

Challenges for Open and Distance learning (ODL) Students: Experiences from Students of the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges facing Open and Distance Learning students at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study was conducted at ZOU Masvingo Regional Campus. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The main data collection techniques were questionnaires and structured interviews, supplemented by documentary review. Tables, frequencies and percentages were the key descriptive statistics used to analyze and present the findings. The results showed that ODL learners were challenged with a range of obstacles in their course of studies. The most reported challenges were lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in access and use of ICT, ineffective feedback and lack of study materials. It was recommended that ZOU should strive to achieve effective and balanced teaching and learning system that satisfies the desire of the learners to the extent that they would wish to come back to the institution for further studies and feel proud to recommend the institution to others who are seeking for knowledge.

Key words: challenges, ODL, students, ZOU, drop-out rate, late programme completion, ICT, Masvingo.

1. Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has grown into an important global strategy in resolving problems of access to education (UNESCO, 2004). Nonetheless, ODL programmes have their own unique problems. Some of the major problems are the high rate of student drop-out and late completion of programmes. High drop-out and late completion of programmes are symptoms of underlying challenges facing ODL students. Such challenges have been found to be situational, attitudinal, psychological and pedagogical (Berge et al., 2002); and institutional and socio-cultural related challenges (Zirnkle, 2001). The challenges are found at three levels: individual student, instructional and institutional. In this study we investigate challenges faced by students at Zimbabwe Open University.

2. Orientation

There are very few established stand-alone ODL universities in Africa: University of South Africa (UNISA), Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). Other African countries like Botswana and Zambia are in the process of establishing ODL stand-alone universities.

Both developed and developing countries are adopting ODL to meet the demands of students in the 21st century. Many educational institutions, especially in developed countries, are shifting from purely a campus-centered model of higher education to ODL model using information and communication technologies (Howell et al., 2003). More and more universities are therefore increasingly offering some type of distance learning courses.

Zimbabwe acknowledges the importance of ODL in bringing higher education to the disadvantaged groups like women and the disabled. In the early 1990s University of Zimbabwe introduced a distance education programme under its distance college programme. The college transformed into a full-fledged ODL university in 2000 established through an act of parliament. As an off-shoot of the University of Zimbabwe, ZOU became the first university in the country to offer degrees through the ODL mode.

Major benefits of ODL are related to its flexibility, accessibility, affordability and life based education opportunities. It enables an expansion of tertiary enrollments at less cost per student than under the conventional residential campus system (Pityana, 2004). Greater flexibility enables ODL courses to adapt to specific student needs or work requirements, thereby enabling greater relevance (Saint, 1999). ODL also accommodates the growing demand for lifelong learning more easily than do residential programmes. Moreover, ODL can effectively reach those learners who have been denied access to higher education, for example, women who are unable to attend traditional educational programmes because of household responsibilities or cultural constraints, economically marginalized groups, and the imprisoned (Rumble, 2000).

Despite the expanding growth of ODL and its benefits, students who enroll with ODL have been shown to face many challenges related to individual, institutional and instructional (Bhalalusesa, 1998, 1999; Cosmas and Mbwete, 2009; Mbukusa, 2009; Mushi, 2001). Cross (1981) identified three distinct categories of challenges facing ODL students: Situational, institutional and dispositional. According to Cross, situational challenges include job and home responsibilities that reduce time for study. Institutional related challenges include poor logistics system or a lack of appropriate advising (Kruger and Casey, 2000). Dispositional challenges are related to learners' own attitudes and feelings.

Berge et al (2002) classified challenges to distance learners as situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and/or cultural related challenges. Zirnkle (2001) identified specific challenges facing distance learners as programme costs, lack of equipment and infrastructure, instructional concerns and poor technical assistance. Other challenges documented by Zirnkle are inadequate feedback and poor teacher contact, alienation and isolation, and poor student support services.

Garland (2007) identified some situational challenges for students to be persistence in distance learning. These include poor learning environment and lack of time. For example, students felt that the course took more time than anticipated because they failed to judge the demands of work, home and school. Kember (1989) argued that poor time management leads to challenges such as learners' inability to integrate the demands of off campus study with family, work and social commitments.

Ukpo (2005) found that teachers who enrolled in the ODL face challenges related to failure of trainees to receive training materials on time, students' engagement in other economic activities to supplement their family incomes, and poor learner support services especially where study centres are under resourced and overstretched. Kamau (2007) found that, without an effective learners' support services system that provides on-site face to face, timely feedback on student performance and access to library services, student achievement will be undermined and dropout rates and procrastination will increase.

ODL also presents new challenges in information dissemination, especially in developing countries. Mossberger et al (2003) observes that technical competence needed in order to have effective access to contemporary ICT is a challenge to distance learners. Technical competence refers to the skills needed to operate the hardware and software of ICT, including the skills of using networked systems to access and share information (Warschauner, 2003). Lack of these skills is a critical challenge as learner may fail to use the various physical, digital and human resources involved ICT.

These challenges prompt many problems in distance learning. Among these problems are high rate of students' drop-out and late programmes completion. According to Carr (2000), in the US drop-out rates range from 20% to 50%. The OECD (2000) reported that drop-out rates range from 20% in the United Kingdom to 45% or more in Austria, France, and Portugal. In Australia, drop-out rates range from 35% to over 55% (Fozdar et al., 2006). In African countries the drop-out rate is estimated to be over 50% (Daniel, 2005).

3. Statement of Purpose

This study sought to examine challenges related to individual, instructional and institutional levels facing students of ODL using Zimbabwe Open University as case study.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Bean and Metzner's (1985) Student Attrition Theory. Bean and Metzner (1985) came up with the student attrition theory to explain attrition of non-traditional students including distance learners. They identified four factors affecting persistence: academic variables such as study habits and course availability; background and defining variables such as age, educational goals, ethnicity; environmental variables such as finances, hours of employment, family responsibilities, and outside encouragement; and academic and psychological outcomes while at the college. These variables can challenge students and push them out of the educational institution by putting too much pressure on their time, resources, and sense of well-being.

When both academic and environmental variables are favourable, students should persist. When both variables are unfavourable, students are likely to drop-out. When academic variables are positive, but environmental variables are negative, the favourable effects of academic variables on student goal attainment are suppressed. Students may drop-out of college despite strong academic performance if they perceive low levels of utility, satisfaction, or goal commitment, or if they experience high levels of stress.

5. Research Methods and Study Participants

This study adopted a mixed methods approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. This combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches complemented each other and allowed complete analysis.

The population of this study consisted of undergraduate and post-graduate students enrolled in various degree programmes offered by ZOU and ZOU staff at Masvingo Regional Campus.

Selection of study sample was subjected to simple random sampling taking cognizance of equal representation of both sexes. Thus, a sample of male and female students was selected so that any sex and gender

challenges impacting upon students' progression could be identified. A total of 20 respondents were sampled for this study.

6. Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments for this research included combination of various techniques namely: questionnaire, interview and documentary review. The use of more than one technique was considered as an appropriate way for ensuring reliable and valid data through triangulation. Triangulation refers to the application of several different sources of information in research, which serves to enhance the credibility of the gathered information.

7. Findings

7.1 Individual related challenges facing ODL students

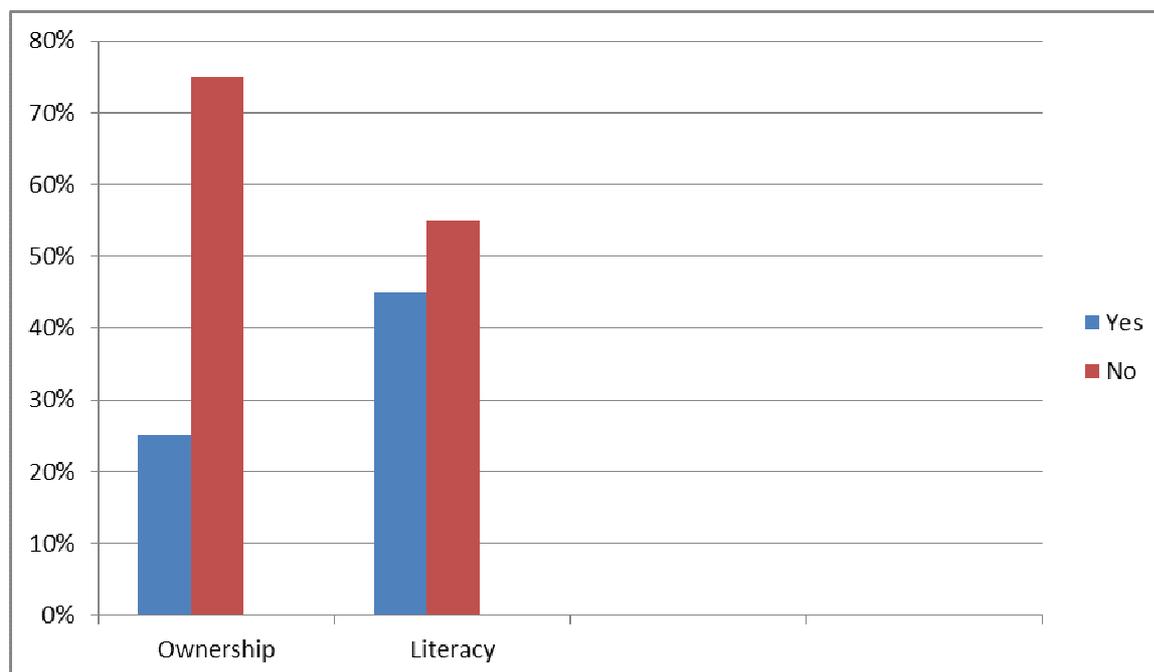
In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate seven selected individual related challenges in a likert scale format as shown in Table 1. The table shows that more than half agreed with most of the individual related challenges facing them. Only lack of support from family etc had less than half (40%) agreeing. Lack of sufficient time for study and conflicts between work and study schedule had 75% each; distance to the regional centre, financial constraints and unfavourable home learning environment had 80% each; difficulties in learning technically demanding materials (50%); and information and communication technologies barriers (70%).

Table 1: Responses on individual related challenges facing ODL students
 (Source: Primary data)

Selected Individual Related Challenges	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Agree	
	F	%	F	%	f	%
Lack of sufficient time for study	10	50	5	25	5	25
Distance from home to the regional centre.	8	40	8	40	4	20
Financial constraints	12	60	4	20	4	20
Lack of support from family, employer, friends, etc.	4	20	4	20	12	60
Unfavourable home learning environment.	10	50	6	30	4	20
Difficulties in learning technically demanding material	6	30	4	20	10	50
Lack of experience and/or training with instructional technologies	8	40	6	30	6	30
Conflicts between family /Work and study schedule	10	50	5	25	5	25

Most respondents showed that they had challenges in working with information and communication technologies. As shown in Fig 1, seventy percent of the respondents had no computer and 55% were computer illiterate. The implication is that most of these students could not access information on the Internet. The use of electronic media is therefore likely to exclude the majority of distance learners. This concurs with several other studies in developing countries that established that ODL students in developing countries are challenged with both lack of experience in the application of technology and absence of these technologies (UNESCO, 2004; Mbukusa, 2009; Basaza et al., 2010). Fig 1 summarizes the results on computer ownership and operation skills among respondents.

Fig 1: Computer ownership and application skills
(Source: Primary data)



Nonetheless, ICT is the major ingredient in the effectiveness of ODL. In the modern digital world application of ICT in ODL is not a matter of choice, but a must (Cosmas and Mbwete, 2009). Zimbabwe Open University has regional computerized and digitalized libraries and computer laboratories. If the majority of students cannot operate these gadgets and systems, then they are nothing but simply white elephants that have no purpose in the university.

Most respondents were adults who were self-financing their studies. With a host of other obligations back home finance became an automatic hurdle. Several respondents have postponed semesters and examinations at least once due to other commitments, especially children school fees. Other than the UNESCO sponsorship for professionalization of secondary school teachers, Zimbabwe Open University has no financial assistance scheme for students. Therefore, students are supposed to take their own initiatives to seek financial assistance elsewhere.

About 40% reported lack of support from employers as a challenge facing them. A follow-up discussion showed that they were denied permission to attend examinations. The fact that they still persisted even under this hostile environment shows that they were highly committed to advancement of their education. This was clear indication of self-motivation in learning. As observed by Brien (1992) and Reamer (1990), self-motivated distance learners are more likely to persist, even more under the most adverse circumstances, such as lack of support from employers and financial constraints. Similarly, Knowles (1997) described the need for self-motivation and self-direction as important attributes for overcoming obstacles and successful course completion.

As seen from Table 1, about 80% of the respondents thought that unfavorable home environment was a challenge facing them. Further probing in the follow-up discussion showed that this was not as big a problem as the university environment itself. If the university environment is supportive students will manage the home environment.

7.2 Instructional related challenges facing ODL students

Questionnaire responses to questions on instructional related challenges were as in Table 2.

Table 2: Responses on Selected Instructional Related Challenges

(Source: Primary data)

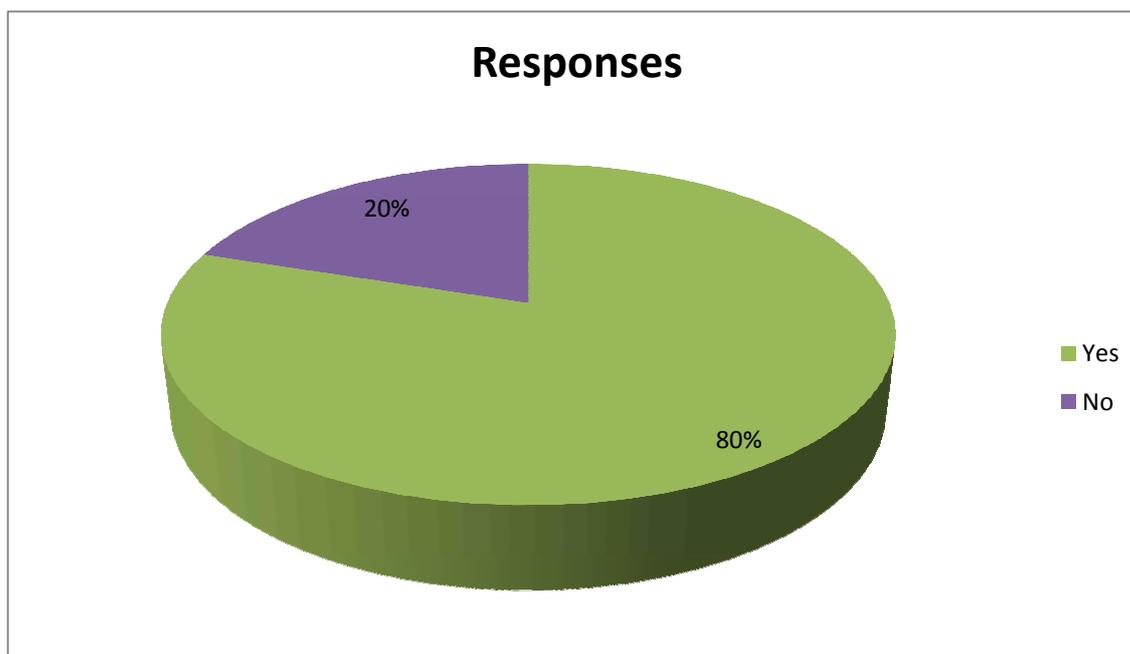
Selected Challenges	STRONGLY AGREE		AGREE		NOT AGREE	
	f	%	F	%	f	%
Delayed/ineffective feedback from the Instructors	11	55	4	20	5	25
Lack of instructor's contact and inadequate academic support	10	50	4	20	4	20
Difficulty in attending face to face	6	30	10	50	4	20
Difficulty in attending Laboratory practicals	6	30	10	50	4	20
Poor course material design/ inappropriate learning materials	8	40	6	30	6	30
Unhelpful course information and lack of direction	8	40	6	30	6	30

At least 70 respondents agreed that instructional related challenges affected them. Seventy five percent of the respondents thought that delayed or ineffective feedback was a challenge; seventy percent thought that lack of instructor's contact and /or inadequate academic support was a challenge; unhelpful course information and lack of direction and poor course design /inappropriate learning materials were also at 70%; and eighty percent thought difficulties in attending face-to-face and laboratory practicals was a challenge.

Students were also unhappy with delayed feedback on their performance. As reported by Hara and Kling (2001) students experience confusion, anxiety, and frustration due to lack of prompt or clear feedback from their lecturers. Thus, delayed and ineffective feedback can add burden to learners who are struggling with the isolation and the remoteness nature of distance learning.

Another related observation was that of lost assignments and test scripts. Respondents were asked if they had already encountered the problem of their assignments or test scripts getting lost. Responses were as in Table 3.

Fig 2: Responses on lost assignments /test scripts
 (Source: Primary data)



The follow-up discussion showed that the problem of scripts getting lost frustrated, discouraged and brought many discomforts to students.

Tests and assignments are major assessment tools in ODL. They give both the lecturer and student feedback on student progress and thus help determine the next action. Thus, accurate ways of students' grades recording and ensuring that instructors give regular feedback is of great importance not only for learners' satisfactions, but also for institution's reputation.

With regards tutorials, face-to-face and laboratory practicals, respondents' challenges were socio-economic in nature like travelling distance and its accompanied expenses. There was also the issue of dissatisfaction with lecturers and tutors performance. Students felt that most of their lecturers came to lectures unprepared and waffle around without saying anything meaningful to students. Most lecturers were described as ineffective.

7.3 Institutional related challenges facing ODL students

Table 3 shows responses to questions addressing institutional related challenges facing ODL students. Over 65% of the respondents felt that institutional challenges greatly affected their performance and progress. The distribution of responses were as follows: delayed study materials (95%); accessing administrative services (70%); lack of an effective institutional network of technical assistance (60%); lack of responsiveness from regional centre / ZOU headquarter administrative staff (90%); lack of appropriate students services support (80%); and lack or delayed important information (70%).

Table 3: Responses on rating selected institutional related challenges
 (Source: Primary data)

Selected Challenges	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Agree	
	F	%	f	%	f	%
Delayed study materials at regional centers	18	90	1	5	0	0
Difficulty in administrative services such as registering and paying fee	10	50	4	20	6	30
Lack of appropriate advice provided under the umbrella of students services support	10	50	6	30	4	20
Lack of an effective institutional network of technical assistance	10	50	2	10	8	40
Lack of responsiveness from regional center/OUT headquarter administrative staff	15	75	3	15	2	10
Lack/delayed of important information	12	60	2	10	6	30

The issue of delayed study materials deserves further discussion. Follow-up discussions with respondents revealed that students were not happy with delayed study material, especially modules. Most of the respondents (95%) received study materials late or never got them. In this situation students are affected academically, psychologically, and financially. Lack of study materials may force students to submit assignments that are not properly written and they are likely to get to examinations without enough preparation resulting in poor performance. Such poor performance may not be the true reflection of their academic abilities. Some students may persist at slow pace, resulting in late completion of programmes. Others withdraw from studies. The public (employers included) may question the individual student's academic abilities on the ground that why does it take him /her long to graduate. Also, the quality of education provided through ODL becomes questionable.

Delayed or lack of study materials may affect students economically as they waste resources in terms of money and time; patiently waiting for the arrival of study materials and sometimes travelling to regional centre to make follow-up, but find nothing.

8. Conclusions

This study reveals that there are several challenges faced by ZOU students. The challenges include individual, instructional and institutional related challenges.

Individual related challenges were found to be lack of sufficient time for study; problems related to the access and use of ICT; financial constraints; lack of support from employers; and occasional obstacles resulting from travelling distance from home to the regional centre; especially during face to face and examinations sessions.

Instructional related challenges were established as ineffective and delayed feedback of students' assignments and examinations results, lost scripts and unrecorded grades. These instructional related challenges contributed negatively to students' learning because students would find it difficult to move on to new content.

Institutional related challenges were found as delayed or lack of study materials; lack of students support services in areas of guidance and counseling; and inadequate academic support and administrative services at the regional centre.

9. Recommendations

In line with the above findings and conclusions the following recommendations are made:

- ZOU should equip students with independent study skills;
- ZOU should regularly train students on how to work with ICT;
- ZOU should recruit competent, self-motivated and committed academics;
- administrative and counseling services at the regional centres need improvement to ensure that students with various problems access these services easily; and
- ZOU must ensure enough production and delivery of study materials.

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