Effectiveness of Open, Distance and Electronic Learning on Entrepreneurial Leadership Short Courses at the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional services (ZPCS)

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Abstract

The transition from a traditional face-to-face learning mode to Open, Distance and Electronic Learning (ODeL) has become increasingly relevant in the context of Zimbabwe's educational landscape, particularly for sectors requiring specialised training such as the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services (ZPCS). The study focused on the effectiveness of the transition from blended learning to full adoption of ODeL in delivering short courses in entrepreneurial leadership to the top officials of the ZPCS. The study employed a qualitative paradigm using interviews to generate data by assessing participants' experiences, learning outcomes, and overall satisfaction with the transition phase from face-to-face delivery, then blended learning to full ODeL. Major findings were the flexibility of ODeL, the need for technological support, low effect on learning experience and low engagement levels. While ODeL increased accessibility to educational resources and scheduling convenience, the study highlights critical challenges that impede optimal learning outcomes such as inadequate infrastructure, inconsistent internet access as well as varying levels of digital literacy among participants, which collectively hinder their ability to fully engage with the course learning material. Recommendations include the need to have tailored support systems to ensure sustainable educational practices.

Keywords: Effectiveness, Open, Distance and Electronic Learning (ODeL), Entrepreneurial leadership, short courses, ZPCS

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a vital component for economic growth and sustainability, particularly in developing nations like Zimbabwe (Munyoro & Ncube, 2020). The role of entrepreneurship extends beyond mere business creation; it encompasses innovation, job creation, and the ability to adapt to changing economic landscapes (Mtengwa, 2023). In Zimbabwe, where traditional industries have faced numerous challenges due to economic instability, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset has become essential for revitalising the economy and empowering communities. The transition from traditional learning modalities to Open Distance e-Learning represents a significant evolution in higher education delivery methods (Turnbull, Chugh & Luck, 2021). As evidenced by ZOU's proactive approach during the post Covid-19 pandemic recovery phase, institutions should embrace innovative solutions that prioritise accessibility while ensuring quality education remains at the forefront.

ODeL is grounded in several educational theories that emphasise learner-centred approaches. Constructivist theories suggest that learners construct knowledge through experiences and interactions with their environment (Piaget, 1976). ODeL aligns with these theories by providing flexible learning environments where participants can engage with materials at their own pace. Additionally, the Community of Inquiry framework highlights the importance of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in online learning environments (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). These elements are crucial for fostering effective learning experiences in ODeL settings. The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted educational systems worldwide, acting as a catalyst for the rapid adoption of online learning modalities (Stracke et al., 2022). Traditional learning environments, characterised by face-to-face interactions in physical classrooms, faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic. Lockdowns and social distancing measures necessitated a shift towards remote education, compelling institutions to explore alternative delivery methods (Costa, 2022). This transition was not merely a temporary solution; it marked a significant transformation in how education is perceived and delivered. Prior to the pandemic, many educational institutions were already experimenting with online learning platforms, but these efforts were often supplementary to traditional classroom instruction. The onset of COVID-19 forced universities and colleges to quickly adopt full online learning mode. According to Dhawan (2020), this sudden shift highlighted both the potential and limitations of online education. While some students thrived in virtual environments, others struggled due to lack of access to technology or inadequate support systems (Turnbull, Chugh & Luck, 2021).

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in educational delivery methods, with many institutions embracing Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face instruction (Mwaniki et al., 2020). This transition was relevant especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated remote learning solutions across the globe. Since 2022, ZOU through the Graduate school of business (GSB) has implemented ODeL strategies to deliver its entrepreneurial courses effectively. This approach not only increases accessibility for learners but also allows for a more flexible learning environment that can cater for diverse needs. The shift from traditional face-to-face learning to Open, Distance and Electronic Learning (ODeL) has been a significant trend globally, particularly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mwaniki et al, 2020). In Zimbabwe, this transition is especially pertinent in sectors requiring specialised training (Kaputa, 2021), such as the security sector.

One of the primary concerns regarding the shift from traditional learning models to ODeL is maintaining educational quality. Research indicates that effective online learning requires careful consideration of instructional design, student engagement strategies, and assessment methods (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). ZOU has committed itself not only to technological adaptation but also to pedagogical innovation that ensures students receive an enriching educational experience. To achieve this goal, ZOU has invested in training faculty members on best practices for online teaching and learning (Kaputa, 2021. Faculty development programmes are essential for equipping educators with the skills necessary for creating engaging content and fostering meaningful interactions among students (Koch, 2009).

Research indicates that ODeL can enhance accessibility and flexibility for learners who may not be able to attend traditional classes due to geographical or time constraints (Tladi, 2018). In Zimbabwe, where access to education can be limited by various socio-economic factors, ODeL presents an opportunity to reach a broader audience. Studies have shown that participants often report higher satisfaction levels when engaged in ODeL programmes

compared to conventional methods due to the autonomy it provides (Rajabalee & Santally, 2021). However, the effectiveness of ODeL is contingent upon several factors including technological infrastructure and digital literacy among participants. A study by Mtebe (2014) highlighted that inadequate technology access significantly hampers the success of online learning initiatives in developing countries. This aligns with findings from Zimbabwean contexts where infrastructural challenges persist.

Other studies found that ODel posed barriers such as poor internet connectivity and lack of access to necessary devices that can impede learners' ability to fully engage with course materials (Munyoro et al., 2021). Furthermore, varying levels of digital literacy among participants pose additional hurdles; some may struggle with navigating online platforms or utilising digital resources effectively (Uzhenyu, 2024).

The involvement of the security sector in entreprenuership, economic development, food security, and humanitarian assistance among others is primarily a pro-active approach towards community engagement programmes (Weiss and Collins, 2018). However, the question is how to keep the military out of domestic social, economic and political issues. This question raises political, legal and policy questions on the proper role of military and civilian governance (Weiss and Collins, 2018). In the twentieth century, armed forces in the developing world adopted roles as owners and managers of economic enterprises that constitute an important source of financial and institutional self-sufficiency for the state and society for sustainable development (Dandeker, 2021). The challenge is about the constitutional policy on role of military entrepreneurship in developmental goals. This is influenced by patterns of state capacity, military professionalisation, and threat conditions

However, another perspective treats security or military entrepreneurship as being positive to the achievement or maintenance of military professionalism and that it is quite durable because it adapts to prevailing market conditions and, therefore, can weather major shifts toward democracy (Crecente, Sarabia & del Val, 2021). A dilemma arises on whether the security/military is not part and parcel of the social system. Despite the recent shift to democracy, can the military not play an important economic role as owner, manager and stakeholder in economic enterprises (Ojo, 2021). Such entrepreneurship poses a challenge to the development of democratic civil-military relations from a Eurocentric prescription and not from an Afrocentric perspective (Xu et al., 2022). Scholars have distinguished different types of security entrepreneurship, which reflect distinct historical patterns and implications. There are many different types of security entrepreneurs like industrialists determined to build national defence capabilities and compete for international prestige; nation builders, seeking to promote economic development that can foster social development and cohesion in their organisations (Okun & Arun, 2021). The challenge is to determine significant differences between these types, their origins, theory, ideology, context, paths, and political consequences (Chukwu, 2021).

Zimbabwe' Prison and Correctional Services (ZPCS) prison system has long faced significant challenges, including overcrowding, poor living conditions, and limited resources for rehabilitation and reintegration programmes (Mutisi, 2024). In addition, ZPCS also faces shortages of water, food, bedding and educational materials and prison population has risen so much that the number of inmates has gone beyond the facilities' carrying capacity (Manomano, 2021). There is also needed to capacitate prisons' health facilities to accommodate expecting inmates and ensure their smooth delivery. However, the increased availability and accessibility of information and communication technology (ICT) presents a promising opportunity to

transform the country's approach to prisoner rehabilitation and improve outcomes for incarcerated individuals and society as a whole (Mutisi, 2024).

The Portfolio Committee on Justice, Legal, and Parliamentary Affairs in Zimbabwe conducted a nationwide outreach programme of inspecting prisons in order to assess service delivery, conditions facing prisoners (inmates), challenges and come up with suggestions to members of parliament for further deliberations (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2022). The committee gathered that inmates were fed with fresh vegetables that were readily available and got their protein mainly from sugar beans and on very rare occasions meat was provided. The Committee noted that remand, medium, and maximum prisons were experiencing an inadequate supply of basic food provisions such as mealie-meal, cooking oil, sugar, and peanut butter. At Chikurubi female prison and Harare remand prison, members were appalled to learn that inmates could go for more than two months without cooking oil and sugar. Prison officials and inmates at Bindura Prison, Hurungwe Farm Prison, and Anju Farm Prison in Matebeleland North Province did not complain about food shortages as they had been producing in abundance (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2022). Concerns were raised by female inmates with children over inadequate supplies of basic food provisions for children under the age of 2 years who have special dietary needs compared to adults.

The delegation also visited Botswana and learned that the food and dietary requirements for inmates were being adequately met in prisons. The report also raised worrying issues of overcrowding and accommodation challenges in major prisons across the country, where there was a high concentration of inmates compared to prison farms (Parliament of Zimbabwe,2022). At the time of the committee visits, it was gathered that Harare remand prison with a holding capacity of 900 inmates was housing approximately 1485 inmates inclusive of 154 prohibited immigrants. At Bindura Prison, a prison cell with a holding capacity of 20 inmates, it was housing 87 inmates instead. The committee gathered that major factors that had led to overcrowding within prison institutions were the passing of custodial sentences by courts as opposed to alternative sentences, as well as remanding inmates in custody as opposed to granting bail. Officers at Chikurubi prison mentioned that there was lack of adequate and appropriate space for detained mental patients (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2022).

A study by Rupande and Ndoro (2014) on challenges faced by the ZPCS in implementing prison rehabilitation programmes at Marondera prison found that shortage of resources was a major challenge to prison rehabilitation. Quite a significant number of officers said that rehabilitation was not a priority for the organisation in contradiction to the thrust of correctional services. The study established that the institution was still experiencing problems such as food, bedding toiletries and uniforms for inmates although some civic organisations were donating soap, tissues, food and other items to inmates. The shortage of financial resources largely posed serious challenges that made it difficult for the institution, Marondera prison, to meet the rehabilitation needs of inmates in addition to meeting their nutritional, sanitary and such other basic needs (Rupande & Ndoro, 2014).

A recent study by Davira et al (2025) on the effectiveness of rehabilitation and re-integration programmes in Zimbabwe prison services in Midlands Province, revealed that prison and correctional institutions provided psycho-social support, moral guidance and spiritual support, and sports and recreation. The research indicated that correctional institutions suffer from a shortage of rehabilitation officers, a lack of proper funding, and shortage of academic books for the institution's academic section, and negative attitudes from prison officers and other members of the public.

Based on the above, this is why the ZPCS has partnered with ZOU's Graduate school of business to provide 6 months course on entrepreneurship leadership to its senior officers so that they can be innovative to come with new projects that will compliment the inadequate government resources to sustain operations at prisons with ultimate aim of going for self reliance and sustainability. This paper focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of these courses that started in 2022 with physical classroom set up, then later adoption of blended learning and now towards full ODeL.

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has taken significant steps towards fostering entrepreneurial skills among leaders in critical sectors such as security through targeted short courses. These initiatives are particularly important in a country where formal employment opportunities are limited, and many individuals rely on self-employment or small businesses to sustain their livelihoods (Munyoro & Ncube, 2020). By equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge, ZOU aims to cultivate a new generation of entrepreneurs who can contribute positively to their communities and the national economy.

In response to these global trends, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) through its Graduate school of business made a strategic decision at the beginning of 2022 to transition its course delivery method towards Open Distance e-Learning for some of its short courses that included entrepreneurial leadership with ZPCS. This approach aims not only to reach a broader audience but also to maintain high standards of educational quality amidst changing circumstances (Uzhenyu, 2024). ODeL combines various instructional strategies that leverage technology while promoting learner autonomy and flexibility (Makina, 2023).

It is against this background that the study intended to asssess the effectiveness of ODeL on entrepreneurial leadership short courses at the Zimbabwe prisons and correctional services (ZPCS) that are earmarked to promote self-reliance and augment government financial resources that are inadequate to effectively meet its operations.

Research Methodology
The study adopted the interpretivism philosophy and the qualitative paradigm since data that was collected was qualitative in nature (Gravetter and Forzano, 2018; Saunders et al, 2015). Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique based on their knowledge, relevance, or expertise concerning the research topic. The participants were the learners who were made up of top officials in the ZPCS who undertook entrepreneurial leadership short courses with ZOU between 2022 and 2024 and also the ZPCS training college administrators and academics. The ultimate sample size was based on the data saturation technique (Patten, 2017). Interviews were used to generate data in order to gain deeper insights into participants' comments (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Research ethics were observed during the entire process of planning, collection and analysis of data. This included getting informed consent of participants, confidentiality, integrity and verification of statements (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020; Porter, 2014)

Results and discussion
The following are the major study findings.

Flexibility of ODeL
Majority of the participants felt that ODeL would provide them with greater flexibility compared to traditional learning methods and was an effective mode of learning. The research findings highlight a significant shift in educational paradigms. Moreover, this flexibility can lead to increased motivation among participants, as they have more control over their learning pace. Many respondents highlighted that this self-directed approach allowed them to delve deeper into topics of interest without the constraints typically associated with fixed classroom schedules. This aspect is crucial for adult learners who often juggle multiple responsibilities and may find traditional education models challenging.

Such sentiments align with the growing body of literature that emphasises the advantages of ODeL, particularly in accommodating diverse learner schedules and commitments. For example, Machado et al (2023), found out that the asynchronous nature of ODeL enables learners to engage with content when it suits them best, which is particularly beneficial for individuals working in demanding environments like prisons and correctional facilities.

One participant, Key informant 10, a leaner said

''*ODeL is flexible and reduces learning costs such as travel, affiliating to libraries and buying textbooks. Actually, you can learn from anywhere as long as you have the correct facilities and machinery.*''

Another participant, an academic, Key informant 6 said

''*ODeL has a lot of teaching advantages. The learning material e.g. power point slides can be shared easily with students and lectures can be recorded so that even those who would have failed to attend, can still benefit*''

Most participants in the study expressed appreciation for the ability to access course materials whenever it suited them best. This aspect of ODeL is particularly beneficial for professionals who may have unpredictable work schedules or long hours, as it allows them to integrate their studies into their lives without sacrificing their professional obligations. According to Modise (2020), this adaptability can lead to increased learner satisfaction and improved educational outcomes, as students are more likely to engage with content when they can do so on their own terms. The asynchronous nature of ODeL further enhances its appeal. Learners are not bound by fixed class times; instead, they can interact with course content at times that align with their personal schedules. This feature is particularly advantageous for those employed in correctional facilities or similar environments where time constraints are prevalent. Research by Bender (2023) supports this notion, suggesting that asynchronous learning fosters deeper engagement with material since learners can reflect on content before responding or participating in discussions.

Moreover, the ability to revisit recorded lectures or supplementary materials allows students to reinforce their understanding at their own pace. This self-directed approach not only caters to different learning styles but also empowers learners by giving them control over their educational journey. As highlighted by Blignaut and du Toit-Brits (2024), such autonomy can enhance motivation and commitment among adult learners who juggle multiple roles. Thus,

the findings from this research underscore the need for educational institutions to continue embracing ODeL methodologies, particularly as they pertain to non-traditional student populations like those working within security sectors. Institutions should consider developing more robust support systems tailored specifically for these learners, including mentorship programmes and resources that facilitate effective time management strategies (Prinsloo, 2023).

Technological support

Despite the advantages related to flexibility, most of the participants reported feeling partially supported technologically and viewed their studies as less effective. This raises important concerns about the infrastructure and resources available for learners engaging in ODeL. While many participants appreciated the accessibility of online platforms, a significant portion expressed frustration over inadequate technical support when issues arose. Some reported difficulties in navigating online learning systems or accessing course materials due to poor internet connectivity or lack of training on how to use digital tools effectively.

An elderly learner, Key informant 12 said,

''*Some of us are not very computer literate given that our academic background was disturbed by the liberation struggle. This has been worsened by the lack of proper orientation on ODeL system and lack of face-to-face interaction with lecturers at times for assistance since some of us are slow learners*''

However, Key informant 9 another learner felt otherwise and had this to say,

''*I really enjoy ODeL because it is user friendly and the system can provide a total learning package if fully developed at minimal cost unlike the conventional leaning mode*''

One of the administrators, Key informant 3 said,

''*Our budget for infrastructure development from government including e-resources at this college is not adequate and this is why our senior management approved these short courses, to enable us to initiate enterprising projects at our prisons in order to raise money for self-reliance and sustenance of our operations.*''

This gap in technological support can hinder the overall learning experience, leading to feelings of frustration and disengagement among participants who may not be as tech-savvy (Prinsloo, 2023. It highlights a critical area for improvement within ODeL programmes: ensuring that all learners receive comprehensive training and ongoing support for using technology effectively throughout their studies.

Technological support is paramount in ODeL settings, where learners rely heavily on digital platforms for accessing course materials, participating in discussions, and submitting assignments. Samuel (2023) notes that effective distance education hinges on the availability of robust technological frameworks that facilitate seamless interaction between learners and educators. The reported frustration among participants regarding inadequate technical support underscores a failure to provide these essential resources. While many participants appreciated the accessibility offered by online platforms, their experiences were marred by challenges related to usability. Issues such as navigating complex online learning systems or accessing materials due to poor internet connectivity highlight a dichotomy between accessibility and

usability. According to Kiruki and Mutula (2021), accessibility refers to the ability to reach educational content, while usability pertains to how effectively learners can interact with that content. The lack of adequate training on digital tools further exacerbates this issue, leaving many learners feeling overwhelmed and disengaged (Ochionuoha, 2023).

Impact on learning experience

Majority of the participants said that the gap in technological support significantly hindered the overall learning experience. Learners who encounter difficulties seemed to develop feelings of frustration and disengagement, which adversely affected their motivation and academic performance.

A leaner, Key informant 9 said

'' *Some of us are failing to cope up with the online learning at times as we enjoy classroom set up where we can ask and discuss with lecturers. The online learning inadequacies and shortcomings on my part is forcing me to develop negative attitude and frustration at times*''

Research by Martin and Borup (2022) emphasises that learner engagement is crucial for successful outcomes in online education; thus, any barriers to effective participation must be addressed promptly. To enhance the ODeL experience for all learners, it is imperative that institutions prioritise comprehensive training programmes focused on technology use. This includes not only initial training but also ongoing support mechanisms such as help desks or peer mentoring systems that can assist students when they encounter technical issues. Furthermore, institutions should invest in improving internet connectivity options for students, particularly those in remote areas where access may be limited.

Engagement Levels

The study revealed mixed feelings about engagement levels among participants. While some appreciated the self-paced nature of ODeL, allowing them to engage deeply with course content at their own speed, others expressed concerns regarding isolation and lack of interaction with peers and instructors.

Key informant 18, a learner had this to say,

''*Some of us enjoy lectures when we physically interact with lecturers. Once we use the online learning mode, in my case, i do not feel comfortable because it becomes very remote and there is no time to get detailed explanation or individual attention. I end up trying to get assistance from fellow students through group discussions but that has not helped much because with some of them we are facing similar predicament*''

This sentiment resonates with a research by Moore (1993) that identified transactional distance as a critical factor affecting learner engagement in distance education. For those who thrived in a self-directed environment, the ability to manage their time effectively was a key benefit; they found that this autonomy fostered a deeper understanding of entrepreneurial leadership concepts. However, these positive experiences were contrasted by sentiments from other respondents who felt disconnected from their peers and instructors due to limited opportunities for real-time interaction. Participants voiced concerns about missing out on collaborative learning experiences that are often inherent in traditional classroom settings. The absence of face-to-face interactions can lead to feelings of isolation, which may negatively impact motivation and engagement levels over time (Prinsloo, 2023). Some suggested incorporating

more interactive elements into ODeL courses-such as live discussions or group projects to enhance peer-to-peer connections and foster a sense of community among learners.

The findings highlight a dichotomy in the experiences of learners engaged in Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL). On one hand, some participants appreciated the self-paced nature of ODeL, which allowed them to delve deeply into course content at their own speed. This aspect aligns with the principles of adult learning theory, particularly Knowles' andragogy, which emphasises the importance of self-directed learning and autonomy in adult education (Knowles, 1980). Learners who thrived in this environment often cited effective time management as a key benefit. They reported that this autonomy not only facilitated a deeper understanding of complex concepts such as entrepreneurial leadership but also empowered them to take ownership of their learning journey.

The absence of real-time interaction can lead to feelings of disconnection, which may hinder collaborative learning experiences that are typically present in traditional classroom settings (Mtebe, 2014). Participants voiced concerns about missing out on the dynamic exchanges that foster critical thinking and community building among learners. The desire for more interactive elements within ODeL courses was a recurring theme among participants. This aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, which posits that social interaction is fundamental to cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). By integrating collaborative activities into ODeL frameworks, educators can create opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with each other and their instructors, thereby mitigating feelings of isolation.

Moreover, research by Archambault et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of community in online learning environments. They argue that fostering a sense of belonging is crucial for enhancing student satisfaction and success in distance education contexts. Therefore, it is essential for educational institutions offering ODeL programmes to consider strategies that promote interaction and collaboration among students. In summary, while the self-paced nature of ODeL offers significant advantages for learners who thrive on autonomy and effective time management, it also presents challenges related to isolation and limited interaction. Addressing these concerns through interactive elements could enhance the overall learning experience by fostering community and collaboration among participants

Conclusion and recommendations
The use of ODeL for short courses in entrepreneurial leadership at ZPCS by senior officers (learners) is yet to be fully effective as there are some challenges such as lack of infrastructure, technical support, engagement, internet connectivity, etc. There is potential for this mode of delivery to contribute positively towards sustainable development goals at ZPCS through enhanced leadership capabilities. The study concludes that the use of ODel on entrepreneurial leadership short courses at the Zimbabwe prisons and correctional services (ZPCS) is not effective as there is urgent need to address identified challenges first in order to enhance its impact.

The study made the following recommendations:
- Conduct training workshops or online courses firts focused on essential digital skills tailored for different user groups at ZPCS namely senior officers (students), training college academics and administrators before embarking on short courses.

- Develop mentorship programmes pairing tech-savvy or computer literate individuals with those needing guidance in using online learning platforms effectively.
- Utilise discussion forums, group projects, and collaborative tools within the ODeL platform tailor made to ZPCS in order to facilitate interaction.
- Conduct regular surveys and focus groups to gather input on user experiences and challenges faced during their learning journey.
- Ensure that course materials are accessible in various formats e.g., video, audio, written notes, sharing material on WhatsApp platforms etc. to cater for different preferences.
- Improve digital infrastructure at the ZPCS training college in order to capacitate learners, administrators and academic staff.

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