

# Student involvement in enhancing student, retention, persistence and success in open and distance learning at Zimbabwe Open University

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## ABSTRACT

The study sought to establish how student involvement could enhance student retention, persistence and success in Open and Distance Learning at Zimbabwe Open University for it to become a world class university. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems in Sub-Saharan Africa institutions are grappling with fiscal challenges of low state funding and low student numbers against a background of increasing proliferation. African ODL systems are pursuing world class visions to effectively determine and monitor variables that affect student retention, persistence and success. With Open and Distance Learning, students are now being considered as the largest stakeholders. Investing time and money in learning, Open and Distance Learning institutions ought to orient partnerships to retain their students throughout the course of their learning. This research sought to find out how student persistence and success in Open and Distance Learning could be enhanced through customer feedback approaches at the Zimbabwe Open University. The case study survey design was used to gather data from randomly selected forty final year students and ten alumni members. The interview and the questionnaire were used as data collection instruments. The study established that assignments contribute much to students' persistence and success to learning, hence the commenting need to be thorough. Tutorial sessions were found to be theoretically based and lacking practical activities, and some concepts in modules were viewed difficult to be conceptualized by students. Academic advisory services being given to students were enhancing learning; however, they lacked the social aspects.

**Keywords:** Student retention, student persistence, student involvement, distance learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe Open University is one of the Open and Distance Learning Universities in the Sub-Saharan region. Its mandate depends on stakeholder satisfaction in this instance the students' retention, persistence and success in learning. This in turn will make it the biggest world class university. Failure to meet the needs of the students will hinder its vision. Hence, this study intends to establish students' views on how they could pursue their studies and remain inclined to the university and complete their studies.

Literature on student retention, persistence and success in learning has its roots grounded in Tinto's (1975) model which established that such variables depended on the degree of students' academic and

social integration (Pascrell et al., 2003; Kember, 2004; Cleveland, 2004; Barbara and Metzger, 2007).

However, there is an argument that Tinto's (ibid) model was designed for traditional learning systems and is less applicable to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) (Handel and Lewis, 2005). Csikszentmihlyi (2006) proposes that institutional assessment and establishment of institutional frameworks for monitoring variables related to student retention, persistence and success are critical prerequisites in ODL. Mannan (2007) also advocates for institutional self assessment of prevailing student integration climates. It seems there is need for further research in this area and to expand into other variables outside the integration domain (for example the customer

focus areas).

Statistical analysis has been a very popular method of monitoring and predicting student retention and persistence. For example, Tague (2005) used logistic regression and discrimination analysis to identify factors that contribute to student retention. Herrera's (2006) study used a student flow model to monitor student's progress from first year to final year. Woodman's (2001) study at Open University of United Kingdom used binary logistic regression on Mathematics and Computer courses and found out that the most important factors were marks for the first assignment, number of courses passed in previous years, course level, points the course is worth and student's occupation. The major criticism concerning the use of statistical methods is that when using large samples we may come to conclude that a factor is significant when in fact it is not (Dew, 2009). Statistical methods are not naturalistic and on their own may not be useful tools in providing data for situational analysis.

Documentary analysis has been used extensively to mine data for analyzing and determining predictors for student retention and persistence. Boero et al. (2005) analyzed data from enrolment management, academic performance, retention and other related areas. Romero and Ventura's study (2007) is a survey of students' data at an ODL institution for ten consecutive years. Candara (2009) identified variables that affected student retention and dropout using student databases. Many of these documentary analysis studies concluded that gender, age, occupation, academic performance and family background were significant determinants of the probability of persistence in ODL studies. However, data analysis' studies seem to lack environmental and institutional variables at play during the course of the methods and are also underplaying the role of student participation.

It seems there is no universal agreement in explaining what keeps Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students on course. In addition to the academic and social integration phenomenon, Venter (2006) put forward student background, motivation, and technical support as a critical framework. However, Boero et al. (2005) argues that student background characteristics such as academic and socio-demographic variables (age, sex, ethnic origin, marital status and financial background) are only potential predictors for student retention and persistence. Herrera (2006) concluded that many variables vary in their success at predicting persistence depending on the academic level. Herrera (ibid) argues that variables that affect persistence at one level may not necessarily affect persistence at the next level. Herrera also argues that students can resist biological or psychological factors and complete their programmes despite the risks. It can be interesting to find out the extent to which students themselves can contribute in determining and monitoring variables that affect their persistence and success in Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

It is worthwhile to note some studies that have

attempted to monitor students' retention, persistence and success using students. Diaz (2009) for example analyzed ODL student learning styles and concluded that there is a correlation between their intrinsic motivation and academic persistence. However, other studies (for example, Woodman, 2007) oppose to the use of student background characteristics as variables, arguing that background characteristics are just starting points. It seems that approaches focusing on student background alone overlook institutional variables that directly affect student learning throughout the course of the study.

Involving Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students in identifying and assessing variables that determine their persistence and success in learning is an area in need of research (Bitzer, 2006). According to Jita (2006), the process of stakeholder participation in promoting excellence in learning has been rather limited and poorly conceptualized. In the same vein, Savitz and Weber (2006) argue that although the notion of customer engagement has been reported in business literature, it has not been fully realized in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Customer retention through excellence has its roots in the business world. Csikszentmihalyi (2006) view excellence as the achievement of an ideal level of perfection that draws one to a high level of performance. According to Tague (2005), excellence depends on a system that ensures customer retention by responding to their needs and continuously improving delivery of goods and services. There have been efforts to apply this concept in developed world Open and Distance Learning (ODL) systems. For example, student retention by exceeding customer market needs; student retention by high academic standards (Handel and Lewis, 2005) and student retention by exceeding students' expectations of quality education (Handel and Lewis, 2005). It is against this background that this study sought to find out how student retention, persistence, and success in Open and Distance Learning could be monitored and maintained through student involvement at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) for it to become a world class university.

### **Statement of the problem**

The problem of high attrition rates is at the heart of many ODL institutions. Carr and Led (2000) found out that in some ODL institutions in Africa, attrition rates exceed 50%. It has been observed that ODL institutions in Africa are grappling with challenges caused by fiscal realities of low state funding, student retention (Handel and Lewis, 2005). With the proliferation of many 'for-profit' ODL, systems some of which have become 'savvy' in marketing themselves to the student customer, students as customers now have options to choose which institutions to study with (Dew, 2009). ODL institutions in Africa cannot increase unit private costs but have to increase and retain their student numbers despite

unfavorable economic environments affecting their students (Van der Merwe and Joubert, 2005). It is therefore critical for third world ODL systems particularly in the Sub-Saharan Africa to effectively monitor variables that affect student retention, persistence and success in the light of increasing competition, complexity and expectations of ODL students.

In Zimbabwe, attracting and retaining students in ODL has become critical for ODL systems seeking to reach out to many students and maintain high levels of student satisfaction and retention. While research in the developed world has put forward methods of enhancing student persistence, retention and success, the ODL context in Africa particularly Zimbabwe is lagging behind in defining and empirically determining strategies for enhancing student retention and persistence.

With a business vision of becoming a world class Open Distance Learning provider, it seems Zimbabwe Open University may consider applying empirically grounded customer oriented approaches in interacting with students. Considering the aforementioned predictors of student retention, this study sought to find out how student satisfaction and expectations can be determined and used as variables to enhance retention and ensure their success in Zimbabwe Open University.

The study sought to answer the following question: How can student retention, persistence and success in Open and Distance Learning be monitored and maintained through student involvement at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)?

### Objectives of the study

1. To explore students and former students' views of tutors' attitudes about students development to learning.
2. To explore student's and former students' perceptions on how study materials affect student retention, persistence and success.
3. To explore students' views on how face to face tutorials affect their persistence and success in ODL.
4. To explore students and former students' views on how assignment management affect their perceptions and success in ODL.
5. To explore students' views on how advisory and counseling services provided affect their persistence and success in ODL.

### Research questions

1. How do tutors' attitudes affect student retention, persistence and success in ODL at ZOU?
2. To what extent are study materials contributing to student retention, persistence and success in Open and Distance Learning at Zimbabwe Open University?
3. To what extent are face to face tutorials contributing to student retention, persistence and success in Open and

Distance Learning at Zimbabwe Open University?

4. How does management of assignments affect students' retention persistence and success in their learning?

5. To what extent do student advisory and counseling services being provided contributing to student retention, persistence and success in Open and Distance Learning at Zimbabwe Open University?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research design

This research used a case study design. According to Robson (1997), a case study is a detailed empirical investigation of the problem within its real life context using multiple sources of data. The case study was adopted because it uses a situational analysis approach which is viewed by Borg and Gall (Ed) as a form of a study where the problem is studied from the viewpoint of the subjects and their views pulled together and provides an in-depth perception that will contribute to understanding the problem.

### Target population

The population was 162 final year part four semester 2 of 2012 students, from each of the four faculties at Zimbabwe Open University of Manicaland and Mashonaland Central regions and 40 alumni members. Final year students were selected because they had long learning experiences and were assumed to have developed expectations of things that make a student persist and succeed in studies. Inclusion of alumni members was necessary because they persisted through the rigor of Open and Distance Learning and registered success in their studies.

### Sample and sampling procedures

Stratified random sampling was used. Each of the 4 faculties represented a stratum. Five students were randomly selected from each faculty in each region. The total number of sampled students was 40. Five alumni members were randomly selected from each region to come up with a total number of 10. The total sample was 50.

### Research instruments

In order to collect detailed and extensive data, the questionnaire and the interview were used as research instruments.

#### Questionnaire

Structured questionnaire was used to collect data from students. The use of the questionnaire enabled the collection of data from many students, while reducing bias that could result from personal characteristics involved in interviews.

#### Interview

The structured interview technique was used to collect data from sampled students and alumni members. This made the wording and sequencing of questions fixed to ensure that when variations appear between responses they could be attributed to actual

differences between responses and not on variations in the interviews.

#### **Data collection procedures**

The researchers first sought a letter of permission to carry out the research in the University together with an introductory letter from University Management. The questionnaire for students was administered by the researchers during weekend tutorials. The researchers conducted interviews of students during the same weekend tutorials semester period. Alumni members were interviewed after seeking permission and making appointments with them.

#### **Statistical analysis**

Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret quantitative data. Descriptive analysis procedures had the advantage that they enabled data to be organized in summaries. Tables were used to analyze data and convert figures to percentages. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically according to objectives stated and research questions of the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Students' ratings of tutor related factors that contributed to their persistence and success in learning**

Data collected revealed that the majority (70%) stated having got effective academic guidance from full time, whilst 30% rated it as good. Most of the students had regular consultation with full time staff. However, they indicated inadequate visits due to personal commitment, since the majority of them are permanently employed and committed to their organizations. Most of the students (90%) revealed that full time lectures were accessible. However, students were disgruntled on accessibility of part time tutors yet they should provide the expertise in their subject areas. What they got from full time tutors is university governance guidance and in some cases academic guidance, not purely academic guidance because these full time lectures did not specialize in all areas. The majority of the students (66%) were of the view that full time lecturers should complement tutorial letters by meeting each student individually after receiving study materials to offer guidance on how to overcome anticipated challenges in the new courses. The majority of alumni members (100%) interviewed cited the need for making part time course tutors accessible to students through the phone or internet when needed by students.

### **Frequency distribution of students' views on how modules contributed to their persistence and success**

On learning materials like modules, the majority of the

students (80%) had of the view that modules contributed to their persistence and success. It is worth to note that all the students emulated the use of modules in their learning. However, some indicated that in some modules, certain concepts confused them; hence there was need for clarity.

### **Frequency distribution of students' expectations of tutorials that contribute to students' persistence in learning**

On the issue of tutorials, the majority of students indicated that tutorials must have scheduled sessions for developing communication skills for them to write quality assignments. Ninety percent of the students strongly agreed for the need of tutors to further break down content in the modules to simplified learning materials. Most of them (95%) aired the need to have practical activities during tutorial sessions. They stated it would enhance their learning. Data gathered revealed that students were left to vegetate during tutorial sessions.

### **Agreement concerning that assignment management at Zimbabwe Open University can contribute to students' persistence**

On assignment management, the majority (90%) agreed that assignment management at Zimbabwe Open University should contribute to their persistence to learning. This can be enhanced through provision of minimized turnaround time for assignment marking. All students stated that written feedback comments by markers need to be comprehensive, encouraging and informative. What they found in their marked assignments were ticks, and some comments were not tallying with awarded marks.

### **Rating of advisory and counseling services provided that contribute to persistence in learning**

Data collected revealed that the majority of students receive financial advisory services on fees payment, examination techniques and time management. They indicated that very little was done on linkages with employers related to degree programmes being done and personalized services for students with special needs. Of the students interviewed, 40% got personal advice on social and domestic challenges. There is need to improve on this.

## **Conclusion**

The study established that assignments contribute much

to students' persistence and success to learning. However, students and former students aired their concern on comments provided indicating that they were uninformative. Hence, the commenting needs to be thorough. Tutorial sessions were found to be theoretically based and lacking practical activities. Modules are being valued as being key to students' mode of learning. However, some concepts in some texts need simplification. Academic advisory services being given to students were enhancing learning especially on academic and financial guidance but lacked the social aspects. The grey areas indicated by students need to be taken into consideration by the university as a way forward of fulfilling its mandate of becoming a first world class Open and Distance Learning.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings above this study recommends:

1. Improvement on contact time between part tutors and students.
2. The need to simplify content materials in modules so that they become self explanatory.
3. The need to improve on assignments comments by providing staff development programmes to part time tutors.
4. The need to improve tutorial sessions to encompass practical activities.
5. The university to improve on carrier guidance for students and link them to employers.

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