

Unpacking Marginalised Community Members' Perspectives on ZOU's Response to Heritage-Based Education 5.0: A Conceptual Context for Now and Beyond.

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Abstract

The global discourse on community engagement is gaining momentum, yet limited research exists on how Zimbabwean universities are responding to this paradigm particularly within the framework of Heritage-based Education 5.0 and Vision 2030. This study explores the Zimbabwe Open University's (ZOU) response through its fee-free short courses, implemented to empower communities and support the national goal of achieving upper-middle-income status by 2030. Using a qualitative ethnographic design, data were collected from 40 purposively selected participants through semi-structured interviews and observational checklists. Guided by the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model, ZOU's initiative built on community strengths, offering practical, heritage-aligned learning opportunities. Thematic analysis revealed that the short courses significantly enhanced participants' entrepreneurial skills, social innovation and confidence, fostering inclusive development. High community engagement evidenced by the diverse participant demographics and celebratory graduation attendance underscored the programme's relevance and impact. The study concludes that ZOU's fee-free short courses are an effective model for, community-led Heritage-based Education 5.0 aligned with national development goals. It recommends continuation and expansion of these programmes into intermediate and diploma levels, the need for increased government support and a stronger emphasis on practical, participant-driven content in areas such as construction, civic education and personal grooming services. Most participants felt that such approaches not only promote lifelong learning but also created sustainable, self-employment pathways rooted in community values and needs and by so doing it advances development into upper-middle-income status by 2030.

Keywords: Heritage-Based Education 5.0, community engagement, community-based learning, corporate social responsibility, socio-economic development

Introduction

Globally, there is growing interest in community-led Heritage-Based Education 5.0 in higher education. However, in Zimbabwe, research on how universities are responding to this emerging model particularly considering the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development's (MHTEISTD) Heritage-Based Education 5.0 agenda, remains limited. Heritage-Based Education 5.0 emphasises teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation, aligning with the national vision of transforming Zimbabwe into an upper-middle-income society by 2030. Community engagement, a core pillar of Heritage-Based Education 5.0, capitalises on collaborative partnerships between universities and communities to foster the exchange of knowledge and resources. Yet informal discussions with academic staff reveal persistent confusion between Heritage-Based Education 5.0 and earlier models like Education 3.0, as well as conventional community service frameworks. These misconceptions continue to hinder effective implementation of Heritage-based Education 5.0. This study investigated how the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) responded to the call for community engagement under the Heritage-

based Education 5.0 framework and its alignment with the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1), which aspires to "leave no one and no place behind" in the discharge of inclusive human capital development NDS 1, 2020. The research focused on community perceptions of ZOU's fee-free short courses as a tool for empowerment and social innovation. Guided by three key questions, the study sought to: (i) Assess how ZOU implemented community engagement, outreach and innovation in line with Heritage-based Education 5.0; (ii) Evaluate the relevance of community engagement initiatives to the overarching goals of Heritage-based Education 5.0; (iii) Identify challenges and opportunities that emerged and recommend strategies to enhance the effectiveness of Heritage-based, Community-led Education. These inquiries provided a comprehensive lens for examining ZOU's role in advancing Heritage-Based Education 5.0 and its contribution to inclusive, sustainable development among marginalised communities in Zimbabwe.

Guided by the principle of "leaving no one and no place behind," ZOU, as an Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) institution, is mandated to align its mission with the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS 1) Vision of moving, "Towards a Prosperous and Empowered Upper Middle-Income Society by 2030." While heritage-based, community-led education is not new, its current prominence in Zimbabwe reflects a stronger national policy focus. The MHTEISTD adopted the Heritage-based Education 5.0 model, inspired by global practices that encourage universities to play pivotal roles in the socio-economic development of disadvantaged community members through teaching and learning, research, innovation and industrialisation.

Despite the shift in policy, many institutions in Zimbabwe have struggled to understand and implement Heritage-based Education 5.0, often remaining trapped in the traditional Education 3.0 approaches and treating community engagement as peripheral outreach. Neoliberal pressures have further distorted the concept, reducing engagement to short-term, revenue-driven initiatives with limited social impact. Scholars such as Brackmann (2023) and Bidandi et al. (2021) caution that such approaches exacerbate socio-economic imbalances and marginalise community voices. In contrast, transformative models, such as those advocated by Shephard (2020), emphasise deeper institutional integration of community engagement, research and curricula.

ZOU responded to the parent Ministry's call by leveraging its niche in Applied Social Sciences to launch fee-free short courses rooted in social innovation and community. These initiatives were informed by the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model, which focuses on mobilising local assets, skills, knowledge and resources to address community needs. Drawing from international benchmarks such as Germany's Berlin Neighbourhood Management Programme and Austria's university-led recovery models, ZOU's approach aimed to turn academic knowledge into tangible benefits.

A notable example was the institution's response to a Herald article by Tendai Rupapa (19 July 2021) highlighting social vulnerability of sex workers who ply lucrative Harare Central Business District streets at night. A woman's plea for Early Childhood Education training opportunity inspired ZOU to partner with Angel of Hope Foundation on a short course training programme. This partnership catalysed the rollout of several fee-free short courses across all the ten provinces, aligning with Heritage-based Education 5.0. The short-course training programme emphasises practical needs-driven community empowerment. The initiative sought to replace spiteful survival strategies with viable, self-sustaining livelihoods. In implementing the short-course training programme, ZOU assumed that community members already had

foundational knowledge and were aware of the university's presence through its nationwide campuses. This assumption supported efforts to deepen community engagement and tailor-make content to suit local contexts.

The study was grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Contingency Theory, the ABCD Model and the Critical Engagement Process. The Contingency Theory argues for context-specific strategies, acknowledging that institutions must adapt solutions to their unique environments. ZOU's approach, rooted in its academic niche, exemplifies this adaptive, demand-driven engagement. The Critical Engagement Process emphasises co-identifying community needs, co-designing solutions and collaborative implementation, ensuring mutual benefit and ownership. Participatory methods such as community-led needs assessments, collaborative data collection and feedback mechanisms were employed to ensure interventions remained relevant and impactful. Ethical engagement, critical pedagogy, and inclusive innovation anchored the process.

Organisationally, ZOU adopted an organic, bottom-up structure aligned with Heritage-based Education 5.0 principles. Drawing from Burns and Stalker (1961) and Frédéric Laloux's *Teal Paradigm*, the University emphasises decentralised decision-making, flexibility and community ownership. Martha Feldman's work on inclusive public management further reinforces the value of participatory governance for sustainable development. In sum, ZOU's initiatives demonstrate how higher education institutions can operationalise Heritage-Based Education 5.0 through community-led, heritage-based approaches that foster social innovation, empower local populations and contribute meaningfully to national development goals. Future collaborations with the Angel of Hope Foundation, among others should continue applying these frameworks to ensure sustained impact and relevance.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative, ethnographic design to explore community perceptions of ZOU's implementation of heritage-based, community-led Heritage-Based Education 5.0. Ethnography was chosen for its effectiveness in capturing the lived experiences, social dynamics and cultural beliefs of communities, providing deep, contextually grounded insights (Crossman, 2020). A purposive sample of 16 participants was selected, including 10 community members who had completed at least two fee-free short courses from five different regional campuses. The sample reflected diversity in age groups and disability status. In addition, three regional directors and three course coordinators were included to offer institutional perspectives. Data collection methods involved face-to-face interviews, telephone-administered open-ended questionnaires and direct observations. Informed consent and ethical protocols were strictly followed.

To enhance credibility, data triangulation was employed by combining interviews, observations and narrative accounts. Probing questions were used to clarify ambiguous responses and follow-up calls verified key information. Participant narratives brought authenticity and emotional depth, while the inclusion of direct quotes helped validate the thematic interpretations. Literature was reviewed concurrently to contextualise emerging findings. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes. Data were repeatedly read, coded and organised, with related findings grouped accordingly. Triangulation and crystallisation techniques ensured the robustness of the results. Findings were then structured in relation to the research questions, supplemented by applicable supporting literature.

The primary research question focused on how ZOU responded to the parent Ministry's call for community engagement under Heritage-based Education 5.0. Motivated by humanitarian concerns in Epworth, ZOU partnered with the Angel of Hope Foundation to co-develop short, practical and accessible training programmes aimed at knowledge and skills development, leading to community upliftment. These interventions aligned with Vision 2030 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 5 (gender equality). ZOU's faculties collaboratively designed fee-free short courses based on community needs, incorporating practices from India's participatory approaches and the ABCD model. The initiative emphasised restoring lost skills, introducing new competencies and promoting lifelong learning particularly, among marginalised groups, including women and persons with disabilities.

The Angel of Hope Foundation played a vital role in mobilising communities across all 10 provinces, facilitating trust and widespread participation. Strategic meetings and planning sessions between ZOU and local provincial community leaders were instrumental in aligning course offerings with local realities and national development priorities. The findings derived from interviews, observations, informal conversations and document analysis were analysed using situational analysis and contingency theory. These frameworks helped assess how theoretical intentions matched real-life outcomes and informed adaptive strategies. International models from Germany and Austria, where university-community partnerships have been leveraged for socio-economic resilience, served as comparative benchmarks.

In summary, the study demonstrates how ZOU evolved its understanding of community engagement from a peripheral function to a core institutional mandated strategy arising from redefining its openness. By focusing on needs-based, asset-driven interventions, ZOU has begun to reposition itself as a driver of local empowerment, social innovation, and inclusive development in line with Heritage-based Education 5.0.

Results

The partnership between ZOU and the Angel of Hope Foundation was central to the success of the fee-free short courses initiative. Across all age groups and provinces, participants expressed deep appreciation for the opportunity to engage with higher education in a practical, inclusive and accessible format,

We are humbled by ZOU coming to train us, regardless of our education level. We never imagined interacting with professors and the Vice Chancellor. We are truly grateful.

Elderly participants noted that the initiative reignited their desire to learn and emphasised their role in Zimbabwe's development. This strategic collaboration not only facilitated access to education but also built trust and empowered communities through shared ownership and relevance.

A 74-year-old woman from Hurungwe who, after receiving a certificate of training in agriculture, after having attended school up to Standard One, never thought that one day she would complete a course. Wiping tears of joy, she remarked,

I am very grateful for getting this opportunity. This is like a dream. Apart from acquiring farming knowledge and skills, I now boast of a certificate that I failed to acquire many years ago.

The study revealed that ZOU's response to Heritage-Based Education 5.0 was intentional and aligned with national goals. Using the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model, ZOU designed and delivered need-based, fee-free short courses across all 10 provinces. The Angel of Hope Foundation supported mobilisation efforts, ensuring wide community

participation. Participants viewed the courses as a return to learning and a source of personal transformation which they described as a ‘back-to-school philosophy.’

Course content was adapted based on feedback, with suggestions for additional hands-on training in areas such as sewing, construction and entrepreneurship. The initiative was governed by ZOU’s Community Engagement and Innovation Policy, ensuring alignment with the principles of heritage-based, community-led development.

Initially, some participants were unfamiliar with ZOU and even confused it with internet service provider ZOL. However, the outreach clarified ZOU’s identity as a national open university offering flexible, distance learning. Community members appreciated ZOU’s inclusive teaching methods and saw it as a supportive institution that met local needs. Health, agriculture and ICT courses were particularly impactful, changing perceptions of universities as exclusive spaces. The initiative enhanced ZOU’s public profile and relevance. Many participants recommended the introduction of civic education at all levels, including short courses and formal qualifications. They emphasised its role in national consciousness, resource protection and heritage preservation, ‘if civic education is introduced, learners will understand Zimbabwe’s history and learn to protect its heritage from a young age.’

Community leaders also echoed this, urging ZOU to strengthen its presence at public events and collaborate with local talents to drive national development. Participants frequently described gaining a renewed sense of identity and confidence through the short courses. Certificates, even at entry-level, were symbolic achievements that instilled pride as consensually felt by most participants. One highlighted, “We could read and count but had never received a certificate until today. Now, we have something to show my children.”

After the piloted launches and short course training one of the key informants with disability echoed, “Learning sign language boosted my confidence. My peers even asked me to teach them it showed me that disability is not inability.”

Multi-generational participation, from teenagers to the elderly, reflected widespread community interest. Observations during training and graduation ceremonies confirmed strong engagement and emotional investment from both learners and their families.

ZOU’s approach reflected the holistic intent of Heritage-Based Education 5.0 by integrating community engagement, teaching, research, innovation and industrialisation. The fee-free short courses not only equipped participants with knowledge but also fostered creativity, collaboration and entrepreneurship.

Themes of sustainability, ethics and inclusion were embedded throughout the programme. Practical sessions on farming, ICT and early childhood development demonstrated how academic content could be translated into tangible benefits. Feedback loops ensured continuous course improvement and peer learning during training sessions created a dynamic, inclusive learning environment. ZOU’s initiative mirrored the human-centred focus of Society 5.0 and affirmed the university’s commitment to inclusive national development.

Despite the programme’s success, challenges emerged. Lecturers reported increased workloads and pressure from late registrants. Some initially underestimated community interest and had to adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. While most staff eventually embraced the programme as a key innovation strategy, a few questioned how it differed from past outreach

efforts. This highlighted a need for ongoing staff reorientation to align fully with the values and expectations of Heritage-Based Education 5.0, particularly in viewing community engagement as central rather than supplementary.

The ZOU-Angel of Hope Foundation partnership was widely praised as a practical embodiment of Vision 2030 and Heritage-Based Education 5.0. The collaboration validated the ABCD model by tapping into existing community assets. Demand for short courses remains high across ZOU's regional campuses, with continuous calls for course expansion and certification upgrades. Participants acknowledged how the initiative changed perceptions about universities and increased awareness of ZOU's broader mandate. Many expressed intentions to apply their new skills enterprisingly, in line with Zimbabwe's national ethos: *A nation is built by its citizens*.

Discussion

This study explored how the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) responded to the national call for heritage-based, community-led Heritage-Based Education 5.0. In doing so, ZOU leveraged its regional infrastructure to provide fee-free, demand-driven short courses targeting marginalised communities. This aligns with Smerek et al. (2005), who argue that universities must evolve to meet growing societal expectations. ZOU's initiative demonstrates such responsiveness by linking academic knowledge with grassroots needs. Despite the broader challenges universities often face in embedding social innovation into academic functions (Rao, 2016; Hall, 2010; van Eeden et al., 2021), ZOU made deliberate efforts to integrate community engagement as a core institutional activity. Heritage-Based Education 5.0 emphasises five pillars - teaching, research, community engagement, innovation and industrialisation (MHTEISTD 2020). ZOU's approach embraced this model, with a particular focus on empowering underserved communities through practical, skills-based learning.

The ZOU-Angel of Hope Foundation partnership was a strategic response that combined academic expertise with community mobilisation capacity. The initiative reflected the national development philosophy of "leaving no one and no place behind," and it resonated with participants living with disabilities, who emphasised that inclusive development must fully involve them, not only as beneficiaries but as co-creators of educational initiatives. Despite Zimbabwe's economic challenges, ZOU emerged as an anchor institution, bridging educational gaps in underserved regions. However, as da Lange (2012) cautions, universities require sufficient resources to maintain meaningful engagements. Participants pointed out key challenges such as limited ICT infrastructure, lack of computers and venue constraints to which they proposed that urgent attention be given since it's a very essential in the era we are living in. They further suggested improvements in resourcing, particularly for practical courses like building, sewing and hairstyling, indicating strong demand for hands-on, entrepreneurial training.

These findings reinforce Adriansen's (2016) and Boyer's (1990) arguments that universities must move beyond insular academic priorities and address real-world issues. The absence of coherent community engagement models in some contexts, including South Africa and Zimbabwe, highlights the need for localised, responsive frameworks (CHE, 2004). Participants confirmed that the skills and knowledge acquired empowered them personally and socially. The initiative fostered a mindset shift toward self-reliance, public service and lifelong learning all of which promotes development into upper-middle-income status by 2030. Participants advocated for the integration of civic education into national curricula to promote identity, heritage consciousness and national pride. Their call to understand Zimbabwe's path to

independence and its historical struggles aligns with Ohmer et al. (2022), who advocate for reciprocal, asset-based university-community engagement.

Despite logistical challenges such as long distances, financial limitations and shortages of equipment, the programme generated a strong spirit of solidarity. Community members formed learning groups and expressed commitment to sharing knowledge, sustaining development and applying newly acquired skills enterprisingly. ZOU's nationwide launches ensured inclusivity and visibility, contributing to its public image and institutional reach. Nampala, Kityo and Adipala (2016) affirm that universities play a critical role in driving development through a combined mission of teaching, research and community outreach. Heritage-Based Education 5.0 expands this mission by introducing innovation and industrialisation, both of which ZOU incorporated into its short courses. All this confirms the nobleness of ZOU response to Heritage-Based Education 5.0 philosophy.

To sustain momentum, participants recommended expanding partnerships, improving resourcing and embedding community engagement in ZOU's academic programming. Shephard (2020) emphasises that effective engagement must be transformative and curriculum-integrated, not merely seen as external outreach. The appointment of a National Social Innovation Manager and 10 Regional Social Innovation Coordinators by the Vice Chancellor reflected a strategic institutional shift toward embedded engagement. This structure formalised ZOU's commitment to community development and further enabled reciprocal learning between the university and the communities it serves. Participants across disciplines highlighted the transformative impact of the fee-free short courses. The lessons learnt include:

- **Renewed Identity and Self-Worth:** Participants from the Arts, Culture and Heritage course described the experience as “being born again.” The training reignited a sense of cultural pride and responsibility to give back to their communities.
- **Improved Social Understanding:** Nurse Aide and Palliative Care participants shared how the training helped them better understand elderly relatives with dementia—correcting misconceptions and fostering intergenerational respect.
- **Inclusive Communication:** Parents of children with disabilities expressed appreciation for the sign language and disability management courses. These empowered them to communicate more effectively and support their children more confidently.
- **Legal Empowerment:** Participants in legal education courses gained awareness of their rights and the justice system. Many previously lacked the knowledge of how to access legal support or resolve conflicts appropriately.
- **Entrepreneurial Aspirations:** Business and Entrepreneurship participants expressed a clear intent to use their skills for self-employment and income generation, viewing the training as a pathway out of dependency.
- **Exposure to Higher Education:** Across all groups, participants expressed gratitude for interacting with professors and lecturers. For many, this marked their first direct contact with higher education, which boosted confidence and encouraged continued learning.

These experiences collectively affirmed the value of community-based, inclusive education in building social capital and promoting national development and the study considers this the foundation promoting development into upper-middle-income status by 2030.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social innovation must be a core component of higher education's mission — not a peripheral activity. ZOU's initiative effectively responded to Heritage-Based Education 5.0 by aligning academic outreach with community needs through inclusive, heritage-based and practical learning. The rollout of fee-free short courses through regional

campuses reflected ZOU's capacity to democratise education and promote lifelong learning. The initiative empowered marginalised groups, restored confidence and bridged gaps between academia and community realities. Participants left with new knowledge, skills and a renewed sense of purpose-illustrating the potential of universities to be catalysts for societal transformation. For lasting impact, these efforts must be supported by structured policies, sustainable funding and expanded partnerships.

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Align academic programming with national priorities: Universities should ensure their teaching, research and engagement efforts are aligned with Vision 2030, NDS1, and Heritage-based Education 5.0.
- Develop comprehensive community engagement policies: Institutions should draft or review their engagement policies to reflect heritage-based, socially applied and development-focused goals.
- Revise curricula to promote practical, community-oriented learning: Academic programmes should include real-world application, social innovation and community-driven projects.
- Sustain and expand strategic partnerships: Partnerships like that between ZOU and the Angel of Hope Foundation should be maintained and scaled up. Additional partners sharing similar visions should be identified.
- Regularly update and diversify short courses: Courses must remain relevant and responsive to evolving community needs, especially in entrepreneurship, ICT, civic education and vocational skills.
- Introduce civic education across all levels: Civic education modules should be tailored to different age groups and incorporated into both school and community education to foster national identity, historical awareness and responsible citizenship.
- Improve infrastructure and resource availability: Universities must invest in better ICT resources, accessible venues and practical tools to support effective delivery of community-based learning.

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