Exploring the Challenges Encountered During the Process of Shifting from ODL to ODeL in Higher Education: The Case of Zimbabwe Open University

Nomalanga Dhende[1], Dr. Angela Maposa[1]

[1]Zimbabwe Open University

*Corresponding Author's Email: dhenden@zou.ac.zw

Abstract

The challenges that higher education institutions face when switching from Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) are examined in this research. The incorporation of online learning offers educational institutions both benefits and challenges as digital technologies transform the landscape of education. Non-probability sampling (purposive) was used to determine research participants for qualitative data, while probability sampling (simple random) was used to determine respondents for quantitative data. The population of the study was 300 respondents comprising academics, administrators and students in three Matabeleland Regional Campuses of ZOU, subsequently the sample size was 100 respondents. To analyse data exploratory sequential design was used as justified by Cresswell and Clark (2018). To collect accurate data on the transition process, this study used a mixed method approach that included surveys and interviews with administrators, students and academics. Observations and focus group discussions also proved to be useful tools for data collection. Limitations in the study included technology infrastructure, faculty unpreparedness, technophobia, inappropriate pedagogical methodologies and low levels of student involvement are the main challenges which were revealed by this study. Analyses of research findings indicated that the stakeholders were fully aware of the benefits to be accrued in the successful transition from ODL to ODeL but they also faced the hitches that are inherent in the implementation strategies. The shift was found to have implications for prospective students, current students, lecturers, support staff and senior management. Based on the findings of this research the following recommendations were proffered. More work must go into the planning process, before launching changes of such magnitude, the qualifications of educators should have a strong bias towards digital literacy and institutions should possess the appropriate infrastructure and gadgets to facilitate a smooth shift from ODL to ODeL.

Keywords: ODL, ODeL, Shift, e-Learning, Challenges, Higher Learning

Introduction

In institutions of Higher learning, e- learning is often used synonymously with such terms as online learning, computer-assisted learning, computer-based training (Lawn, Zhi & Movello (2017); Yacob, Kadir, Zainudin & Zuraira, (2012); Meyer (2014). According to Olowonsi (2016). E-learning is fast gaining recognition nearly in every society. It has been seen to boost teaching and learning in the 21st century. Research by Bhuasiri et.al (2012) showed that developed countries utilise e-learning to support their teaching & learning activities. Studies

have also revealed that e-learning offers significant opportunities to improve the educational process, provided that the necessary teacher support and training is available Montenegro et.al(2024), In support of this assertion is Solórzano et.al (2022) who concurs that the move towards digitalisation in higher education that encompassed the adaptation of teaching methods and other aspects contribute to improving educational quality in University teaching. (Ortiz et al., 2021). Noted that evolution has led universities to reconsider and develop new pedagogical models that guarantee high quality standards. Further the researchers stated that this has raised questions about the way to achieve these goals. Contrary, the scenario in developing countries is different due to poor computerisation and inadequate internet connectivity.

Deb (2011), in support of the foregoing, Eze, Chinedu -Eze & Bello (2018) opine that the adoption of e-learning has been very slow in most developing economies because of poor funding by responsible authorities and low literacy levels.

The landscape of higher education has undergone significant transformation in recent years, largely propelled by technological advancements and the increasing demand for flexible learning opportunities. Widodo et.al (2020) observed that e-learning was the salvation for most teaching and learning institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The widespread use of e-learning in Higher education institutions worldwide was noted by researchers like (Kituyi & Tusubira 2013; Tarus et. Al 2015; Mosa et.al 2016). As institutions pivot from Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to Open, Distance, and e-Learning (ODeL), they encounter a myriad of challenges that influence the effectiveness of this transition. ODL has traditionally been characterised by its focus on asynchronous learning methods, while ODeL integrates digital tools and online resources, creating a more interactive and engaging educational environment. This shift presents both opportunities and multifaceted challenges. On one hand, ODeL can enhance accessibility, allowing learners from diverse backgrounds to participate in educational programmes. On the other hand, the transition requires institutions to address issues related to technological infrastructure, faculty training and student engagement. Furthermore, the effectiveness of ODeL depends on the quality of the content delivered, the pedagogical strategies employed and the support systems available to learners.

By examining institutional perspectives, student experiences and technological implications, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that hinder a smooth transition. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to developing effective strategies that can facilitate a successful move toward more dynamic and inclusive educational models in the digital age. This paper sought to explore the challenges encountered by learners and educators during the process of changing from traditional face to face mode of delivery to the current technologically driven mode at Zimbabwe Open University. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is a state university mandated by the government of Zimbabwe through an Act of Parliament, ZOU Act (chapter 25:20) to provide higher education through Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Established in 1999, the State University operates under the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development. The registration itself is an uphill task for freshers; they fail to upload their qualifications. At times the system does not reflect their latest payment and hence they fail to register the courses on offer, worse still the system has been found wanting in that it displays old course and old assignments, confusing the newcomers. Dues to restricted rights tutors cannot see who has registered for which course. The introduction of the new learning platform (My Vista) brought a lot of challenges for both learners and educators. Documentary evidence shows that there is an upward trend in the number of students' queries every semester. The existence of queries points to the fact that My

Vista has not yet been mastered. Therefore, this study set out to identify problems encountered along the journey from ODL to ODeL.

Statement of the Problem

The demand for university education has increased over the years. This is what has led to the establishment of more universities and colleges in Zimbabwe. The advent of technology has seen institutions of higher learning shifting from the traditional face to face (ODL) to technologically driven instructional processes. It is during this transition that uncountable challenges are encountered. Despite the merits of the ODeL, the shift from ODL is not without its challenges. It is against this background that this study was undertaken.

Research Questions

- What challenges do Higher and Tertiary institutions face in connection with changing from ODL to ODeL?
- To what extent are the relevant stakeholders prepared for the transition from ODL to ODeL?
- How effective are the various pedagogical approaches utilised in ODL compared to those used in ODeL?
- In what ways can one describe satisfaction and engagement towards ODeL?
- What actionable mechanisms can be recommended for mitigating challenges emanating from the transition from ODL to ODeL?

Literature Review

To gain a deeper understanding of the existing research and debates concerned with shifting from ODL to ODeL, the researchers reviewed existing literature. The gaps in the existing literature were identified and they justified the need for current and further studies. The university of Melbourne (2013) sums up the purpose of literature review as to determine what is known, on the subject matter. In agreement, Galvan & Galvan, (2017) posit that literature review serves as a tool for providing context for the current study.

Challenges Associated with the Shift from ODL to ODeL

Moving from ODL to ODeL comes with challenges ranging from connectivity, training and development, socio economic factors as well as learning design for accessibility among others. ODeL brought about pedagogical approaches which were meant to solve or minimise the shortcomings of ODL. According to Artigue and Blomhoj (2013), Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) boosts active learning, activates critical thinking and elevates students' engagement. In support of IBL, Savasci and Berlin (2012) argue that IBL is one of the ramifications of constructivist learning methodologies. Collaborative learning offers a promising alternative to traditional teaching methods. Bishop and Verleger (2013) point out that the flipped classroom model heavily depends on technology and students' preparation. This approach has the potential to encourage active learning, stimulate higher order thinking capabilities and improve academic performance. This study sought to find out how applicable these approaches were during the shift from ODL to ODeL

Connectivity

In developing countries, Zimbabwe included, high speed internet is not evenly spread out. Since ICT heavily relies on electricity, the power outages in Zimbabwe pose a serious challenge to the implementation of e-learning system.

Training and development

Research conducted by Bauer (2020) in the U.S.A found that the strategic use of On-boarding directly improves the performance of employees. Closely related to these findings were those from Li (2020) in a study entitled "Reskilling and Upskilling of the future ready workforce for Industry 4.0 and beyond in Europe. Li (ibid) emphasised the fact that life-long learning should be part of an organisation's strategic goals. This study sought to examine how committed the stakeholders (educators & learners) were, to reskilling and upskilling. In Ghana, the study by Katere et.al (2020) found that performance went up wherever organisation took training and development seriously. In line with Li (ibid), Nadler's study (2019) observed that all the HR department programmes are on the current job. Introducing new skills for a new job/position and general growth for both individuals and organisations to meet the current and future objectives of the organisation. In this study, the HR activities would contribute to the success of the shift from ODL to ODeL.

The quality of education is improved through the implementation of an e-learning system (Coopasami, Knight and Pete, 2017). It prepares a new crop of educators, who can meet the 21st century pedagogical demands (Oye, Salleh and Iahad,2011). Educators are not free from challenges inherent in the transition in question. They are hard hit by the fact that digital literacy does not exist in their CVs. Technological advances took place when they were already employed. There is a need for significant training.

Socio-economic Factors

In the South African context, the challenges of the digital divide (i.e. the unequal access to digital technologies) Lembani. et. al (2020) exists and adversely affects the poor black South Africans who cannot afford or lack the supporting infrastructure. In developing and emerging economies, which are struggling with infrastructural gaps and Socio-economic inequalities (Ge et.al,2019) students are bound to suffer. ODeL instructions, as the name implies, should be open and inclusive. This can be achieved by providing educational access to students who might have been unable to access the institution because of geographic distance and time constraints. The special needs students include the differently abled students, employed students and students previous disadvantaged backgrounds (Dalton et.al, 2019; Lembani. et.al, 2020; Nujbane–Mokiwa, 2017). Researchers were keen to find out what the ODL institution was practicing in its shift towards ODeL. Access to digital devices has potential to perpetuate inequalities. The less privileged may not afford to acquire the required gadgets. While Zimbabwe Open University has the mandate to take University education to the doorsteps of the people, cognisance should be of socio-economic inequalities.

Stakeholder Preparedness

Senior management is responsible for infrastructure and the provision of requisite devices. It is also their role to regularly assess progress of transition against established goals and adjust where necessary. The current crop of academics was employed without any requirement of

digital literacy. The focus of the employer was on academic qualification and degree alignment. Educators become apprehensive when they are expected to change the way they have always been designing and facilitating teaching and learning argue Ncube, Dube and Ngulube (2014). Mwale (2019) says older educators do not possess relevant knowledge and skills for using online services and this adversely affects the service delivery. E- learning fosters active learning. It empowers the learners and encourages collaborative learning. Higher order thinking skills and learners' retention of knowledge is enhanced. In this regard. Obuekwe and Eze (2017) observed that e- learning deepens skills, draws the world closer to the lecture room(s) and prepares learners for the job market. A study conducted by Lawn, Zhi and Morello (2017) showed that the success of students in e-learning was hindered by poor study habits, feelings of isolation, poor learner-to-learner interactions, reduced or absent learner -to -educator interactions. Learners often lack the necessary skills for navigating online learning platforms. Tere is a shortage of requisite devices and reliable connectivity. Furthermore, students are not used to self-directed learning, and their time management skills leave a lot to be desired. Closely linked to the hitches faced by learners along the transformative journey from ODL to ODeL is the issue of student support services. According to Ngaaso & Abbam, (2016), student support services play a crucial role in providing with the necessary academic and emotional support during their studies.

Timely, constructive and consistent feedback to students' submissions has been shown to keep the momentum and tempo of their work steady and increase student satisfaction (O'Shea et al., 2015; Paposa & Paposa, 2022). The plight of first year students at the Zimbabwe Open University is exacerbated by the fact that, entry requirements for an array of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programme do not make digital literacy a pre- requisite.

Pedagogical Approaches

The most common error is that of using learning approaches which were meant for the correspondence model. Shifting from ODL ODeL poses learning and instructional design concerns (Mashile & Matoane,2012), Five distinct course approaches are described by Twigg (2003) that can be included in the transition to ODeL. The first is the Supplemental model, which adds online activities to enhance learning delivery while maintaining the same course format. The second is the Replacement model, which substitutes technology-enhanced activities for fewer paper-based tutorial sessions. The third is the Emporium model, which gives students the freedom to select the educational resources that will help them study the most effectively. The pupils choose how quickly they wish to study. The Emporium approach is distinguished by the support it provides for each individual learner. The Fully Online model is the fourth. This is interactive, student-focused and packed with resources. The Buffet model, which offers a range of educational activities, is the sixth.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) are both educational frameworks that facilitate learning outside traditional classroom settings. However, they differ in their delivery methods and pedagogical approaches. Here's a comparison of the pedagogical approaches used in each of them.

Table 1. ODL pedagogical approaches versus ODeL pedagogical approaches

Factor	ODL	ODeL
Learning Environment	Primarily relies on traditional materials (books, printed guides).	Utilises online platforms (LMS, forums) for interaction.

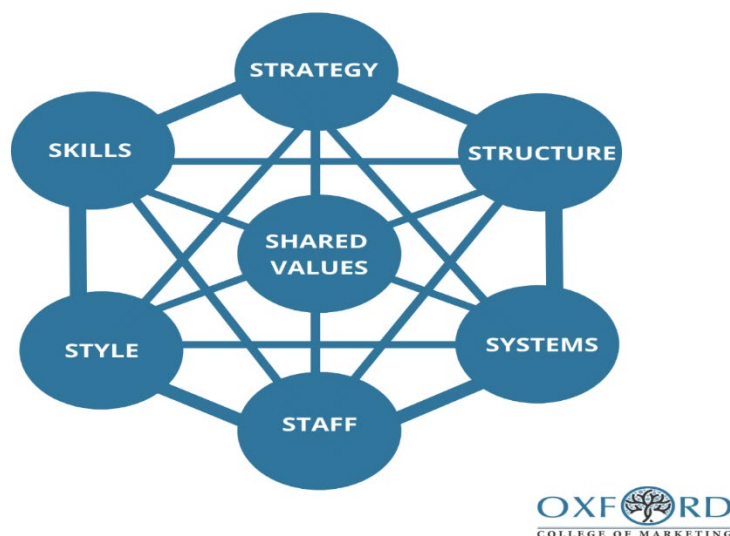|	- May include occasional face-to-face interactions.	- Offers a more flexible and interactive learning environment.
Instructional Design*	- Emphasises self-directed learning with structured materials. - Often follows a linear approach to course design.	- Encourages collaborative learning through forums, discussions and group projects. - Employs multimedia resources (videos, podcasts) to enhance engagement.
Assessment Methods*	- Traditional assessments (examinations, quizzes) often in written format. - Feedback may be delayed due to postal communication. - Engagement is often limited to scheduled tutorials or workshops. - Students may feel isolated due to the lack of immediate interaction. - *ODL*: - Support is often limited to scheduled office hours or tutorial	- Continuous assessment via online quizzes, peer reviews and interactive assignments. - Immediate feedback through automated systems and online grading.
Student Engagement* - *	Engagement is often limited to scheduled tutorials or workshops. - Students may feel isolated due to the lack of immediate interaction.	- Promotes higher levels of engagement through real-time discussions, webinars and social media integration. - Encourages active participation through collaborative tools.
Support Services	Support is often limited to scheduled office hours or tutorial sessions. - Resources may be less accessible.	- Offers 24/7 access to resources, online libraries, and academic support. - Utilises chatbots and online help desks for immediate assistance.

Source: Own design.

Fig 1: McKinsey 7s model

This study was informed by McKinsey 7S model which is a change management tool. This tool has the strength of enabling different parts to function in sync with one another. It is a systematic approach to change which allows the effective tracking of each element in the change process. This model of change suits the teaching and learning arena because it is a long-term model. Therefore, this study chose this model because learning is a process.

Structure

This is the way in which McKinsey's 7S model elements are applicable to Institutions for higher learning which are undergoing change. It is the chain of command and accountability relationships which form its organisational structure. In the process of implementing the shift from ODL to ODeL, the structure of the University takes precedence.

Strategy

It refers to a well-crafted implementation plan to achieve an effective e-learning platform. This strategy is supported by the institution's mission and values. For successful implementation of ODeL. The strategy should encompass well planned activities supervision and monitoring of activities.

Systems

In this paper systems refer to the academic and technical infrastructure of the institution. Inconsistencies are identified and these must be addressed by change. All participants in the ODeL must keep in mind that whatever they do has a ripple effect on other units in the institution of teaching and learning.

Skills

Skills refer to the capabilities and competencies of a college/University which enable its stakeholder to effectively shift from ODL to ODeL. This study has established the digital

literacy levels of both educators and learners. Since this study found the glaring dearth of skills among stakeholders, the key players would have to facilitate skilling and re-skilling through training and development programmes.

Style

The style refers to ways of interaction and symbolic decision-making processes which a barrier to change. The major determinant of success in the envisaged change is the leadership style. Communication channels, consultative meetings and evaluation(s) all emanate from the predominant style of the ODeL institution. This study paid particular attention to this component of change to identify existing shortcomings and find ways of minimising them.

Staff

This element has to do with talent management. It includes all Human Resources issues that include training and re-training, recruitment of staff and all other human resources activities. Staff competencies should not lag technological advancement. Human resources are the most valuable assets in an organisation. So, there are higher chances of success in the shift from ODL to ODeL if members of staff are kept informed; are satisfied and feel that they belong to the University/college.

Shared values

Shared value represents the core beliefs and principles that guide an organisation's culture and priorities. They are the foundational ideals that shape how employees interact with each other and with external stakeholders. At a micro-environment level, it means the organisation's mission and vision must be geared towards the desired ODeL.
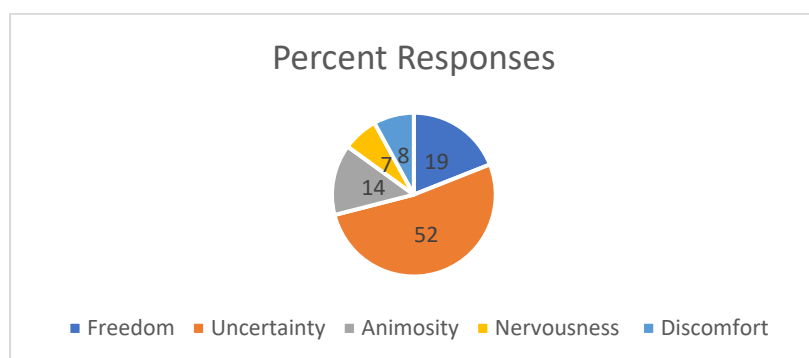
Research Methodology

A mixed methods case study design was employed in this study to provide an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the transition from Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL). As defined by Creswell and Clarke (2018), this approach integrates both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to develop evidence-rich cases. The study adopted an exploratory sequential design, beginning with the qualitative phase to explore the thoughts, beliefs and experiences of key stakeholders; educators, learners, and senior managers through interviews, focus group discussions and observations. Insights and themes emerging from this phase informed the design of a quantitative survey instrument aimed at measuring factors influencing the shift from ODL to ODeL. The integration of both qualitative and quantitative findings allowed for a more holistic understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the transition. Research tools included unstructured questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions, each selected to ensure data validity and depth. The unstructured questionnaire was carefully designed to enhance reliability, while focus groups provided diverse perspectives through interactive discussions. Interviews offered detailed qualitative data, facilitating deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities of the transition. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants directly involved in or affected by the shift, thereby ensuring the relevance and richness of the data collected.

Table 2: Sample Composition.

Age Group	Number of Educators	Number of learners	Number of clerks	No of Technologist	Total
20-30	3	10	2	0	15
31-40	6	10	2	2	20
41-50	12	10	2	3	27
51-60	5	10	2	4	21
60+	4	10	2	1	17
	30	50	10	10	**100**

Results and discussion

Findings of this study were presented in simple descriptive language, in tabular form bar graphs and pie charts. The researchers interpreted data from both qualitative and quantitative strands, to come up with meta- inferences.

Figure 2: Dominant feelings associated with ODeL

The younger, techno savvy learners were not scared, but the older stakeholders could not hide their nervousness and discomfort. The participants placed the blame on connectivity challenges, their own lack of skills and socio-economic drawbacks.

When asked about the objectives of shifting from ODL to ODeL, responses threw a lot of light on the challenge encountered during the process of changing from ODL to ODeL.

Respondent X raised her voice and said "*These computers sometimes shortchange us as they slow down our learning process……. books are much better than computers.*" Such responses were common among focus group members.

Respondent Y *"asked what if these computers crush without information in the middle of learning"* Questions like this revealed fear and anxiety among respondents.

Respondent Z *"E-learning has made training more flexible and available, but it doesn't offer the personal interaction found in face-to-face sessions."*

Table 3: Significance of shifting from ODL to ODeL

Responses	Frequency	Percentage

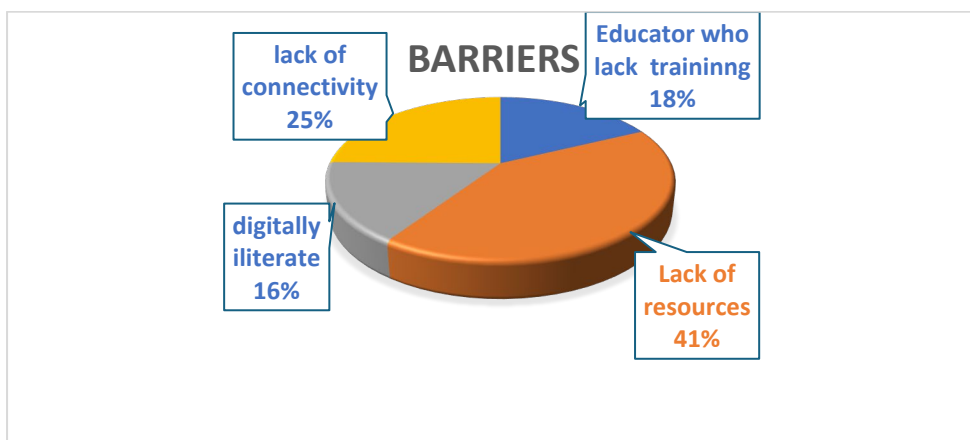|		
- To reduce students time on Campus	28	28%
- To make the LMS more comprehensive and extensive.	25	25%
- To make learners more independent.	23	23%
- To reduce educator workload.	14	14%
- Not sure	10	10%
	100	**100%**

Fig 3: **Barriers encountered in the process of shifting from ODL to ODeL**

All educators blamed the challenges in the shift on senior management. The findings were: 18% cried foul over lack of training and retraining to keep abreast with technological advancement; 16% of them confessed that they were digitally illiterate; 41% blamed the shift failure on the lack of resource, while 25% blamed lack of connectivity as a cause of failure.

Responses to interview questions relating to barriers encountered in the process of shifting from ODL to ODeL

Respondent X

"*The Shift from ODL to ODeL cannot succeed f the lecturers themselves are not trained in e-learning*"

Respondent Y

"*This shift is bound to suffer due to the general economic hardships of Zimbabwe. Nobody can afford to buy a computer. A more serious problem is that of lack of electricity, especially in rural areas.*

Respondent Z

"The transition from ODL to ODeL will be effective if all stakeholders have a positive attitude towards change. Something must be done improve connectivity, which is the major set-back to our studies"

Responses from the interview respondents resonate well with the quantitative data displayed on the pie chat.
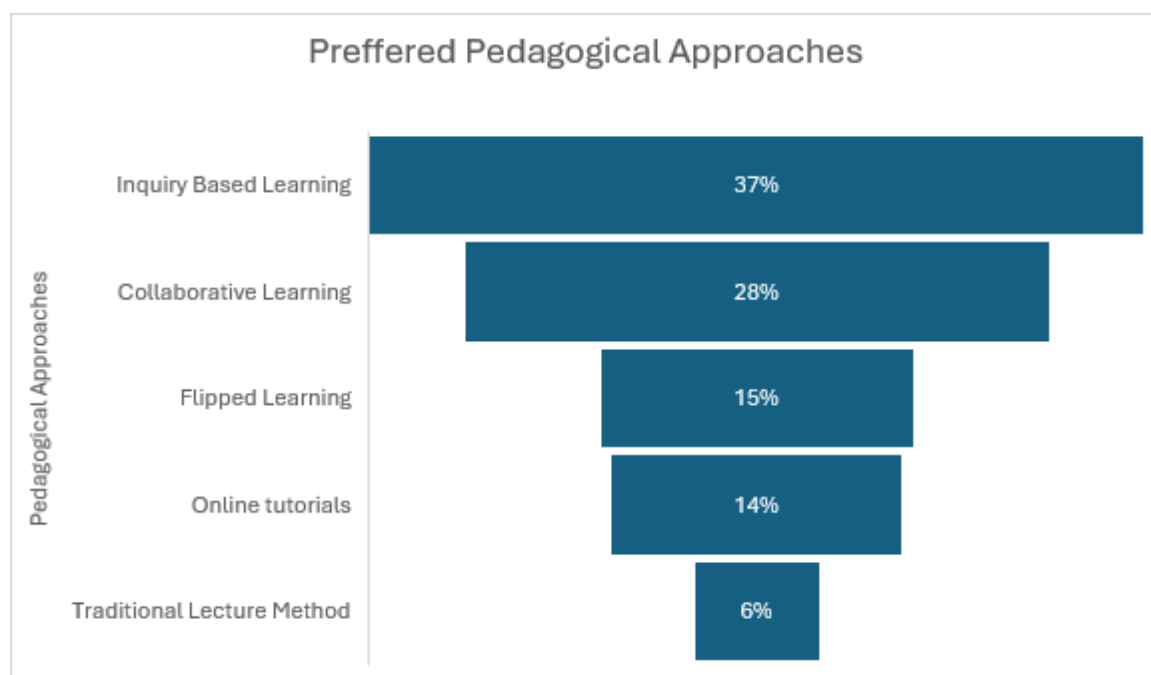

Fig 4: Preferred Pedagogical Approaches

Both educators and learners were interviewed, and their responses were shown as in figure 4 above.
Educators and learners' choices echoed the merits of pedagogical approaches which were outlined under the review of literature. The versatile approaches (IBL, CL and LCM) were highly supported. It became apparent that the shift from ODL to ODeL implied the shift in pedagogical methodologies.

Key findings on satisfaction and engagement

While the new normal system of ODeL presents vast positives, it also has presented negatives that affect the student's satisfaction and engagement. Participants emphasised the need for relevance and clarity on the course content. Satisfaction was closely linked to the accessibility and responsiveness of educators, with timely feedback being a crucial factor. User-friendly platforms contributed positively to satisfaction, while technical issues detracted from the experience. Many learners appreciated the flexibility of self-paced learning which enhanced their overall satisfaction.

It emerged that engagement levels increased with interactive elements such as quizzes and discussions fora, consolidating a sense of involvement. A strong online community facilitated

through peer interactions was found to be essential for enhancing engagement. A significant impact on engagement levels was ignited by intrinsic motivation and interest on course content as confirmed by learners. Continuous feedback from educators helped maintain high engagement, as learners felt more connected to the course.

Issues related to technological access and reliability were highlighted as major barriers to satisfaction and engagement. Some faculties and students exhibited resistance to transition, impacting overall engagement levels.

Mechanisms for Improving Scenario

The shift can only succeed if suitable qualified cadres are recruited. Onwe (2023) noted that the effectiveness of an ODL institution depends on the quality, competency and commitment of its employees. The place of quality cannot be overemphasised, particularly in the sustainability of the shift from ODL to ODeL. Training and retraining of educators and librarians. ICT people are recommended by Otubelu (2016) In support of this, Ogunleye (2013) emphasizes the need for quality assurance systems that are clear, achievable and transparent. According to Muyinda (2012) adequate funding is not an option, in students support services. This could be the answer instead of a complete shift which is lightly to leave some stakeholders behind.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, the transition from Open and Distance Learning to Open and Distance e-Learning presents a myriad of challenges, including technological barriers, a need for enhanced staff and new students training on all online learning activities and issues of students' engagement. The stakeholders should consider implementing the model of reskilling and upskilling to make career development a crucial phase of the future workforce. Senior Management at ZOU is encouraged to establish off-the -job training models for their stakeholders to fully accomplish the ODeL mode. The institutions of higher learning are encouraged to spruce up connectivity by investing in reliable internet infrastructure. The acquisition of upmarket computers is not an option. Community of scholars is encouraged to conduct further research, considering the presence of AI on the aspect of shifting from ODL to ODeL.

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