

Accessibility and Affordability of ODL in Zimbabwe: A Reality or a Myth?

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Abstract: *This study looks at the extent to which the establishment of district centers by Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has increased accessibility of Open and Distance Learning, and how affordable is ODL to the general populace. The challenge faced by ZOU in the establishment of these district centers is discussed. The study employed the descriptive survey design and convenience sampling was done to select the 50 out of 300 active and inactive students in the two district centers of Murehwa and Hwedza. Questionnaires were used to solicit data from the respondents. The study found out that at the district centres, there are no tutorials which are being carried out, and the writing of examinations is still being conducted at the regional centre. Financial constraints are hampering the affordability of ODL. The study recommends that district centers should offer all the services offered at the regional centre, and ODL students should also be given educational government grants just like their convectional counterparts. Tutorials dates should coincide with the pay days of most civil servants so that when they come to regions to collect their salaries they can also attend lectures hence it becomes cheaper for them in terms of travelling.*

Keywords: *Accessibility, affordability and open and distance learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to UNESCO in 2002 open and distance learning has become a force contributing to social and economic development of many countries and open and distance learning is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of educational systems in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis for the latter. This growth has been stimulated in part by the interest among educators and trainers in the use of new, Internet based and multimedia technologies, and also by the recognition that traditional ways of organizing education need to be reinforced by innovative methods, if the fundamental right of all people to learning is to be realized. The globalization of distance education provides many opportunities for developing countries for the realization of their educational goals. The explosion of interest in distance learning has also emanated from the growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining; and the technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subjects at a distance. Zindoga (2012) in an article in the Herald newspaper pointed out that for a very long time, open and distance learning was deemed the preserve for old people, who had lost out on opportunities to go to conventional universities and colleges. These old people had to beef up their education and enter into various courses via mature entry or accredited prior learning options. This kind of notion then led people to refer to the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as the University of "Machembere" (the elderly) when it was launched in 1993. However times have changed. Distance learning is increasingly becoming popular even to younger generations. ZOU has grown to be a vibrant institution. To date, ZOU has more than 30 degree programmes that are relevant to all socio-economic sectors of the country. In order to sufficiently cater for students throughout Zimbabwe, ZOU has a highly decentralised structure with 10 regional centres in all the provinces. "ZOU is among various players in the open and distance learning in the country with all universities in the country offering the service.

ZOU has over the years gained currency among Zimbabweans as many have pursued various academic interests with the institution citing convenience, cost and flexibility as the main advantages of open and distance learning. The advantage of open and distance learning in terms of the cost is that you can spread your payments and being employed you can pay for your education gradually .ODL is critical in reducing poverty and empowers people through entrepreneurship training and vocational education and training, teacher education training, primary and secondary education, and higher education

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

ZOU since 2012 has been involved in the setting up of district centres throughout its regions which are found in every geo political provinces of the country. This move was necessitated by the desire to bring education to the doorstep of the student. ZOU is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, 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 started as a Centre for Distance Education in 1993 housed in the Department of Education at the University of Zimbabwe, offering only one programme, the Bachelor of Education degree in Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies with initial enrolment of 624 students. In 1995, the Centre for Distance Education was transformed into a College of Distance Education. On 1 March 1999 an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20), transformed the College of Education into a fully fledged university - Zimbabwe Open University - with its own Charter and Vice Chancellor. ZOU operates through a National Centre based in Harare, the capital city and In order to sufficiently cater for students throughout Zimbabwe and globally, ZOU adopted a highly decentralised structure of opening Regional Centres as well as district centres in all the ten (10) provinces of Zimbabwe as well as a virtual region for all international students. The Regional Centres are located in each of the ten geo-political provinces of the country in order for the university to reach every potential student throughout the country (Benza, 2001) *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning Vol. 1.* (See Table 1.1).

Table 1. *Zimbabwe Open University Regional Centres*

1.	Harare/Chitungwiza Regional Centre.....	Harare
2.	Mashonaland East Regional Centre.....	Marondera
3.	Mashonaland West Regional Centre.....	Chinhoyi
4.	Mashonaland Central Regional Centre.....	Bindura
5.	Manicaland Regional Centre.....	Mutare
6.	Matebeleland Regional Centre.....	Gwanda
7.	Matebeleland North Regional Office.....	Hwange
8.	Bulawayo Regional Centre.....	Bulawayo
9.	Midlands Reginal Centre.....	Gweru
10.	Masvingo Regional Office.....	Masvingo
11.	Virtual Region.....	National Centre (Harare)

The functions of the district centres among other things are:

- Processing of application forms
- Receipting direct cash payment
- Registering new and retaining students
- Issuing out course materials to registered students
- Attending to student queries

- Handling of assignments
- Marketing Zimbabwe Open University programmes
- Arranging for tutorials where the number of students has reached the critical mass of ten students per course.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Learning is an active process of construction of knowledge, attitudes and values as well as developing skills using a variety of resources including people, printed material, electronic media, experiential and work-integrated learning, practical training, reflection, research, etc. Learning is also associated (UNISA2008)

Open distance learning is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, and educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed; (UNISA2008) According to UNESCO (2002), the terms open learning and distance education represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. Open and distance learning is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education, and its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of Internet-based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web.

Peters (1976) argues that distance education is characterized by the use of (1) printed material, radio and TV programmes, (2) computers and (3) study circles. Keegan's definition incorporates aspects of the definitions proposed by Holmberg (1977), Peters (1973), and Moore (1973). Keegan (1986) identifies seven principal characteristics, which he regards as being essential for any comprehensive definition of distance education. These characteristics, Keegan (1986:49-50) argues, distinguishes distance education from other forms of education systems. These characteristics include;

- The separation of teacher and learner which distinguishes it from face-to-face lecturing;
- The influence on educational organization which distinguishes it from private study;
- The use of technical media, usually print, to unite teacher and learner and carry the educational content;
- The provision of a two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue;
- The possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes;
- The participation in an industrialized form of education which, if accepted, contains the genus of radical separation of distance education from other forms;
- The privatising of learning so that learning occurs away from the group.

Keegan (1995:7) gives the most thorough definition of distance education. He says that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained".

4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

How accessible and affordable is ODL offered by Zimbabwe Open University to its clients and how has the establishment of district centres increased the accessibility of ODL to the distant learner?

Research Questions

- To what extent is ODL affordable?
- How accessible are ODL learning centres to the student?
- What types of services are offered at ODL learning centres?
- What general challenges affect the ODL learner?

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Jain (2013) pointed out that unlike the conventional education system; ODL provides adequate flexibility in terms of 'entry' and 'exit' points to a learner. Thus irrespective of age and occupation, one could pursue a learning course of ones own choice and requirement. Professionals can learn at their own pace and at their own convenient time and not necessarily be class-room bound at a given time. Further the open system of learning has made the basic educational system also accessible and inclusive. ODL has enabled flexibility in education by making it suitable for multi-end use in a variety of situations. Since ODL is open, flexible and accessible, it makes the process of learning so much more resource-effective, in terms of knowledge creation but the learner also contributes thereby making the process much richer and better in terms of time .The learners can learn at their desired time and pace. Jain (2013) pointed out that though highly inclusive ODL is affordable.

6. THE ROLE OF ODL

Anuwar (2013) pointed out that ODL is considered an avenue to widen access to higher education, especially for working adults. Where other higher education institutions focus on creating access for school-leavers to obtain their first degrees, this demonstrates ODL's potential to provide solutions for the educational needs of the workforce. By leveraging on ICT, ODL utilises a delivery method that allows learners to study on a part-time basis, often using an online platform and freeing them from the obligation of attending on-campus classes. This flexibility is the main advantage for working adults who cannot afford to study full-time. At Zimbabwe Open University as well as many other open universities, the bulk of the learner population is formed of working individuals, such as teachers, nurses, civil servants and those working in the fields of human resources, business administration and information technology. This is because ODL programmes tend to gravitate toward career-oriented and industry-driven fields, thus making them even more attractive to those who are already working. As a form of capacity building, those with higher qualifications have a chance for promotion and career advancement; and the workforce is boosted by skills and knowledge upgrading of working individuals.

While ODL has been widely accepted in many parts of Africa, it has its own share of challenges .The most persistent challenges among these issues are related to accessibility, affordability and flexibility. ODL programmes should not be limited only to the privileged few if universal access to education is to be achieved. The flexibility inherent in ODL and the fact that it can be undertaken concurrently with a full-time job makes it very convenient for student teachers as it allows them to study at an "affordable" cost and in the comfort of their homes and workplaces during school holidays. ODL institutions must explore ways to provide nationwide infrastructures, such as Internet (including broadband and WiFi) access and other ICT facilities, to reach learners in both urban and rural areas. 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 (Keegan1996)

With the issue of affordability, ODL providers must achieve cost-effectiveness (especially in terms of ICT investment) while maintaining fees that are affordable to those within the lower

income brackets (Anuwar 2013) This is particularly important in many developing African countries as a majority of the population is within the lower- middle-income groups. The establishment of district learning centres nationwide is critical to broaden access, especially in countries such as Zimbabwe which have widespread remote geographical areas. According to Anuwar (2013), ODL institutions must ensure that these nationwide learning centres are equipped with excellent infrastructure and ICT facilities as well. Carefully investing in ICT can result in economies of scale and lowering of delivery costs. Prohibitive costs often affect learner retention in ODL institutions, which needs to be carefully monitored to ensure that there is a successful continuum between enrolment of learners and the creation of knowledge workers.

Flexibility relates to an institution's ability to create a system that can suit working adults. Fully utilising ICT is again an important strategy, especially to reach learners through various platforms and media as well as to suit different learning styles, so that teaching and learning can take place anywhere, anytime as well as both synchronously and asynchronously.

It is necessary to point out that accessibility; affordability and flexibility are all linked to the importance of quality delivery and learner retention. ODL institutions that struggle with retaining learners need to focus on these three key issues as part of the focus on quality across all facets of delivery. For instance, it is important to use ICT in ways that can motivate and assist learners, while at the same time provide easy and quick solutions to their problems and concerns. These will be instrumental to ensure that learners are given the appropriate support and guidance to successfully complete their studies.

7. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE STUDENTS

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).

8. 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). Keegan(1996) pointed out that in many developing countries, the non availability of a reliable telecommunication network in remote districts, coupled with the cost of providing such technologies, as well as the low levels of penetration of the personal computer, have meant that e-learning, an inseparable component of distance education, cannot be easily implemented (Chikuya, 2007). The absence of e-learning facilities in rural areas has tended to worsen the shortages of reading materials faced by students.

9. METHODOLOGY

The study employed the descriptive survey design to gather the views of both active and inactive students in the two ZOU district centers of Murehwa and Hwedza. The study adopted the descriptive survey design because it is appropriate on areas where human perceptions are required. Due to its ability to solicit information deeply buried in the minds and attitudes of people, and its ability to reveal the true present state of affairs in a given set up, the design is seen to be the most appropriate. The instrument which was used to solicit data from the respondents was the questionnaire, which was used due to its numerous advantages in descriptive surveys, among which is the fact that they can gather lots of data from a large sample in a short space of time.

10. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population for the current study consisted of 300 active and inactive students in the two district centers of Murehwa and Hwedza. Out of these, a sample of 50 was chosen through convenience sampling. Active students were sampled as they came to visit the library and the regional centre for different services whereas the inactive students were sampled from the database of inactive students kept with the regional office's academic registry.

11. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 2. *Affordability of ODL to Students*

Variable	Number	Percentage
ODL is affordable	45	90
ODL is not affordable	5	10

The majority of students 90% both active and inactive are of the opinion that ODL is affordable and many of them as they were responding to this question gave a comparison to Convectional education. The opinions of most of these students are in line with Jane (2013)'s opinion who pointed out that although ODL is highly inclusive, it is also affordable. Many of the respondents, who argued that ODL is affordable, were highlighting the flexible payment plans at Zimbabwe Open University, such as the Salary Service Bureau facility where students are expected to fill in a stop order form, which allows a certain amount of money to be deducted for a specified period, towards their fees. This facility is very popular and students are very much happy with it. Some students pointed out that the payment plans at the Zimbabwe Open University makes ODL to be very much affordable as it gives them enough time to pay for their children's school fees. Some 30% of the respondents pointed out that the fact that they learn whiles at home do not force them to incur extra costs like on-campus students do.

Ten percent of the respondents however were of the opinion that ODL is not affordable as they cited that after paying the required amount of money, the student still has to budget for travelling from his home to regional centres for tutorials. However the same students also pointed out that the presence of distinct centres has to a great extent lowered the expenses, which are related to registration and assignment submission. These students advocated for more district centres to be opened up which will serve a cluster of villages. This opinion is in keeping with Zimbabwe Open University mission of bringing education to doorstep of the student.

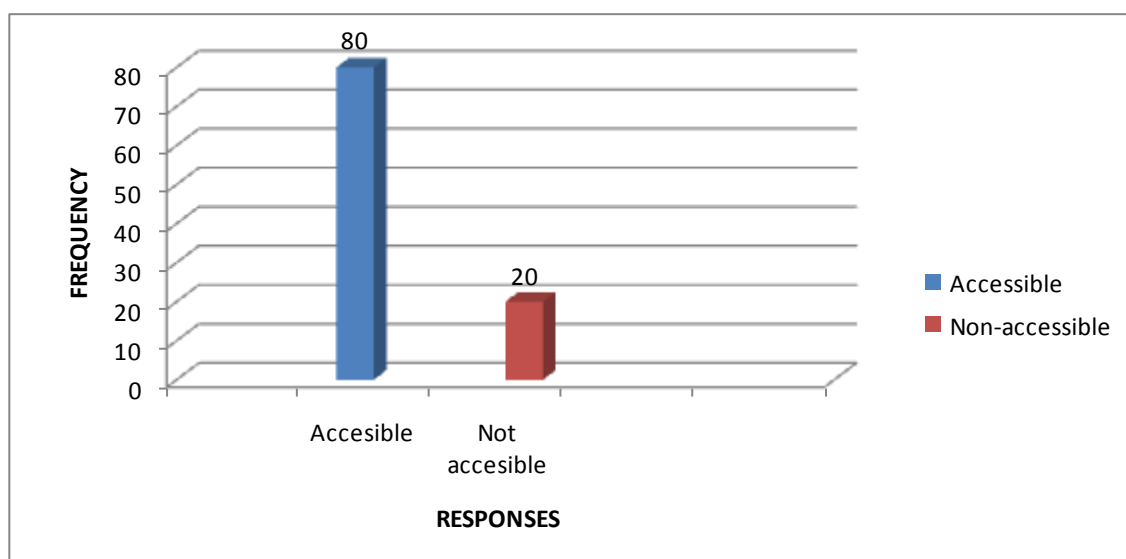


Figure 1. *Accessibility of ODL learning centres to the students*

Eighty percent of the students pointed out that the building of district centres that is that of Murehwa and Hwedza have drastically increased the accessibility of ODL. These students highlighted that they are now travelling to regional centres only for tutorials and examinations and for all other processes pertaining to their educational requirements; they simply do it at their

district centres. Anuwar (2013) is also of the same opinion that ODL is an avenue to widen access to higher education.

Twenty percent (20%) of the respondents highlighted that even though Murewa and Hwedza districts have been built their effect with regard to accessing ODL is limited because there are no information communication technology facilities at those district centres and this makes ODL not to be accessible. The argument given by those students in relation to ICT, is in keeping with Anuwar (2013)'s opinion who pointed leveraging on ICT, ODL utilizes a delivery method that allows learners to study on a part-time basis, often using an online platform and freeing them from the obligation of attending on campus classes. The respondents who argued that accessibility of ODL is still a problem highlighted that they are resorting to the use of their cell phones to communicate and also to search for information but they argued that this is not adequate, as they sometimes want to download and print the researched material. Keegan, (1996), also pointed out that most ODL institutions and students grapple with problems inherent in the digital divide, access to institutional technology is negligible compared to those of developed nations. Chikuya (2007) also echoed the same sentiments, when he pointed out that in many developing countries, the non-availability of a reliable telecommunication network in remote districts, coupled with the cost of providing such technologies as well as the low-levels of penetration of the personal computer, have meant that e-learning, an inseparable component of distance education, cannot be easily implemented.

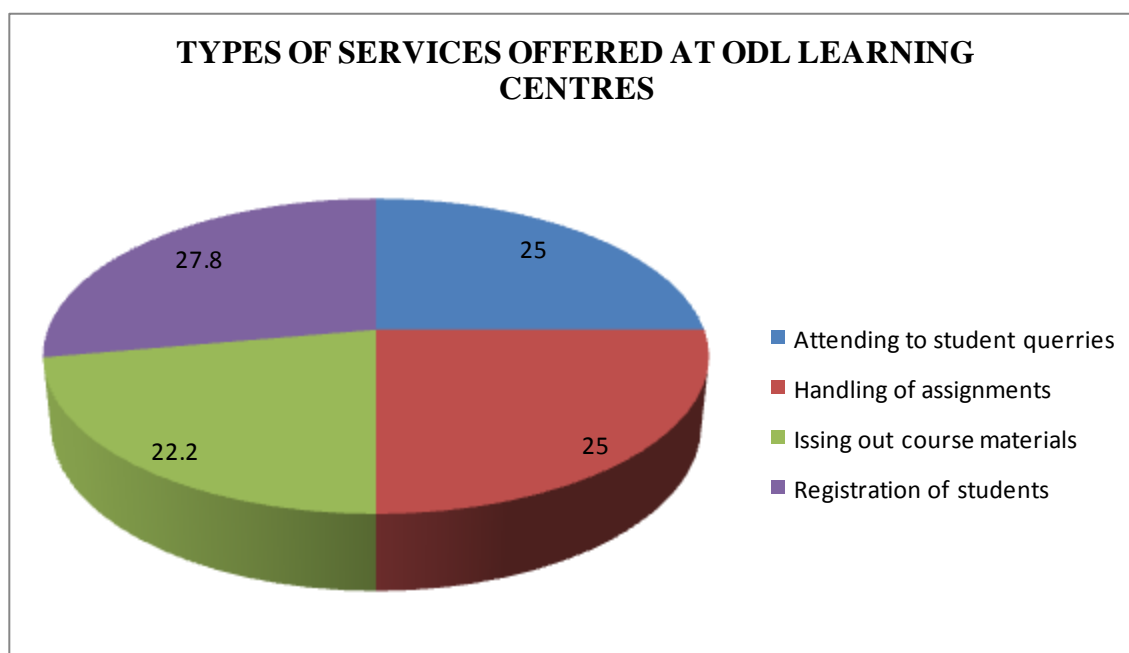


Figure 2. *Types of services offered at ODL learning centres*

Twenty –five (25%) of the respondents pointed out that learning centres serve the purpose of attending to student queries and another 25% of the respondents also highlighted that the district centres assists in handling of assignments and related issues. 27.5% of the students pointed out that district centres are there to serve the purpose of registering students as well as receipting cash payments. Lastly, 22.2% of the respondents highlighted that district centres serve the purpose of issuing out course materials. The above functions highlighted by the respondents are in tandem with the envisaged functions of the district centres, as they were set up by Zimbabwe Open University. However, the respondents seem not to realize other functions of district centres such as marketing Zimbabwe Open University programmes and the arrangement of the tutorials where the number of students has reached a critical mass of ten per course.

12. GENERAL CHALLENGES THAT AFFECT ODL LEARNER

When the respondents were asked to give the general challenges affecting ODL students at the Zimbabwe Open University the following challenges were highlighted by the respondents:

- The challenge of missing results;

- the challenge of inadequate modules in some programmes;
- Absence of ICT infrastructure in the two district centres of Murewa and Hwedza.
- Low ICT skills; and
- Some respondents prefer lectures to tutorials.

13. CONCLUSIONS

Generally, with regard to affordability and accessibility of ODL with respect to district centres in Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East region both the active and inactive students agreed that these district centres have increased access to the ODL to be affordable to its students and generally, the respondents pointed out that it is very cheap as compared convectional universities. The learning package of Zimbabwe Open University was also hailed by students as well written and is increasing access to ODL as students in remote areas can still study where library facilities are non-existent.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Based on the above conclusions, the study made the following recommendations:
- All programmes should have enough modules.
- Minimize missing results.
- More district centres should be built so as to bring education to the doorstep of the student.
- Regions should have ICT infrastructure.
- All programmes should have ICT courses, especially in the first semester.
- Employ a mixed method of teaching lecture method and tutorials.
- Tutorials dates should coincide with the pay days of most civil servants so that when they come to regions to collect their salaries they can also attend lectures hence it becomes cheaper for them in terms of travelling.

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