established a district centre at Murehwa and another is set to be officially opened in Hwedza before the July to December 2011 semester.

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.

Due to the increase in the tutorial hours from 3 to 40, these prospective ETP students felt there was genuine need to reduce the programme duration for degrees from 4 to 3 years. The majority of the students also felt that the establishment of linkages with prospective employers would lure more students as they would at least be assured a job after completing the programme.

Conclusions

Findings from this study reveal that Ordinary and Advanced level graduates have generally embraced the ETP as one that may help them acquire qualifications that appear to be illusive in light of the exorbitant fees, among other impediments in conventional institutions. 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 to be raised from the traditional 3 to 40 per course per semester. Students preferred to study through the ETP because of their areas of residence which were prohibitive for them to enroll at conventional colleges. The majority of such responses were from the rural based students who could not afford accommodation rates charged in urban residential areas within the vicinity of colleges since some of the colleges were no longer providing college accommodation services following directives by government and university authorities.

Among the other features of the ETP that help entice the respondents were the following: high quality of learning material, increased learning or face to face time through the forty hours tutorials but still maintaining flexibility and convenience, attachments/internship and the community service aspect. However, areas of contention still do exist. A minority of the respondents was scornful on the idea of enrolling through the ETP to lack of technological/web capacity, perceived little face to face contact resulting low socialization, despite the 40 hours of contact. Also the distant location of tutorial venues weighed against their enrollment in the ETP.

Implications

The acceptance 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 bolstered by the school leavers. Steps must be taken to adopt and introduce ICT courses to those intending to enroll so that prospective students do not get scared off by the technology once they enroll. 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. 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 and making ODL community linked. 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 centers 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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