Effects of the Open Distance electronic Learning (ODeL) System on Student Service Delivery at the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

Open and Distance electronic Learning (ODeL) has transformed itself to become virtual with minimal or even no physical tutor-student contact as academics create learning platforms, mark assignments and even supervise dissertations and theses online. The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has undergone a lot of transformation since becoming a fully pledged university in 1999. ZOU started with class contact (face-to-face with tutor) and use of modules but has made great strides towards full use of electronic learning (e-learning) in line with contemporary global practices in ODeL. The study used the explanatory research design. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. The interview guide was used to collect qualitative data. The study established that the majority of academics' workload had increased as the transition phase was taking longer than expected. A lot of administrative work, coupled with inadequate training to effectively use the ZOU MyVista software learning platform, pressure emanating from doctorate degree studies by most academics, the need to undertake research and publish research papers as well as implementing a demanding quality assurance system, all strained academics. On a positive note, the use of e-learning has expedited feedback and communication to students, and it is also very convenient to them as they no longer have to travel long distances or queue at regional campuses to see the regional programme coordinators. The study recommended that more training on e-learning and availability of more accessible infrastructure, namely computers and relevant software, would capacitate both academics and students. There is also an urgent need to bring Part Time tutors on board, who are the majority but currently left out of this e-learning drive, so that there is a strong learning culture at ZOU for improved service delivery.

Keywords: Delivery mode, Electronic learning, Open and distance learning, Quality learning, Transformation, Sustainable development

Introduction

Open and Distance electronic Learning (ODeL) is the fastest growing mode of adult learning at the moment and has seen phenomenal changes over the last two decades owing to improved technology and globalisation. Open distance learning has a very long history, which stretches back for over 180 years (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009). For such a long time, the prevalent model of distance learning has been the use of correspondence especially in institutions of higher education (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). There is now growing transformation from the correspondence model to the phenomenon of electronic learning (e-learning) (Panda & Mishra,

2007). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is increasingly becoming virtual with minimal or even no physical tutor-student contact as academics create platforms, mark assignments and even supervise dissertations and thesis online (Berge, 2008) and also give feedback through use of You-tube, teleconferencing and podcasts etc. This demonstrates how the ODeL is changing rapidly according to Ruth and Sammons (2019). However, this transition phase still seems to be including some aspects traditionally done by non-academic staff which are purely routine and administrative in nature (Mashile, 2014).

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only state university mandated to offer distance learning in Zimbabwe. ZOU has undergone a lot of transformation since becoming a fully-fledged university in 1999. During its early phases, ZOU used to have between 12-16 contact hours for each course per semester. Each student was issued with a hard copy module which has always been the major learning mode of delivery. After about five years since its formation to date, ZOU has largely been using the hard copy (printed) module as the dominant delivery mode but then reduced classroom tutorial contact time with the tutor to six hours for each course in a semester. ZOU is now in the transition stage of slowly moving away from the printed mode of delivery, towards an e-learning delivery mode, in line with international best practices (Hovenga & Bricknell, 2016) and globalisation.

The coming up on board of electronic learning has brought transformation in the Open distance learning delivery mode. There is now increasing demand to abandon the traditional modes of delivery such as use of printed (hard copy) module and conducting classroom tutorials to the contemporary virtual learning which hinges on the use of e-learning. The software package, MyVista being now used by ZOU, is bringing a lot of changes to quality of tuition, as well as the whole learning spectrum or atmosphere. Both students and academics are complaining of increased workload and learning has become more complicated, strenuous and time-consuming taking cognizance of the other individual commitments such as family, social, church and work just to mention the major ones.

The study intended to interrogate the effects of the open distance electronic Learning (ODeL) system on student service delivery at the Zimbabwe open university and to then suggest ways of improving service delivery to students.
The study was guided by the following questions:

(i) What has been the nature of learning in ODL before adoption of e-learning system?
(ii) How adequately prepared has been ZOU to implement a vibrant ODeL mode of delivery?
(iii) Which are the positive effects of using ODeL on students' service delivery?
(iv) What are the negative effects of using ODeL on students' service delivery?

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

The evolution of distance education can also be understood from the metaphor of generations, which represent major changes known as models of distance education (Bates, 2014), as well as Moore's Transactional Distance theory (Moore, 1993, 2009)

Generations of ODL (Bates, 2014)

Generation 1 (Correspondence model)

The period covered stretched from 1451 to 1916. This was dominated by use of the printing press which produced printed learning material that was used through correspondence and mail delivery system. The content was in the form of letters, books and latter covered filming. There was hardly any student-tutor contact.

Generation 2 (Multimedia model)
The period covered stretched from 1918 to 1955. The major development was the use of the media which initially involved use of the use of radio but later the television and video tapes. These were complimented by use of the printed learning material. Learning was largely student centred with minimal interface between the student and the tutor.

Generation 3 (Tele-learning model)
This period covered stretched from 1956 to 1968. A new era emerged with the development of computers. This saw wider use of technology which included the use of audio-graphic communication and video-conferencing and. Students accessed learning material at their own time and place of convenience.

Generation 4 (Flexible learning model)
This period covered stretched from was around 1969 to 2005. This witnessed the use of chats and forums for online group communication through interactive multimedia dominated by use of electronic resources.

Generation 5 (Intelligent flexible learning model)
This is the contemporary phase where ZOU is today. There is extensive use of the internet and the World Wide Web. There is more flexibility and adaptability to instruction and curriculum demands and its more user friendly than previous ODL delivery modes.

A number of studies on ODL and ODeL have been conducted and a lot of salient issues have been raised. The use of printed modules with face-to-face contact teaching (tutoring) hours with students per course is becoming increasingly redundant (Hovenga & Bricknell, 2016). Technology and globalisation have made access to learning material feasible to all corners of the world (Briggs, 2020). The roles of both students and teachers (academics) in ODL universities have taken new dimensions owing to the ever-transitional trends in the modes of delivery (Lyons & Ingersoll, 2010). In developing countries, hard copies of learning material like modules are still preferred by students especially those without adequate access to internet facilities, like those who reside in the rural areas (Brown, Lewin & Shikongo, 2014). A combination of the use of modules and e-learning is still prevalent even in some developed countries (Ganster & Perrewe, 2011). This ranges from the use of hard printed copies like modules to contemporary approaches such as the use of electronic-learning (E-learning). E-learning reduces physical contact between the academic (tutor) and learner (student) (Bennet et al., 2019).

Unless the human resource departments and university authorities work hand-in-hand with academic staff to rationalise academics' new roles in the wake of e-learning, they are likely to

suffer from stress, burnout and fatigue, as a result of heavy workloads (Courtney, 2020; Di Biase, 2010). This could compromise the quality of tuition which may affect service delivery, such as an inability to efficiently assess student's work (Mashile, 2014; Stedman & Coaldrake, 1999). ODL students may not get enough attention and guidance owing to academics' heavy job demands (Brown, Lewin & Shikongo, 2014). This lack of attention to students by academics due to heavy workloads emanating from interphase with students including a lot of administrative work, is often experienced in developing countries, such as Zimbabwe, where resources are inadequate (Kamuka, 2016; Vutete & Uzhenyu, 2016; Zulu, 2015).

Research Methodology

The research used the mixed methods paradigm. The explanatory sequential design was used since data were sought from the target population of 1052 students that comprised final year students, academics and administrators drawn from the national centre (head office) and the Harare regional campus by collecting and analysing quantitative data first followed by qualitative data (Kennedy, 2009). Stratified sampling was used to come up with participants who provided quantitative data through the use of the questionnaire, whose size was 52. Data saturation technique was used to select interview participants (Khothari, 2014). Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017) and descriptive statistics for quantitative data (Leedy and Omrod, 2016). Research ethics were observed throughout the study by the researcher, and these included seeking informed consent first from respondents, together with confidentiality, honesty and integrity (Porter, 2014).

Results and discussion

Gender composition of respondents

The majority of the respondents were male students (58%). It is common knowledge that universities have more males for both academics and students than female (Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Hovenga & Bricknell, 2016).

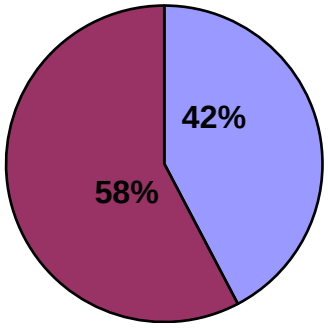

Figure 1: Gender composition of respondents and participants'

Nature of ODL learning before e-learning

Table 1: Shows comments by each respondent on how ODL used to be before e-learning

Mode of learning	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
Largely combination of modules and classroom contact(tutorials)	74	24	0	2	0
Largely involving tutorials, practical work and modules	25	12	5	39	19
Few contact hours (tutorials) and readers/modules	36	28	3	25	8
Few tutorials and a number of modules not available	54	37	0	3	6
Tutorials which were poorly attended and modules	58	36	0	3	3
Access to the Region particularly the Programme coordinator for assistance and even other tutors	57	31	2	6	4

The results above were also supported by interview findings. The majority said that both modules and tutorials (online) were used, raising some concerns from the participants. For example, key informant number 6 said that

‘’ *although tutorials are conducted largely online, only a few are able to access these tutorials due to internet connectivity and high costs of data bundles. Although modules were available, most of them were written early 2000 and the content (literature) was now archaic for a number of courses that rely on contemporary issues or developments’’*

Key informant 8 had this to say: ‘*’tutorials (online) are very few and for new programmes, some do not have modules despite students having paid their fees accordingly*

From the above, it can be concluded that the dominant means of learning was largely a combination of modules and online tutorials. The concerns raised by some students showed some discontentment about the service delivery by the university. The results were also supported by interviews, which showed that the tutorials were few and at times modules were not available at registration despite students having paid their fees accordingly. This was also raised by Nyenya and Bukaliya (2015) and Ruth and Sammons (2019).

Adequacy of preparation put in place for the transitional phase to e-learning

Table 2: Shows comments on level of preparation before transitioning to the e-learning mode

Planning for e-learning	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Not sure %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
Enough time was given to fully adopt e-learning	4	6	3	41	46

There was a lot of awareness on the need to move towards e-learning for smooth change	8	18	0	31	43
A lot of training programmes and workshops were conducted first on how to use e-learning	15	19	7	29	30
A lot of computers were procured to prepare for e-learning	27	25	8	23	17
There was an increase in the number of computers in laboratories and library	18	18	17	28	19
Access to e-learning was enhanced by availing Wi-Fi to access internet	51	36	7	3	3

The above results showed that there were no adequate preparations for the launching of e-learning. Not much training was done especially for students and part-time tutors. In terms of infrastructural development, it appears that not much had been done. Inadequate planning affect the smooth progress of ODL generation phases according to Bates (2014).

One senior regional campus administrator, key informant 3, said '*'We experienced challenges with students who wanted to be trained on e-learning since we had few IT technicians, and our computer laboratory is too small to accommodate 30 students had we had an enrolment by then of over 6500''*

A programme leader based at the national centre, Key informant 6 said: '*'We experienced challenges with conducting tutorials since training was only done to full time academics, yet majority of our tutors (lecturers) are on a part time basis. We had to overload full time lecturers to teach a number of courses culminating in them complaining of burnout (fatigue)*''

The study was also to a large extent supported by other studies conducted by other researchers on the university such as by Dzvimbo (2015) and Musingafi et al. (2015)

Gains arising from the use of e-learning in ODL

Table 3: Gains arising from the use of e-learning in ODL to make it ODeL

Advantages/Strengths of e-learning	**Percentage (%)**
Convenience as there is no need to travel to the region by students	65
Improves research due to use of library facilities and internet online	56
Quicker feedback to students e.g. on assignments and even examination results	78
Marking is consistent for all 10 regional campuses and that enhances quality assurance	65

Learning material can be downloaded on ZOU website especially using myVista	63
Improved communication between different stakeholders even after working hours	80
Improved work engagement for tutors	53

Some of the gains (positives) arising from the ODL transformation were that students could access their work (assignment questions and marked assignments) and other relevant literature online anywhere and anytime using the MyVista platform, there was no need for students to queue at regional offices anymore, there was quicker feedback to students after marking of their assignments.

The gains raised were almost the same as those suggested through interviews. The positive gains based on the results and findings have been supported by Berge (2008). Of interest was that academics were inspired by more challenging duties or work which enhanced their work engagement as propounded by organisational behaviour experts (Demerouti, Bakker and Gevers, 2015) and Bakker et al. (2019).

Challenges/Problems experienced in the transformation phase to e-learning

Table 4: Problems during the transformation phase to e-learning

Challenges/Problems	**Percentage (%)**
Inadequate training especially for students and part time tutors	85
Slow computers to upload, download or use internet facility	67
Congested Wi-Fi area and laboratory at the region	48
Small laboratory	53
Few computers which cannot suffice the demand	65
MyVista at times down	76
Comments by markers on assignments difficult to retrieve	57
Delays in marking which culminates in students submitting second assignment or even writing exams without feedback for some courses	75
Heavy workload for academics (lecturers)	78
Limited access to internet e.g. those staying in remote or some rural areas	72
Some lectures and students are traditionally accustomed to hard copies e.g. modules and even assignments rather than use of soft copies	58
Inadequate financial resources to use consultancy services to address inefficiencies	56

A plethora of problems raised above affected the transition phase from traditional ODL delivery mode to the contemporary e-learning. Among the major problems were; increased workload for academics, delayed assessment feedback (assignments), myVista usually of line

(breakdown) and lack of appropriate tools such as internet by students in some areas e.g. remote areas.

Most of the results were supported by interview findings. For example, a final year student in the Faculty of Commerce, who was also a committee member of the student representative council (SRC) said: "*we are worse off than the time we used to have face to face tutorials. Our office is undaunted with calls and students storming our offices proposing that in the interim, the university should reconsider blending online tutorials and face to face tutorials. The economy makes it difficult for some students to have correct gadgets (laptops etc.) to move in tandem with the change''.*

Increased workload

Academics workload has been increasing owing to the introduction of the e-learning delivery mode. This enhanced work stress and work engagement challenges.
A key informant 7, a Senior lecturer said:
"*Workload has really increased significantly, for example, it's more difficult to mark 300 assignments online than marking hard copies. Preparation of slides for online teaching it is also burdensome unlike a physical classroom lecture/tutorial''*

Some academics were not happy with the marking of assignments online as that was time consuming especially where one tutor was allocated 300 assignments or more to mark in two weeks' time.

Drastic, instead of gradual, change

The participants' felt that a lot of time and consultation should have been done to allow smooth change rather than implementing across all programs without adequate preparations and an effective logistical framework in place.

A senior administration officer said:
"*There was not much consultation among all key stakeholders, as there were hardly any meaningful meetings done. Training was only done largely for full time academics, yet majority are part time tutors. Non-teaching (support) staff and students did not receive any meaningful training on the use of e-learning. This is why a number of records clerks and students face a plethora of challenges when using the MyVista platform''*

These problems are very prevalent in most developing countries due to economic challenges and lagging behind in technology as alluded to by Mashile (2014) and Briggs (2020).

Conclusion and recommendations

In light of the findings and results, the study concluded that the transformation phase involving the adoption of a contemporary delivery mode posed a lot of operational and logistical challenges, compounded by lack of resources. Although e-learning was user friendly and convenient, generally, its implementation suffered a plethora of problems with a lot of student querying the use of ZOU's myVista

because the transition period has largely been characterised by lack of training to capacitate students and even academics especially part time tutors.

The study made the following recommendations:

- Intensive training was needed in all regional campuses for students, non-teaching staff and academics particularly those part time tutors/lecturers.
- There is need to procure more computers for use especially by students in the computer laboratory and library to enhance the use of myVista since there are technicians who can assist students, non-teaching staff and academics.
- 'Speedy' computers for efficiency were needed to improve access to myVista and internet facilities as majority of computers were out dated and some really obsolete.
- There was need to curb widespread plagiarism that could be difficult to notice taking cognisance of the online marking, by using an anti-plagiarism software, which has not been the case so far.
- There was need to improve or upgrade myVista software especially on the capturing of marks for coursework and reconciling with the exam marks so that this is done by the system and not manually which can cause some delays in processing results.

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