

Zimbabwe Open University Faculty of Commerce Graduates 2000 – 2015 Tracer Study

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Received: 6 April 2025 | Accepted: 30 June 2025 | Published: 30 September 2025

Abstract

This study traced graduates of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) Faculty of Commerce (FACOM) from year 2000 to year 2015 to assess curriculum relevance, graduate outcomes, and labour market alignment. A total of 150 self-administered questionnaires were distributed through Regional Centres to collect data on employment status, further study intentions, programme perceptions, and skill acquisition. Findings showed that most respondents were adult learners, with a mean age of 40.2 years, and that 91.7% expressed the intention to pursue further studies, most preferring ZOU. Employment outcomes were diverse, with graduates largely absorbed in tertiary education, government and banking sectors. Respondents rated the FCL programmes as highly contributory to organisational, leadership, problem-solving and teamwork skills, but less effective in enhancing computer literacy and technical knowledge. Overall, the programmes were perceived as relevant to current jobs and the labour market, though areas such as ICT integration and industry linkages require strengthening. The study concluded that while ZOU FACOM effectively supported human capital development, curriculum adjustments and enhanced delivery mechanisms were essential to sustain competitiveness and graduate employability.

Keywords: Tracer Study, Open and Distance Learning, Graduate Employability, Curriculum Relevance

Introduction

Online and distance education is now increasingly being recognised as an effective and efficient methodology for providing education to those who formerly may have found further education inaccessible for various reasons. And as with all education systems, its primary goal is to enable the society to have a command of knowledge, skills and values for achieving the country's vision of attaining the status of fully developed nation in terms of economic development, social justice and spiritual, moral and ethical strength, towards creating a society that is united, democratic, liberal and dynamic (Abu Bakar et al. 2009).

There is a need for countries to create closer synergies between the needs and purposes of their education training systems, the local and regional labour markets, and their national economies to achieve this. This then calls for routine critical assessments of national education systems in terms of curriculum content, teaching and learning processes, skills acquisition and expertise of educational professionals. Thus, the ODL provider should know the fortunes of their

graduates to make a complete assessment of how the educational process has impacted their graduates. Tracer study is one such means of maintaining curriculum relevance and of providing targeted benefits to graduates to enhance the marketability of ODL.

In that regard, the tracer study was designed to provide relevant information to the faculty to assist it to make informed decisions and fine-tune its strategies and programmes in view of meeting the country's high level and skilled human resources needs in industry, commerce, agriculture and the public sector.

This study was conducted to trace the Faculty of Commerce graduates of the Zimbabwe Open University from year 2000 to year 2015 as to their employment; to determine the factors that contributed to securing employment; to assess the degree to which the curriculum prepared them in the performance of their job; to get feedback from the graduates to modify and upgrade the educational curriculum and determine other concerns that should be addressed by the Faculty of Commerce so that its graduates would be of greater service and relevance to the country.

Research Methodology

The study was carried out among persons graduating with qualifications from the faculty of Commerce during the period between 2000 and 2015. A total of 150 self-administered questionnaires were distributed through the Regional Centres to collect relevant information about the graduates' career outcomes.

Results and Discussion

Gender and age of the respondents

The demographic analysis of the ZOU FACOM tracer study reveals a significant majority of male respondents (58.3%) compared to female respondents (41.7%) as shown in Figure 1.

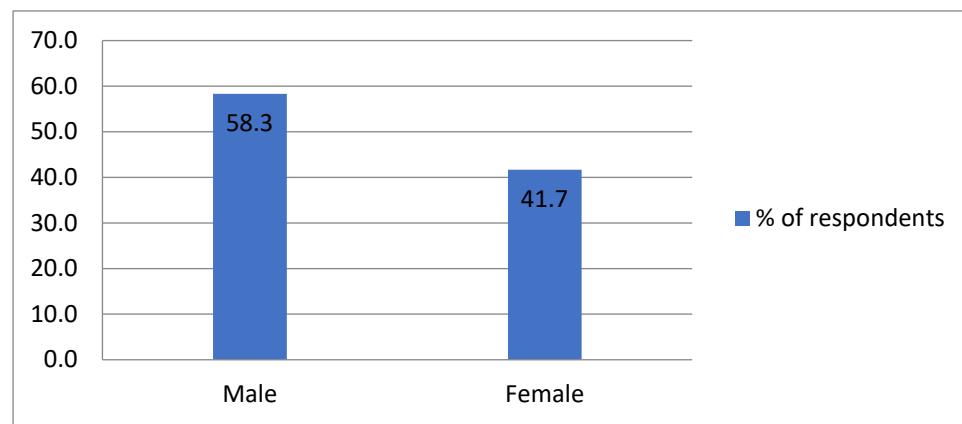


Figure 1: Percentage of the respondents by gender

The mean age of the respondents was 40.2 years, with a minimum age of 28 years and the maximum age of 55 years. 83.3 percent of the respondents were within the 30 to 50 years age group while 8.3 percent were aged 30 years and below (Figure 2). This result shows that ZOU primarily serves adult learners. This demographic profile is a critical factor in understanding the unique needs and motivations of ZOU's student body. Adult learners often balance

educational pursuits with work and family responsibilities, making flexible learning modalities like ODL particularly appealing. This finding aligns with global trends in lifelong learning, where individuals seek to upskill or reskill later in their careers to remain competitive in a dynamic job market. The implication for ZOU is the continued need to tailor its programmes and support services to cater to the specific demands of this mature student population, including flexible scheduling, relevant curriculum content and robust online support systems. Understanding the motivations and challenges of this demographic is key to optimising programme design and delivery for sustained engagement and success.

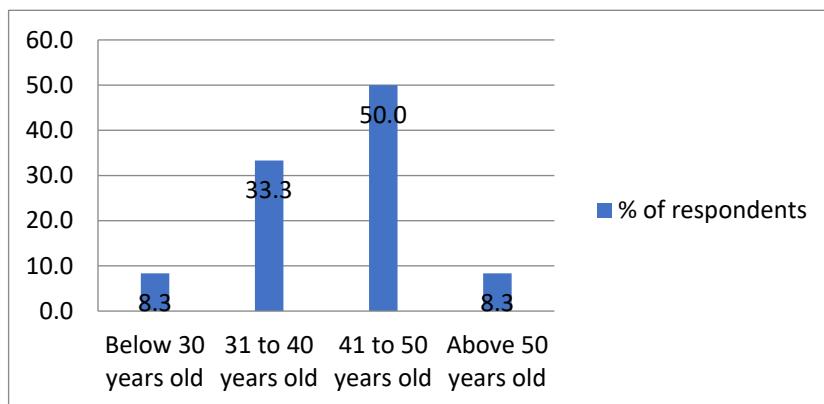


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents by age

Distribution of respondents by area of specialisation

The distribution of traced graduates across various specialisations within the Faculty of Commerce (Figure 3) reveals interesting patterns. MBA and BCom Human Resources Management graduates each constitute a significant 33.3% of the respondents, indicating these programmes are either highly popular or have many alumni. BCom Marketing and BCom Accounting graduates follow with 16.7% and 8.3% respectively, while BCom Banking and Finance graduates make up the remainder. This disaggregation provides a snapshot of the faculty's programme strengths and areas of focus during the study period.

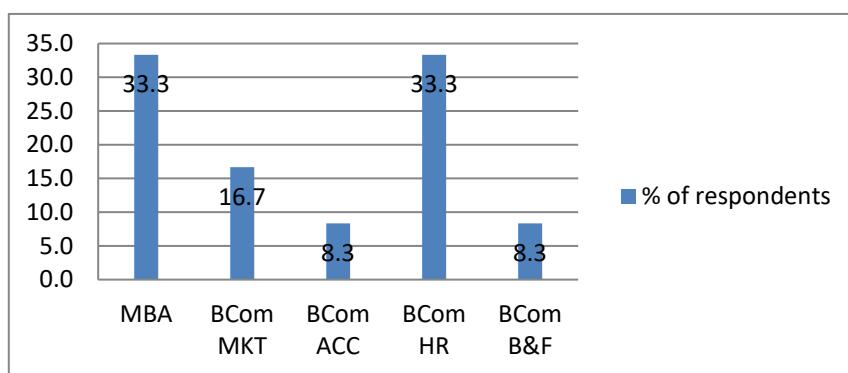


Figure 3: Percentage response by area of specialisation

The high representation of MBA and Human Resources Management graduates suggests a strong demand for advanced management and human capital development skills in the market, or perhaps a strategic emphasis by ZOU on these areas. The gender disaggregation by area of specialisation, as presented in Figure 4, offers further avenues for analysis. For instance,

understanding why certain specialisations might attract a higher proportion of one gender over another could inform targeted recruitment strategies and curriculum development to promote diversity and inclusion within these fields. This data is crucial for ZOU to assess whether its programme offerings align with current and future market demands and to identify areas where new programmes or revisions might be necessary to cater to evolving industry needs and student interests. It also provides a basis for evaluating the impact of these programmes on the career trajectories of graduates in specific sectors (TVET-Vietnam, 2021)

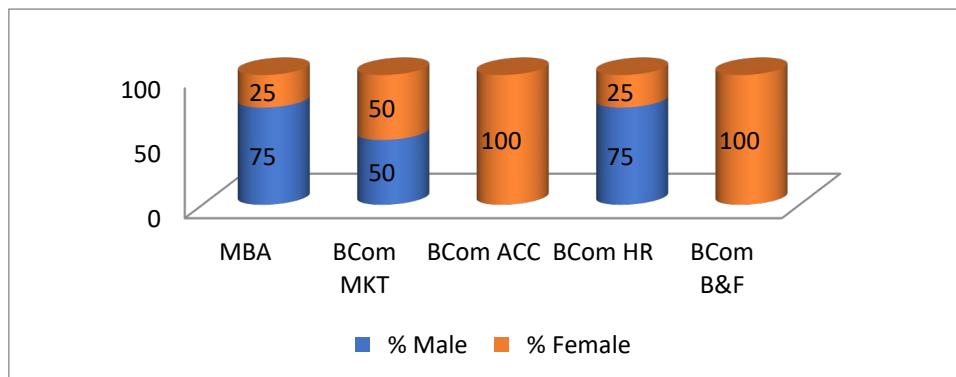


Figure 4: Percentage gender by area of specialisation

Current Studies

The study revealed that 33.3% of the respondents (Figure 5) were actively pursuing further studies, with a notable 75% of these opting for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and the remaining 25% utilising the Block Release mode (Figure 6). This finding strongly reinforced the effectiveness and appeal of ODL as a flexible and accessible mode of education for ZOU graduates, many of whom are adult learners balancing various commitments. The fact that 25% of those currently studying were doing so with international universities through ODL further underscores the global reach and acceptance of distance learning and potentially highlights ZOU's role in preparing graduates for internationally recognised qualifications.

A significant 75% were pursuing master's degrees, while 25% were enrolled in Doctorate programmes of those engaged in further studies. This indicates a strong drive among ZOU FACOM graduates for advanced academic qualifications, suggesting a commitment to continuous professional development and specialisation. This trend is beneficial for both the graduates, who enhance their career prospects, and for the broader economy, which benefits from a more highly skilled workforce. For ZOU, this data can inform the development and expansion of its postgraduate offerings, ensuring they align with the aspirations and needs of its alumni. It also presents an opportunity to strengthen collaborations with international institutions to facilitate seamless progression for graduates seeking global academic exposure (Guadra, et al., 2019).

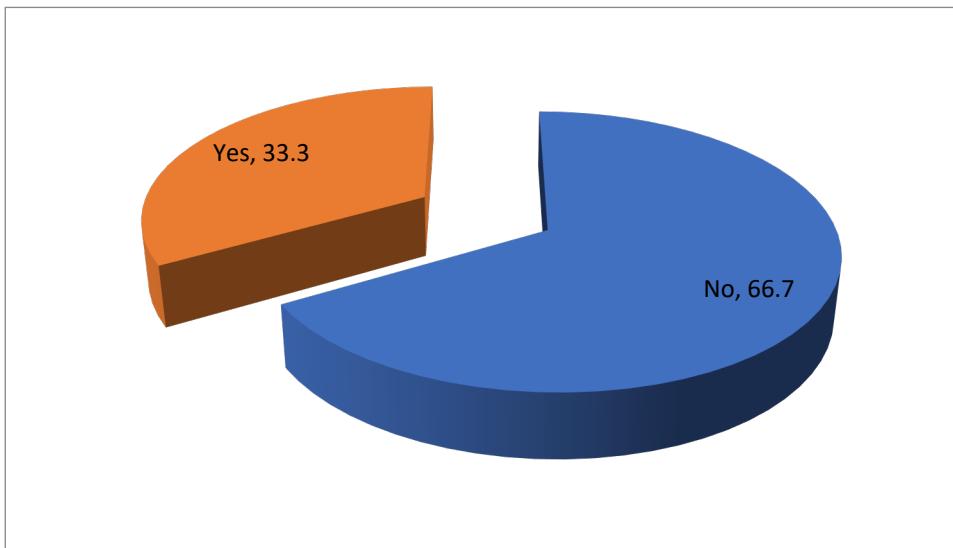


Figure 5: Percentage of respondents currently pursuing studies

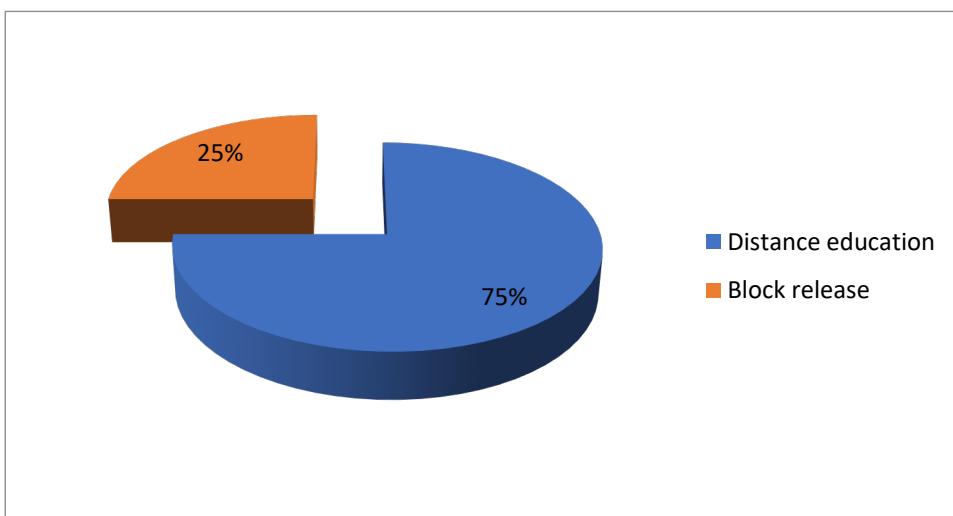


Figure 6: Percentage respondents by mode of studying

Intention for further study

A striking 91.7% of the respondents (Figure 7) expressed a desire to pursue further studies, with the primary impediment identified as a lack of funding. This overwhelming inclination towards continued education is a powerful testament to the value ZOU FACOM graduates place on lifelong learning and professional advancement. It also highlights a critical barrier that, if addressed, could significantly boost postgraduate enrolment and human capital development within Zimbabwe. The fact that 90.9% of those intending to further their studies (Figure 8) still consider ZOU for their advanced education speaks volumes about the positive experiences graduates had with the university and its ODL mode of delivery. This strong loyalty is an asset for ZOU, indicating a high level of satisfaction and trust in its educational offerings.

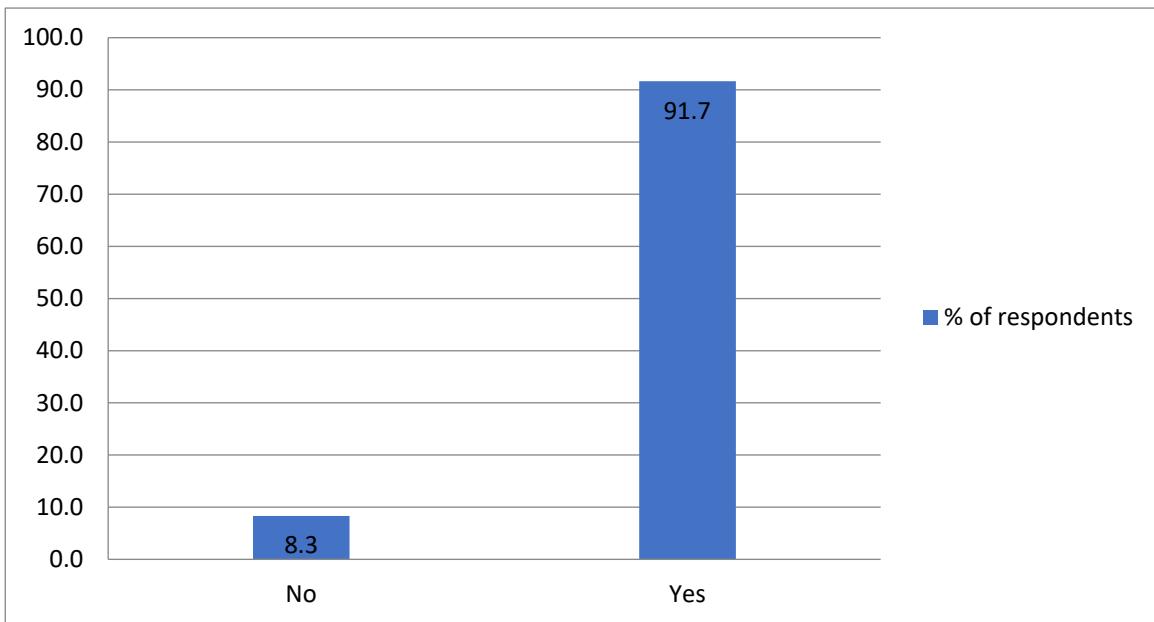


Figure 7: Percentage respondents with intention to further studies

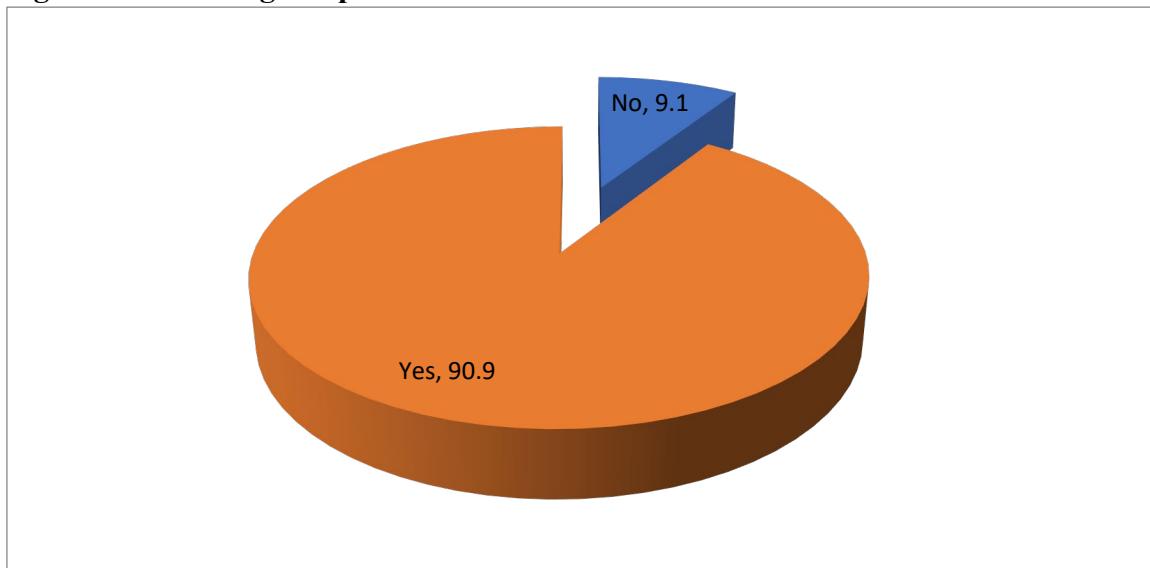


Figure 8: Percentage respondents who still consider studying with ZOU

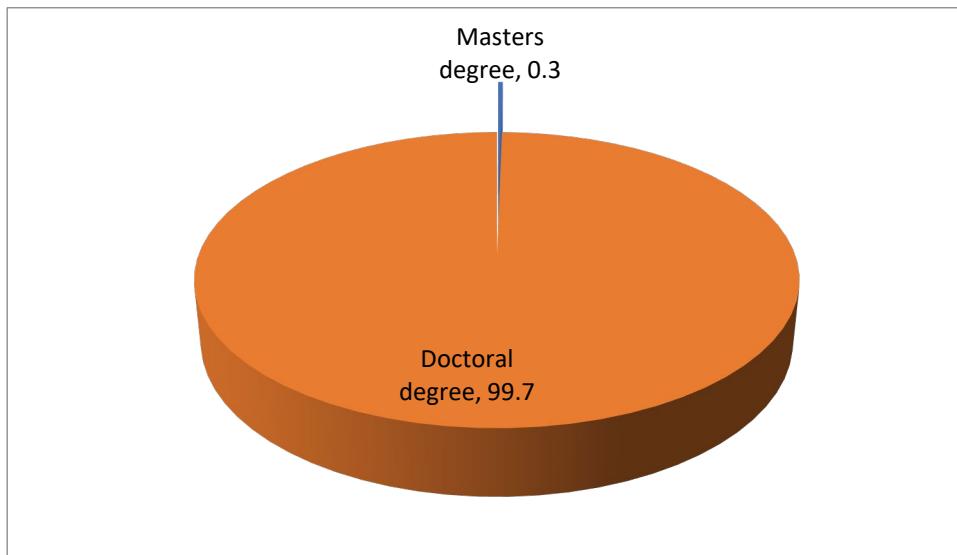


Figure 9: Percentage respondents by level of planned further studies

The preference for doctoral studies among 99.7% of those desiring further education, with only 0.3% opting for masters programmes (Figure 9), is a particularly noteworthy finding. This strong aspiration for the highest academic qualification suggests a deep commitment to specialisation, research and leadership roles among ZOU FACOM graduates. It implies that graduates perceive doctoral degrees as essential for achieving their long-term career goals and making significant contributions to their fields. For ZOU, this presents a clear mandate to strengthen and expand its doctoral programmes, ensuring they are robust, relevant and adequately supported to meet this high demand. Addressing the funding constraint through scholarships, grants, or flexible payment schemes could unlock a significant pool of highly motivated prospective doctoral candidates, further solidifying ZOU's role in producing high-level professionals and researchers (Kartika, 2019)).

Distribution of Graduates by Employer

The employment distribution of ZOU FACOM graduates, as shown in Figure 10, reveals a significant concentration in tertiary educational institutions (over 50%), followed by government institutions (16.7%), banking (8.3%), parastatals (8.3%) and self-employment (8.3%). This pattern underscores the critical role ZOU plays in supplying qualified personnel to the education sector, particularly in higher education. The high proportion of graduates employed as lecturers (27.3%) within government universities further solidifies this observation, suggesting a strong academic pipeline fostered by ZOU's programmes. This is a positive indicator of the quality and relevance of ZOU's curriculum in preparing graduates for academic and public service roles.

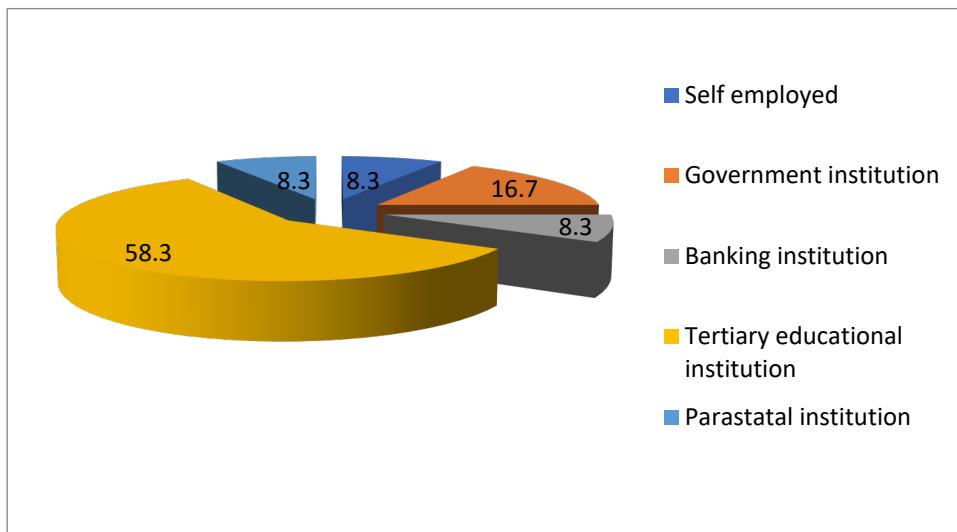


Figure 10: Percentage employment status by sector of employment

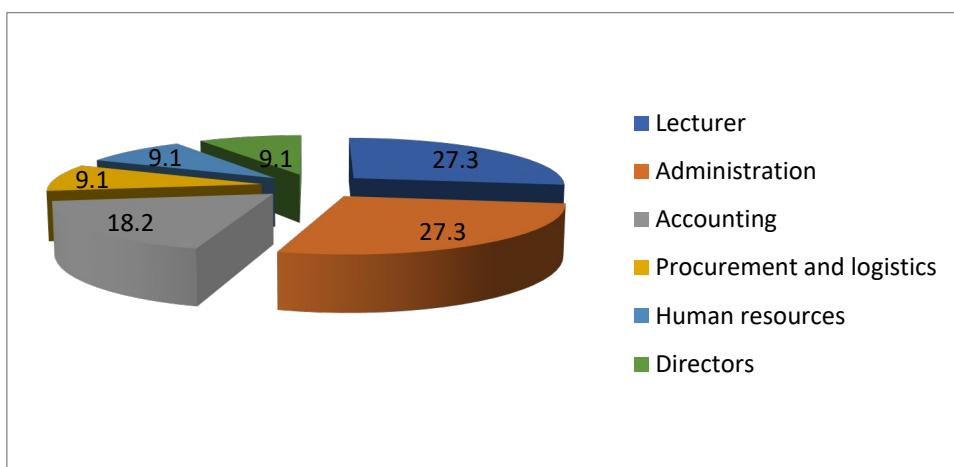


Figure 11: Percentage employment status by profession

The diversity of professional roles (Figure 11), including administration (27.3%), accounting (18.2%), procurement and logistics (9.1%), human resources management (9.1%), and directors (remainder), demonstrates the versatility of the FCL programmes. This broad spectrum of employment sectors and roles indicates that ZOU graduates are equipped with a wide range of transferable skills applicable across various industries. The presence of graduates in self-employment also highlights the potential for entrepreneurial development within the FCL programmes, contributing to economic growth and job creation. For ZOU, this data can inform strategic partnerships with key employers and sectors, ensuring that curriculum development remains aligned with industry needs and employment opportunities. It also provides valuable insights for career counselling and placement services, guiding current students towards promising career paths (OIT/Cinterfor, 2016)

ZOU FACOM Programmes Contribution to Various Skills

The assessment of ZOU FACOM programmes' contribution to various job-related skills reveals a strong positive perception among graduates. Skills such as organisational, problem-solving, leadership, independent work, teamwork, creativity, time management, risk-taking and communication were consistently rated as 'high' to 'very high'. This is a significant affirmation

of the curriculum's effectiveness in developing crucial soft skills that are highly valued in today's dynamic professional landscape. The high ratings for these transversal skills suggest that ZOU's pedagogical approaches, likely emphasising critical thinking, collaboration and practical application, are successful in fostering well-rounded professionals. For instance, the 75% 'very high' rating for leadership skills (Figure 14) indicates that graduates feel adequately prepared to take on managerial and leadership roles, a key outcome for a Faculty of Commerce.

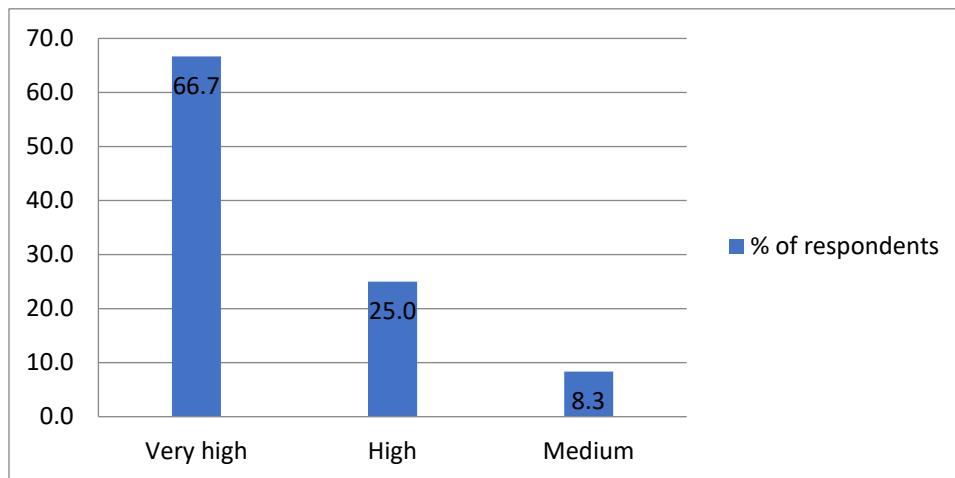


Figure 12: Rating of contribution to organisational skills

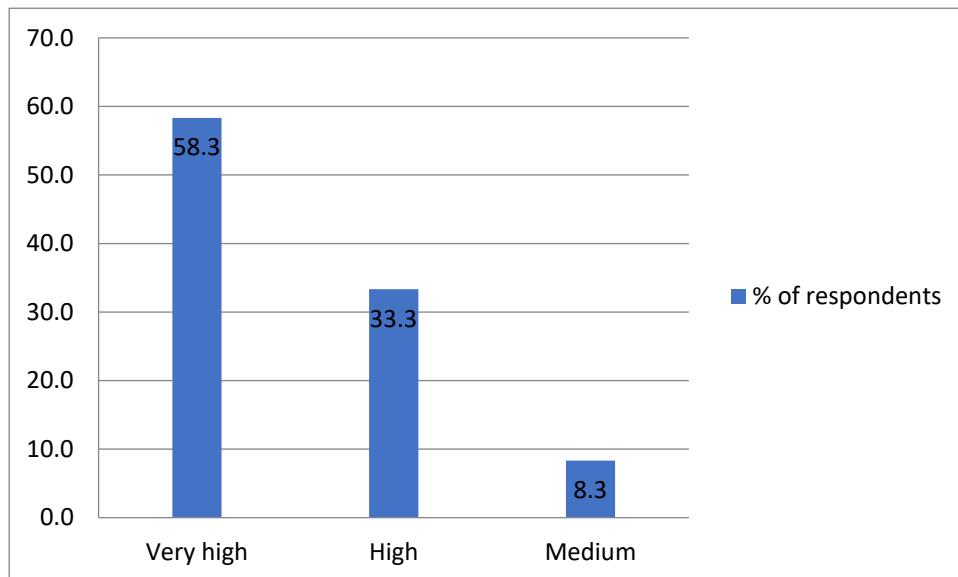


Figure 13: Rating of contribution to problem solving skills

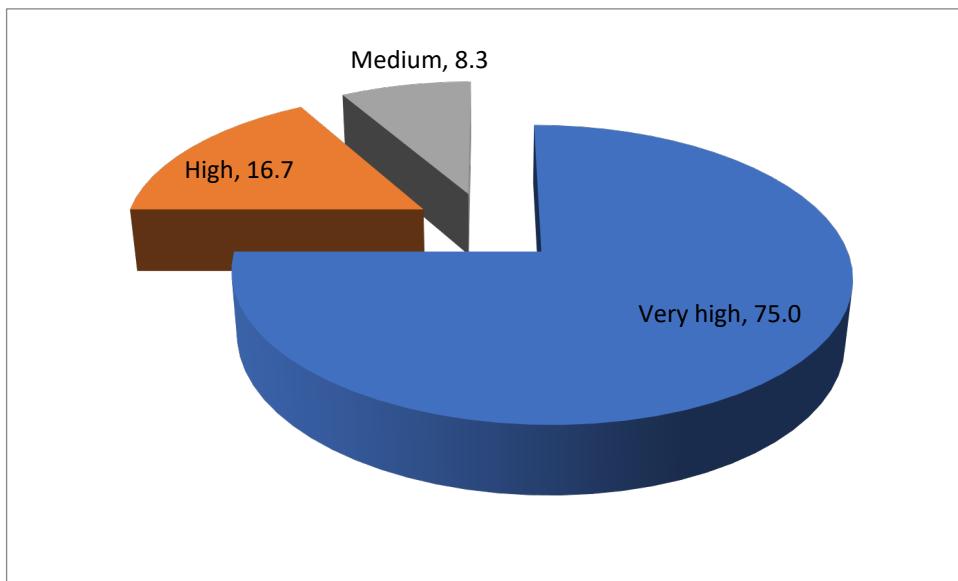


Figure 14: Percentage rating of contribution to leadership skills

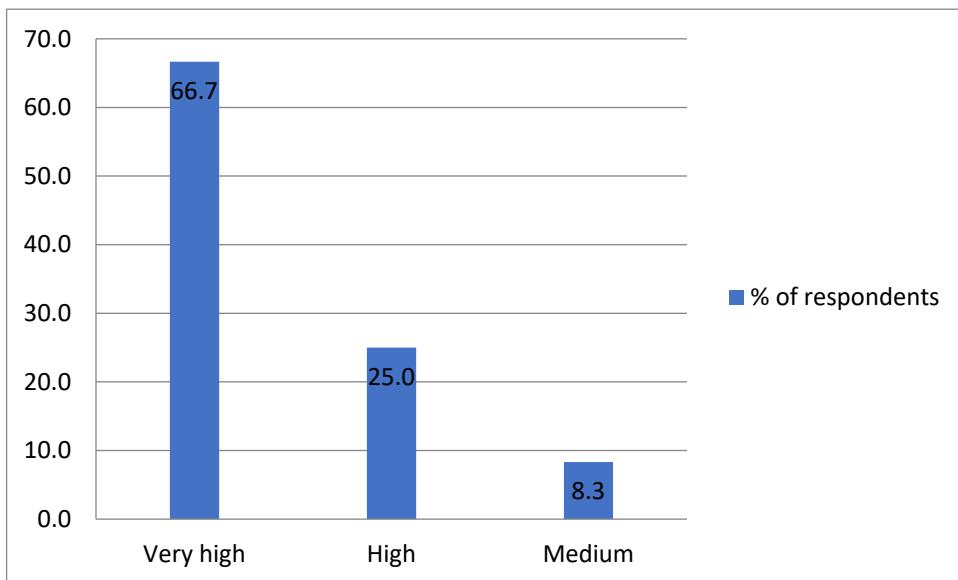


Figure 15: Rating of contribution to working independently skills

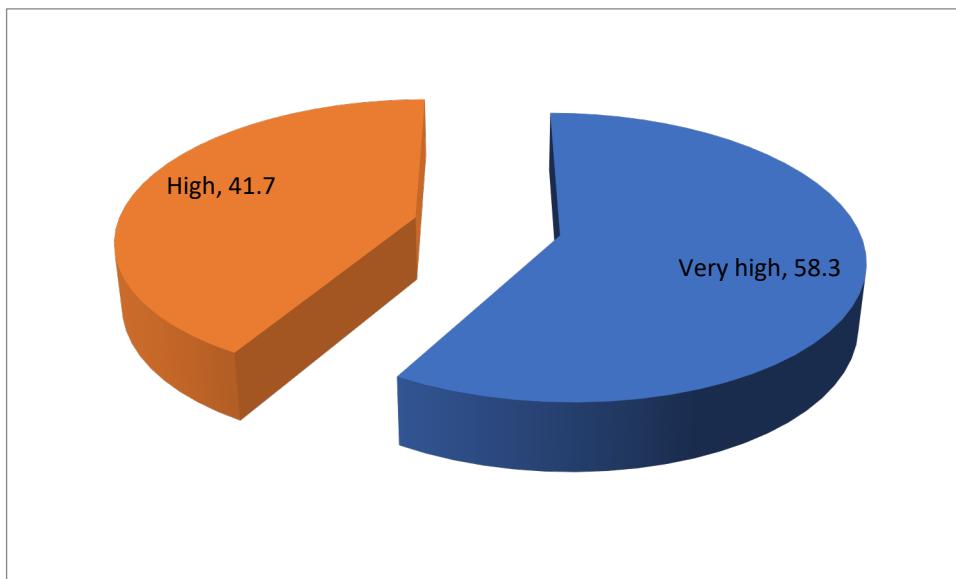


Figure 16: Percentage rating of contribution to teamwork skills

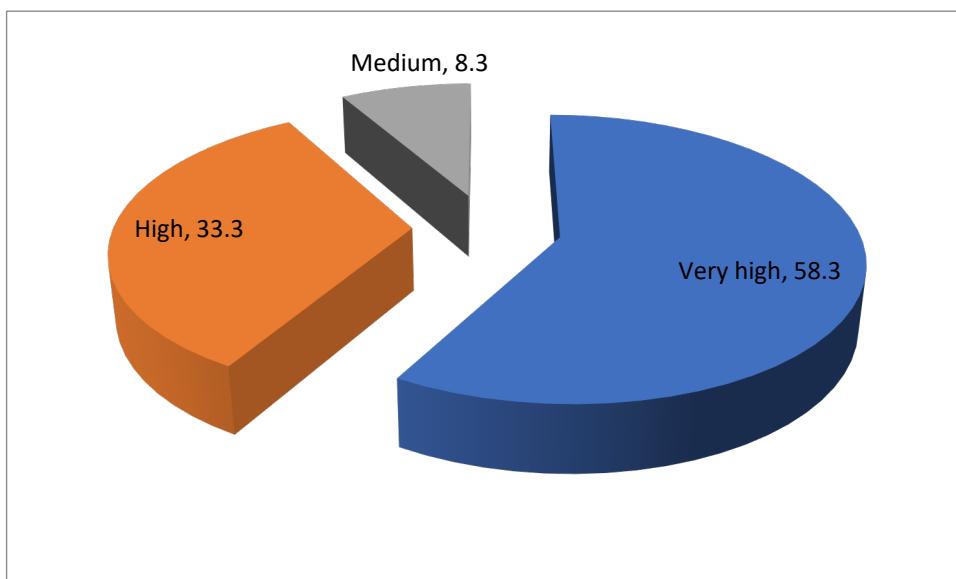


Figure 17: Percentage rating of contribution to creativity skills

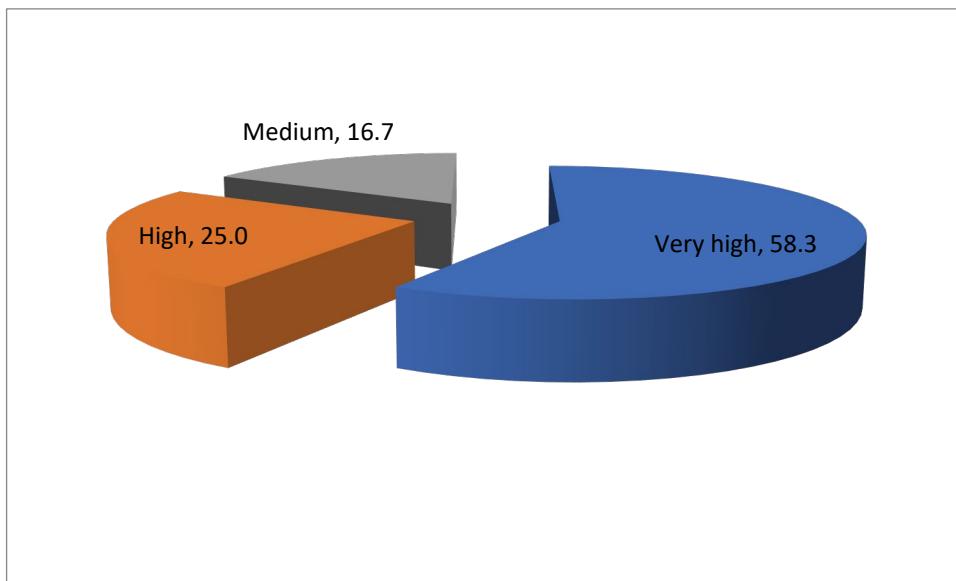


Figure 18: Percentage rating of contribution to time management skills

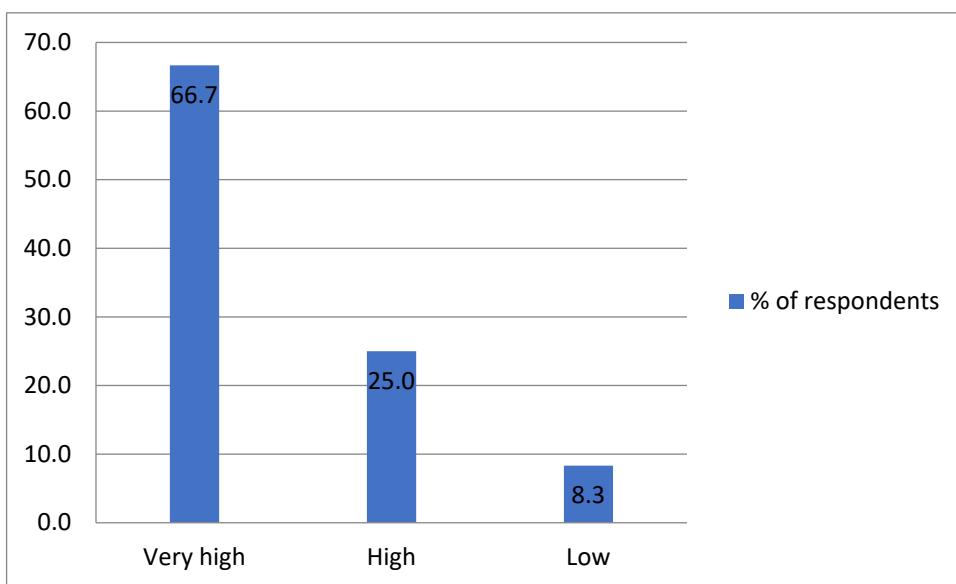


Figure 19: Rating of contribution to risk taking skills

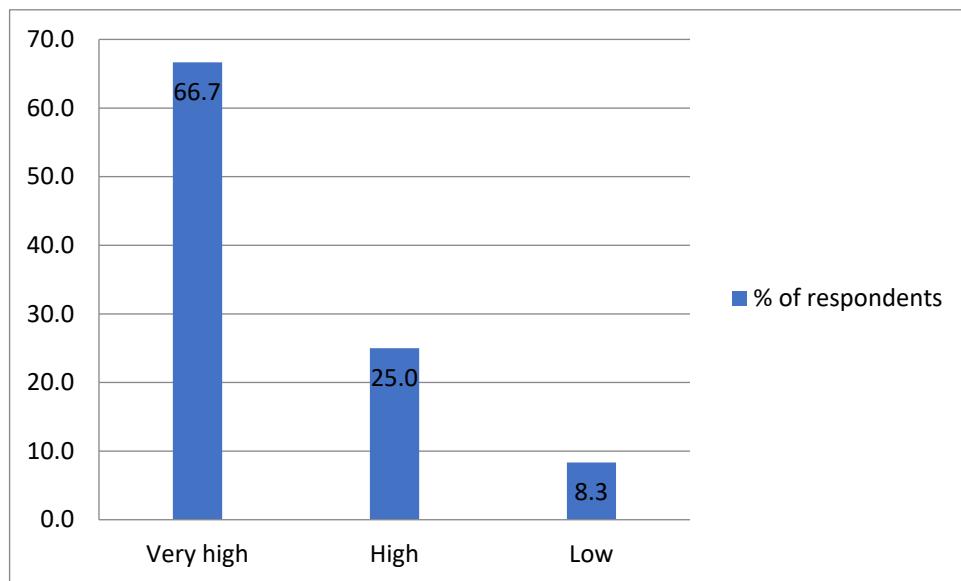


Figure 20: Rating of contribution to communication skills

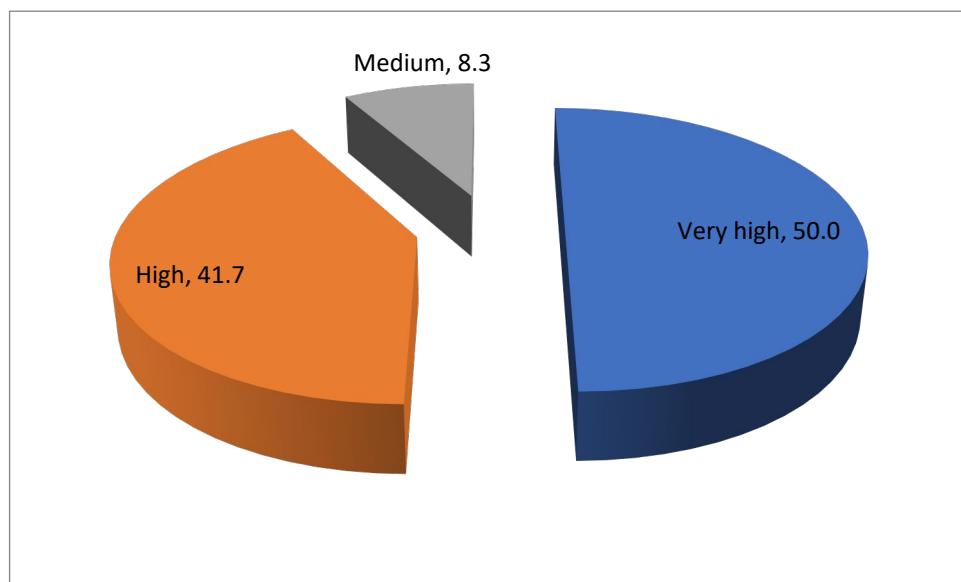


Figure 21: Percentage rating of contribution to decision making skills

However, a critical area for improvement emerged in the assessment of computer skills and technical knowledge. A substantial 41.7% rated computer skills as 'medium' and 8.3% as 'low' (Figure 22), while technical knowledge also received lower ratings (Figure 23). This disparity is a significant concern, as proficiency in digital literacy and technical skills is increasingly non-negotiable across all sectors. The rapid pace of technological advancement necessitates that graduates are not only adept at using current software and tools but also possess the foundational technical knowledge to adapt to new technologies. This finding suggests a potential disconnect between the curriculum and the evolving demands of the modern workforce. Addressing this gap is paramount for ZOU to ensure its graduates remain competitive and relevant in a globalised, technology-driven economy. It implies a need for a comprehensive review of course content, potentially integrating more practical, hands-on training in contemporary digital tools and technical applications relevant to commerce and law professions (Millington, n.d).

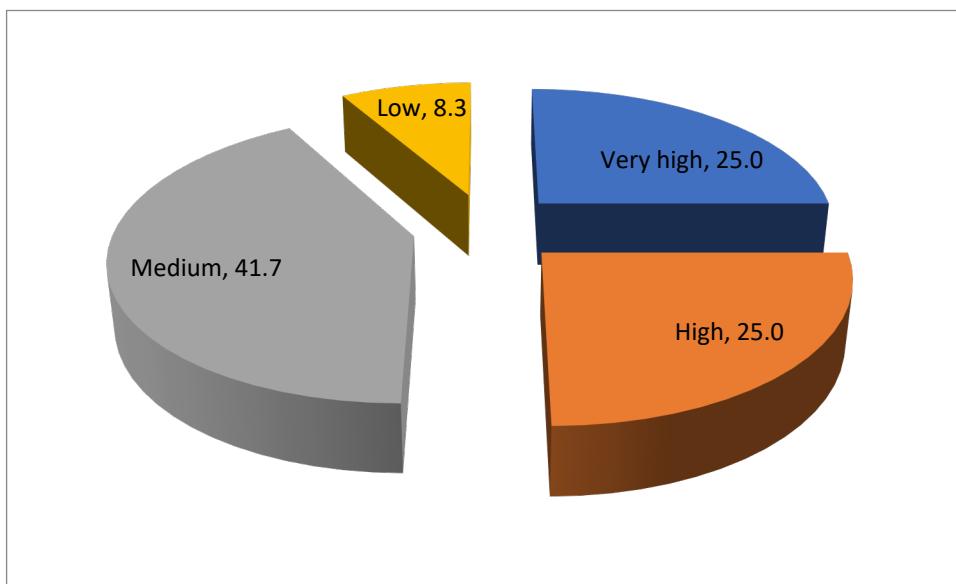


Figure 22: Percentage rating of contribution to computer skills

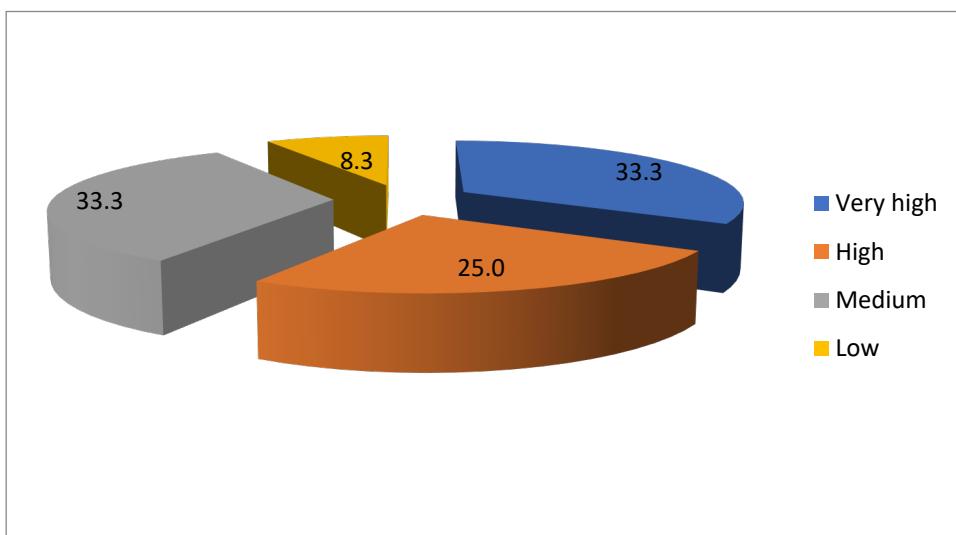


Figure 23: Percentage rating to technical knowledge

Assessment of the Various Features of the ZOU ODL System

The overall assessment of the ZOU ODL system's features by graduates was largely positive, with components such as the range of modules, quality of modules, student workload and industry linkages generally rated as average to above average. This positive feedback underscores the effectiveness of ZOU's distance learning framework in delivering quality education. The fact that 50% of respondents rated the quality of modules as 'above average' (Figure 25) and another 50% as 'average' suggests a consistent and satisfactory learning experience. Similarly, the positive assessment of industry linkages (Figure 31) indicates that ZOU's programmes are perceived to relate to the professional world, which is crucial for graduate employability.

However, some areas emerged as needing improvement. A notable 25% of respondents rated the time allocated for student tutorials as 'below average' (Figure 27), indicating a potential need for increased or more flexible tutorial support. This is particularly important in an ODL environment where direct interaction with instructors can be limited. Similarly, concerns were raised regarding research capacity and the cost of programmes, with 8.3% rating these as 'below average' (Figures 29 and 30). While the majority still found these aspects satisfactory, these lower ratings highlight specific pain points that, if addressed, could significantly enhance the overall student experience and programme accessibility. Improving research capacity could involve more robust training, access to resources and mentorship, while addressing cost concerns might require exploring various financial aid options or more flexible payment structures. These insights are vital for ZOU to continuously refine its ODL delivery model and ensure it remains competitive and responsive to student needs (Fahmy, 2025).

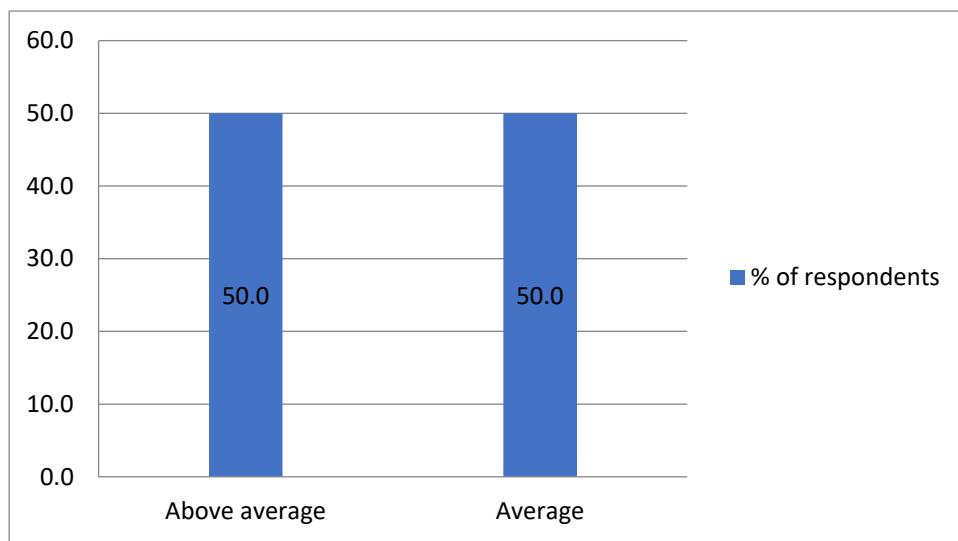


Figure 24: Assessment of the range of modules offered

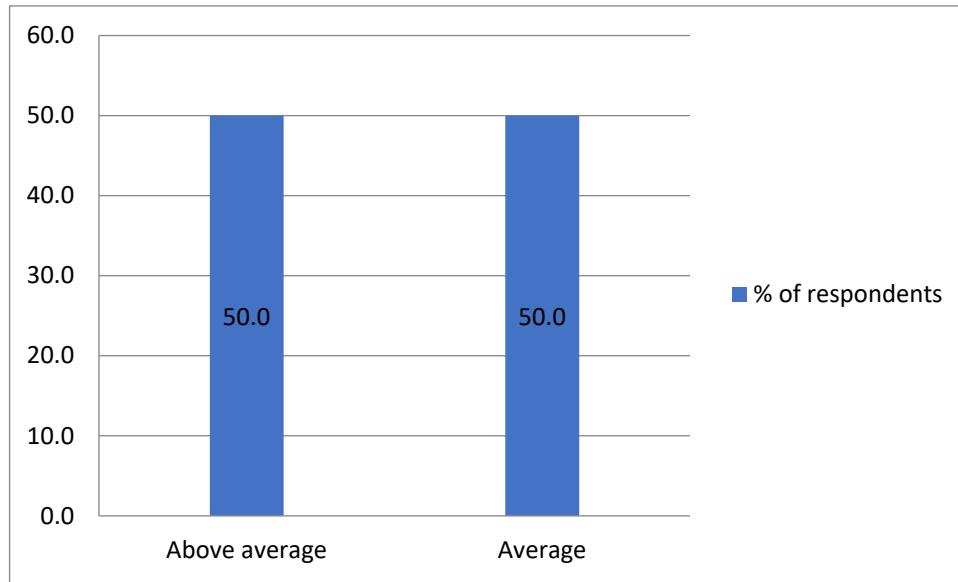


Figure 25: Assessment of the quality of modules

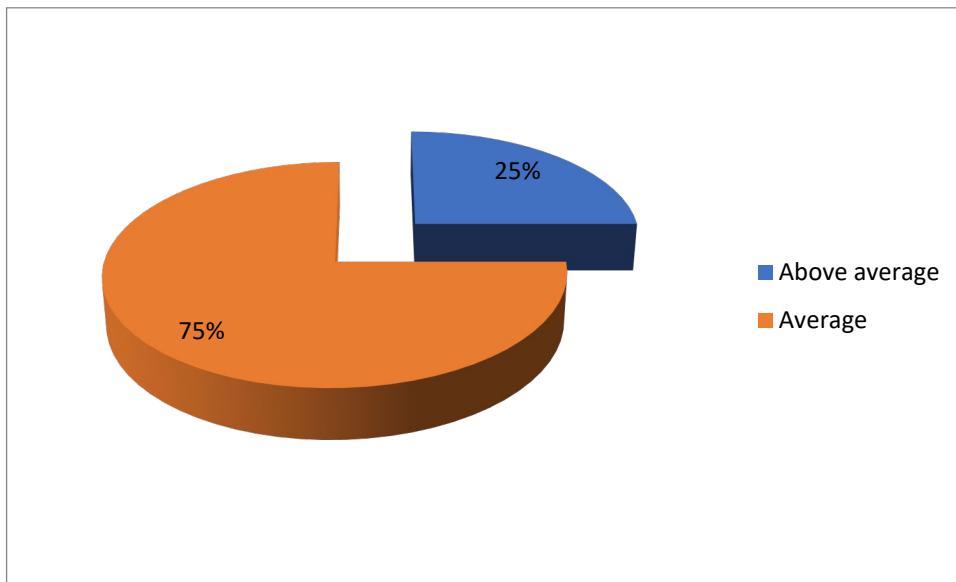


Figure 26: Assessment of the student workload

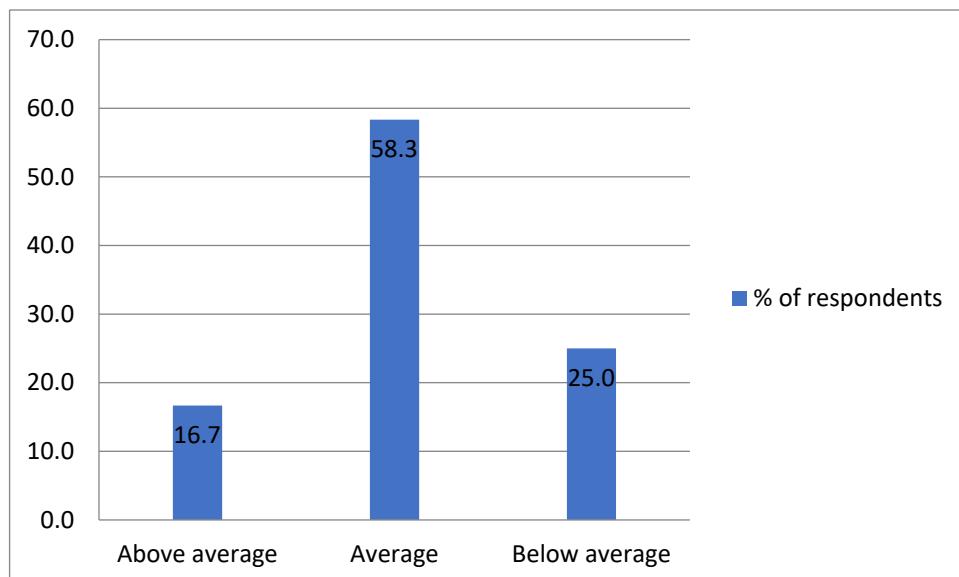


Figure 27: Assessment of time for tutorials

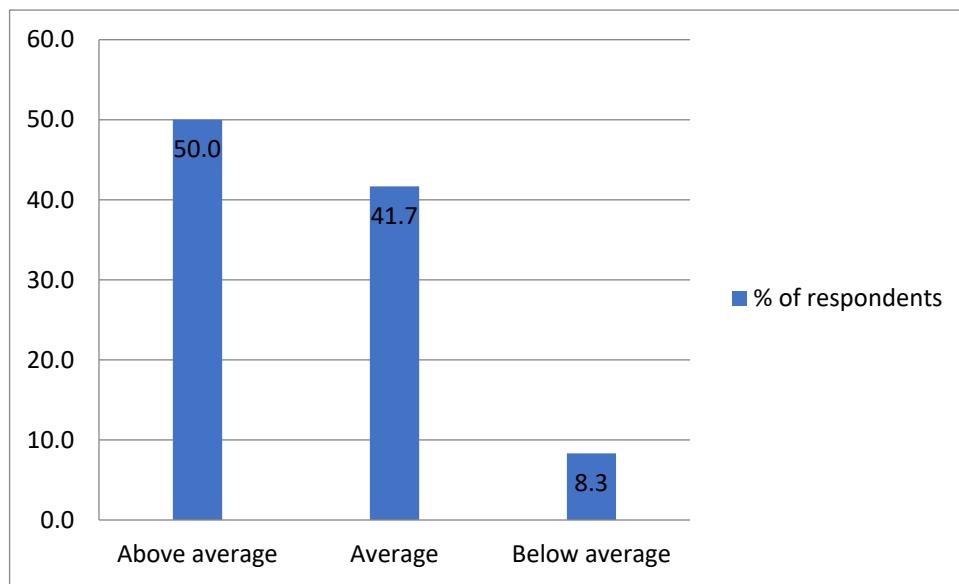


Figure 28: Assessment of the quality of tutors

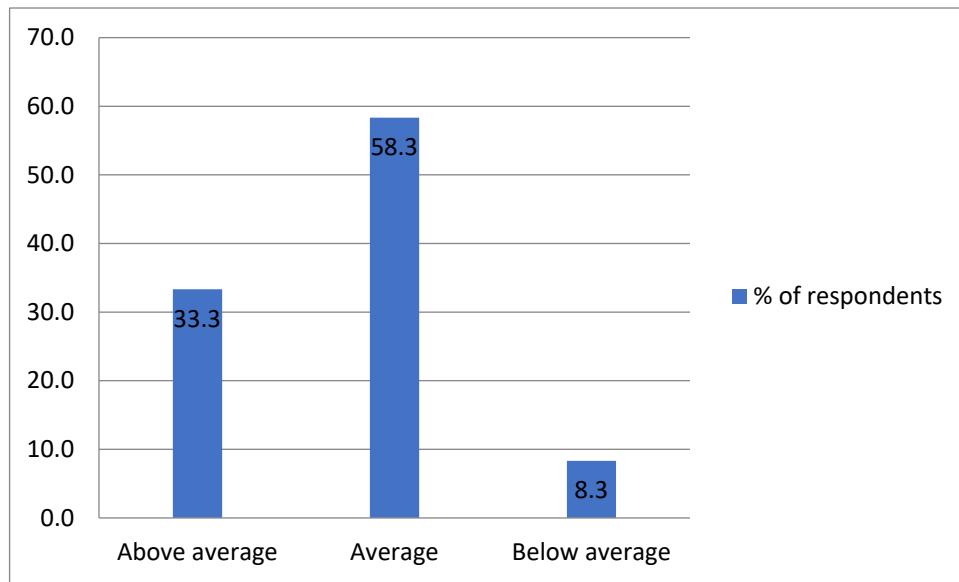


Figure 29: Assessment of research capacity

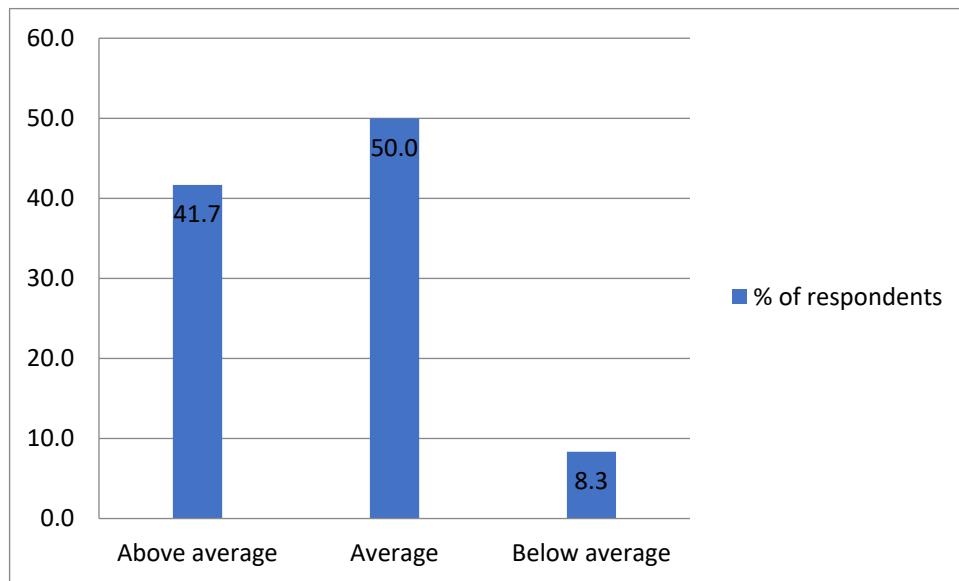


Figure 30: Assessment of cost of studying

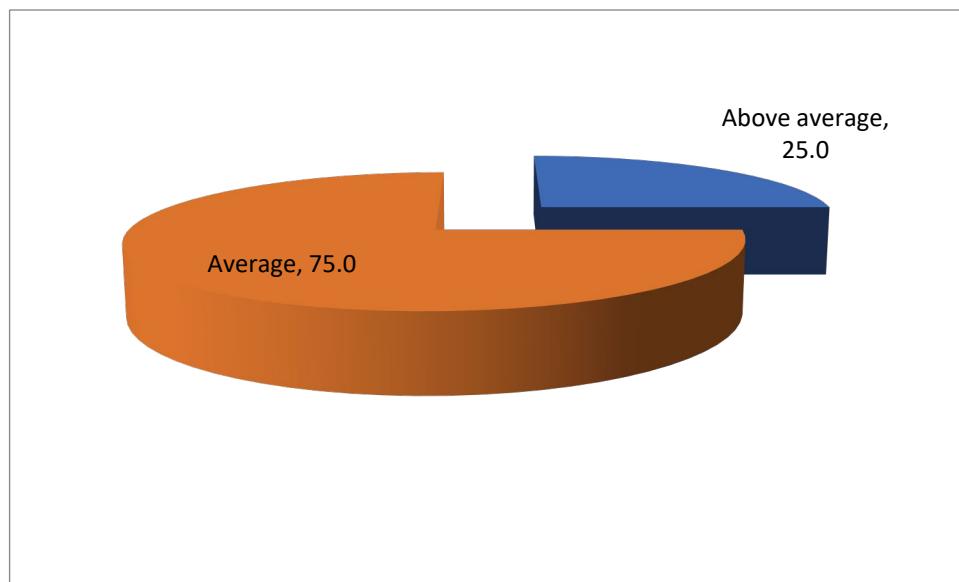


Figure 31: Assessment of industry linkages

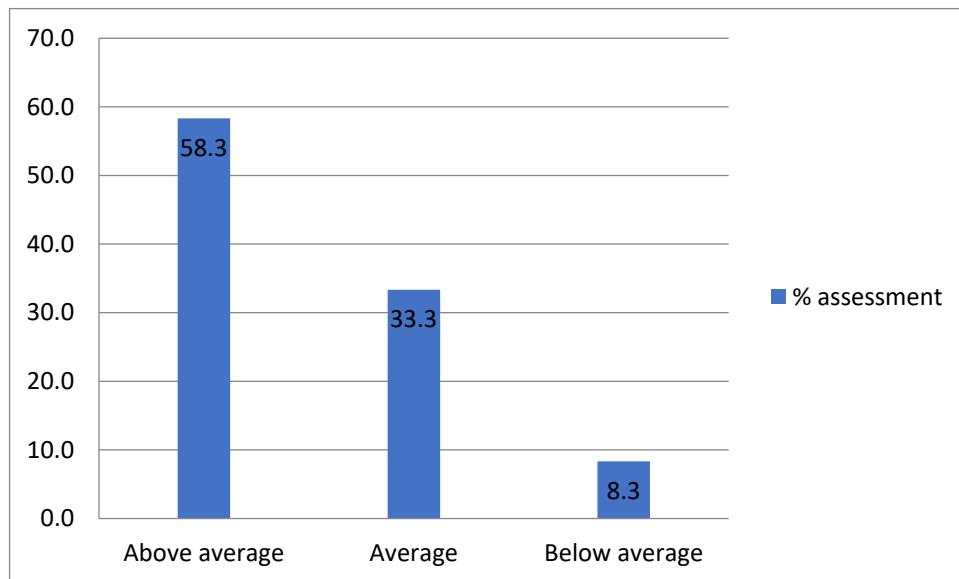


Figure 32: Assessment of methods of assessment

Relevance of ZOU FACOM Programmes to current job and labour market

The tracer study unequivocally demonstrates the high perceived relevance of ZOU FACOM programmes to the graduates' current jobs and the broader labour market. A remarkable 75% of traced graduates indicated that the programmes were 'very much relevant' to their current jobs (Figure 33), with the remaining 25% stating they were 'much relevant'. This near-unanimous affirmation of relevance is a powerful indicator of the curriculum's alignment with professional practice and industry needs. It suggests that the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through ZOU FACOM programmes are directly applicable and highly valued in the workplace, contributing significantly to graduates' job performance and career satisfaction.

Furthermore, the assessment of labour market relevance also yielded positive results, with 66.7% of respondents rating the programmes as 'above average' and 33.3% as 'average' (Figure 34). This indicates that graduates perceive their ZOU FACOM qualifications as highly valuable in the broader employment landscape, enhancing their competitiveness and opening opportunities. This strong perceived relevance is a cornerstone of any successful educational institution, as it directly impacts graduate employability and the institution's reputation. It also suggests that ZOU has been effective in designing and delivering programmes that meet the evolving demands of the Zimbabwean economy. Maintaining and continuously enhancing this relevance will be crucial for ZOU to sustain its impact and ensure its graduates remain highly sought after in a dynamic and competitive job market. This ongoing alignment requires continuous engagement with industry stakeholders, regular curriculum reviews and responsiveness to emerging economic trends (Jesus et al, 2025).

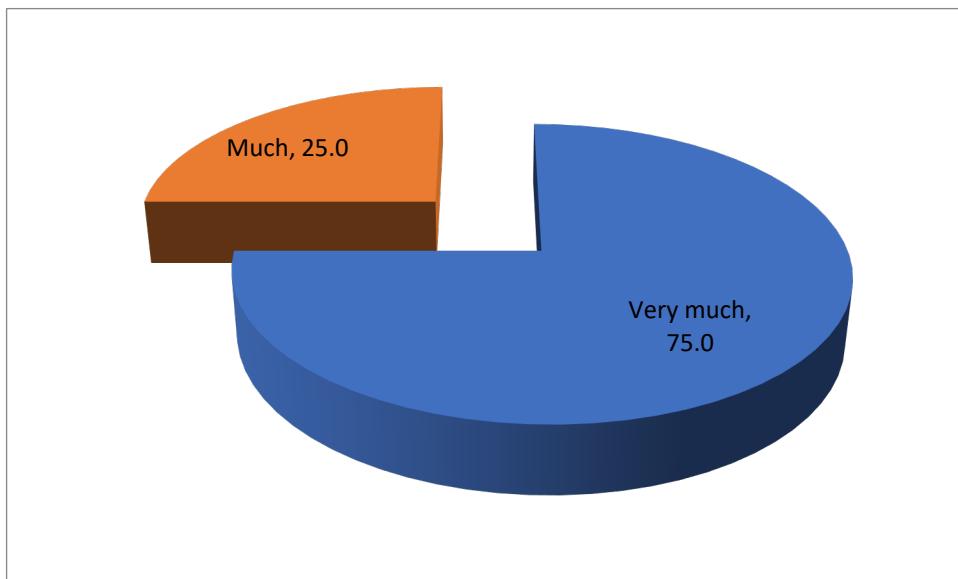


Figure 33: Relevance of studies to current jobs

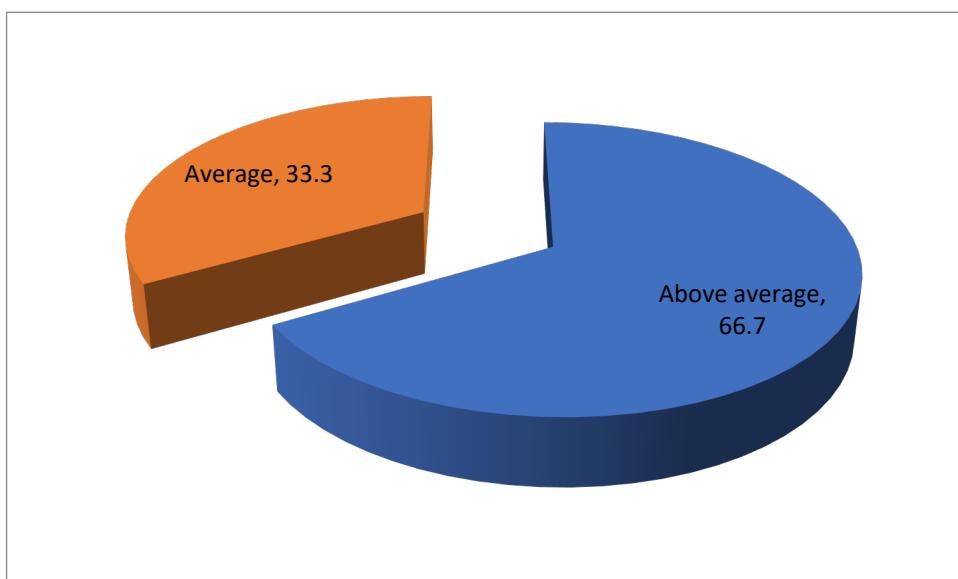


Figure 34: Assessment of labour market relevance

Conclusion and Recommendations

The tracer study of the Zimbabwe Open University Faculty of Commerce (FACOM) graduates for the period 2000 to 2015 demonstrates that the programmes have been instrumental in providing opportunities for adult learners to pursue higher education through open and distance learning (ODL). Most graduates successfully secured employment in diverse sectors, particularly tertiary education, government and financial institutions, underscoring the value of ZOU qualifications in the labour market. Graduates also reported high satisfaction with the development of soft skills such as leadership, organisational capacity, teamwork, problem-solving and decision-making, which were seen as vital for career progression. However, gaps remain in technical and computer-related competencies, as well as in strengthening industry linkages and research capacity. Overall, the programmes were deemed relevant to both current employment needs and broader labour market demands, though continuous curriculum alignment with emerging trends is critical for sustaining competitiveness and employability.

Based on these findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Curriculum Enhancement

- Review and update curricula regularly to integrate ICT skills, technical competencies and contemporary industry practices.
- Strengthen research and analytical training components to enhance graduates' capacity to contribute to innovation and knowledge creation.

2. Strengthening Industry Linkages

- Establish partnerships with industry, government and professional bodies to improve graduate exposure to practical work environments.
- Introduce internship and mentorship opportunities to complement ODL delivery with hands-on experience.

3. Improvement in Programme Delivery

- Expand blended learning approaches that combine ODL with face-to-face or virtual tutorials to improve student support.
- Increase the use of digital platforms and e-learning resources to enhance access, engagement and skills development.

4. Graduate Support and Development

- Provide alumni networks, career services and continuous professional development programmes to improve employability and lifelong learning.
- Explore financial support mechanisms such as scholarships, flexible payment plans or partnerships with funding agencies to address funding constraints for further studies.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Institutionalise tracer studies on a periodic basis to track graduate outcomes and employer perceptions, thereby informing ongoing quality improvements.

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