ISSN NO. 2320-5407

Journal homepage: http://www.journalijar.com

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH

RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPEDIMENTS FACED BY OPEN AND DISTANCE INSTITUTIONS IN THE DECENTRALISING SERVICES

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History:

Received: 22 May 2013
Final Accepted: 30 May 2013
Published Online: June 2013

Abstract

This survey sought to establish the impediments hindering the decentralisation of its services to district centres. The population for the study was made up of 10 Regional Directors and 10 regional administrators. Due to the figures, all the members of the population took part in the study as respondents to questionnaires which were adopted for the collection of data. Presentation and analysis of data was both through quantitative and qualitative procedures. The present found out that the majority of the respondents indicated that buildings were available whereas only a few indicated that buildings were available to a less extent. ICT gadgets were available as these were felt to be a very essential component of ODL. Library facilities were not a problem as all the ten regions had libraries but what was lacking in these ten regions was the internet connectivity. Most respondents pointed out that the knowledge of distance education they had was low and this has a direct negative impact on the way distance education is handled. There were no vehicles for use in the district centres. Based on the above findings, it was concluded that buildings have to a less extent contributed to the university`s inability to decentralise services to district offices. ICT gadgets are not a challenge towards the decentralisation of services as these were available and are a very essential component of ODL. Decentralisation of services was viable due to Internet connectivity. The unavailability of vehicles curtailed work on decentralisation of services. A good number of the respondents have a poor knowledge of distance education and this has a direct negative impact on the way distance education is handled. Inadequate training in management also impacted heavily on the decentralisation process. The study recommended that the university should avail ICT gadgets and offer ICT training to the lecturers and other staff to equip them in readiness for the decentralisation that needs heavy reliance on ICT. Training in distance education theories should be undertaken to improve the process of decentralising services to district centres. Staff should also be well versed in the knowledge of distance education theories as this will enable them to deliver their tutorials effectively in a decentralised set up. It was also recommended that forging synergies with other stakeholders is important in decentralising services to district centres since these will provide infrastructure and other requirements to the university.

Introduction

Decentralisation is the policy of delegating decision-making authority down to the lower levels in an organization. These decisions or policies are then enforced through several tiers of the organization after gradually broadening the span of control until it reaches the bottom tier. One advantage of this

structure, if the correct controls are in place, will be the bottom-to-top flow of information, allowing decisions by officials of the organisation to be well informed about lower tier operations. It is for this reason that ODL institutions have found it worthy to decentralise mostly to cater for the geographically dispersed students. The ZOU with the intention of bringing education to the students` doorsteps has decentralised to 10 geo-political regions and 1 virtual region catering for the students outside the country, wherever they might be. This endeavour, however, has not had the impact that was envisaged at the inception. This survey therefore, sought to establish the impediments hindering the decentralisation of its services to district centres.

Background of the study

ZOU is the only state Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, established on 1st March 1999 through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20). Initially the university operated as the Centre for Distance Education at the University of Zimbabwe before its transformation to the University College of Distance Education. After this transformation, ZOU was granted its own charter to operate as a fully fledged university. ZOU is the largest university in the country and second largest in Southern Africa compared to the University of South Africa. Currently, in 2012, ZOU has four faculties; the Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, offering over 60 diploma and degree programmes. Students are drawn from the country`s ten geo-political provinces as well as the Virtual Region encompassing students outside the country, wherever they may be in the world.

Statement of the problem

Open and Distance Learning institutions have the option to build, buy, or lease the premises for learning centres and equip them with the relevant and appropriate material, but how effective have these district learning centres been run? The present study therefore, seeks to answer the question: What are the impediments that affect the decentralisation of services to district centres in Zimbabwe?

Research questions

The present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Does the university have the necessary infrastructure to decentralise services to the districts centres?
2. How equipped are the lecturers to offer services in the decentralised set up?
3. What can be done to enhance the process of decentralisation of service to district centres?

Literature review

The rationale for distance education from its earliest days has been to open opportunity for learners to study regardless of geographic, socio-economic or other constraints (UNESCO, 2002). Before we look at the different literature, it is imperative to briefly define the term distance education. Perraton (2000) defines distance education as any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print. By definition, in distance education the normal or principal means of communication is through technology (UNESCO, 2002).

Defining the term decentralisation

In many open and distance learning programmes the delivery of learning materials and support to learners is provided through a series of regional learning centres. UNESCO (2002) argues that district and regional centre networks afford a number of advantages. Among these are the advantages that:

- they provide localised, personalised service to learners
- they strengthen the local identity of the programme or institution
- they can be an important marketing tool;
- they can reduce turnaround time in the return of feedback to learners on assignments
- they can provide enhanced support to learners via laboratories, library resources, computing facilities, and audio and video conferencing
- they provide sites for regular meetings and tutorials
- they provide the programme with direct feedback on its performance.

However, these and other services may not be fully provided because of a number of challenges, which are the main thrust of this study.

The present study is based on the learning centre model as propounded by UNESCO (2002).

The learning centre model

The providing organisation establishes a number of learning centres throughout a region or country to

which learners come to meet with their tutors. Sometimes the providing organisation builds, buys, or leases the premises for these learning centres. In other instances the learning centres are operated in collaboration with another organisation such as a school, college, or community group. Organisations may provide a variety of related services at the centres, including

- registration
- course materials distribution
- examination supervision
- mail drops for assignments
- informing learners of their grades in assignments and examinations
- providing access to computers, audio and video conferencing, and library resources.

Previous studies

Availability of necessary infrastructure to decentralise services to the districts centres

Mpofu et al (2012) carried out a study in rural Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. They established that power outages were a problem in the district centres created by the University for its Vocational Open Distance Learning (VODL) programme. The problem of electricity created problems of integration of ICT tools (e-mail, fax, Internet, television, radio, etc.) which are an important aspect of ODL.

Available literature also points to lack of equipment, apparatus, and consumables for practicals. Poor physical infrastructure and limited resources promoted the use of traditional teaching approaches. No practical work was conducted, except a practical component for computer science at one centre during the first residential session, divorcing theory from practice. Other resources which are in short supply include reading material, stationery, and furniture (Mpofu et al, 2012; UNESCO, 2002). Therefore there is some agreement to the fact that lack of infrastructure has curtailed the decentralisation of services in ODL. Lack of resources in developing countries is obvious, and becomes more acute as demographic trends increase the need to expand educational provision (UNESCO, 2001b).

The state of preparedness by lecturers to offer services in the decentralised set up

Most of the lecturers who have to set up and supervise, coordinate and recruit staff for the district centres have no experience in distance education (Mpofu et al, 2012). Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) argue that *i*nadequate human capacity is a major setback in the establishment of ODL institutions. They also assert that lack of infrastructure and professional competence in open and distance learning is a significant barrier. There is a shortage of qualified staff required for guiding and influencing the development of distance education policies, and for planning, developing, managing, and evaluating distance education programmes, thereby concurring with Mpofu et al (2012).

Another area that is of serious concern is the ICT. In Zimbabwe, like in any Third World country, access to the computer is yet to be realised, even by the most affluent of citizens. The major shortcoming in the use of these technologies is that the majority of citizens do not have access to computers because they are very expensive to acquire. What seems disturbing about the introduction of high technology in African distance education is the fact that high technology is expensive and, therefore, beyond the reach of many would be providers of and learners in distance education programmes. As a central element, rather than a learning aid in distance education programme, computers mediated communication smacks of more problems than solutions (Kangai et al, 2010).

In the area of research, Yusuf and Onasanya (2004) posit that ICT resources enable communication between scholars as they can post research, assignments, books or journal lists references to on-line materials. Problems and solution can be discussed between researchers and scholars can react to the work of others in an electronic manuscript. The ICTs can facilitate research in any discipline as they provide quicker and easier access to more extensive and current information through digital libraries that provide digitised full-text resources to learners and researchers

Jeffries (2002) acknowledges that educators are a key element in establishing the use of ICT in education and teacher education but many teacher educators themselves lack skills and training in the use of ICT or the equipment to apply and develop their knowledge and skills, once gained. Jeffries (2002) acknowledges that educators are a key element in establishing the use of ICT in education and teacher education but many teacher educators themselves lack skills and training in the use of ICT or the equipment to apply and develop their knowledge and skills, once gained.

Effective management and administration needs not only competent staff, but also well designed, efficient administrative systems and routines, planning and monitoring systems, budgetary and accounting systems etc. Many of these will be quite different from the corresponding systems needed in the

management of other forms of education (UNESCO, 2002; Siaciwena and Lubinda, 2008).

What can be done to enhance the process of decentralisation of service to district centres?

A study by Bukaliya and Dzimano (2012) argues that some skilled mentor is required to assist the lecturers go through the paces of using ICTs as opposed to throwing them into the deep side of the pool and asking them to swim when they were just novices. This lack of and unavailability of adequate training programmes resulted in lack of competence in the use of the web by potential would be users (Gambari and Okoli, 2007). However, the Zimbabwe Open University had also appointed ICT technicians for each of the ten regions to service and update the gadgets.

A range of technological devices is now widely available and relatively cheap (for example, CD-ROM, various Internet services). They are accepted and often available for domestic use as well as in the workplace. Governments are concerned that educational institutions become connected to the emerging networks, that curricula include the knowledge of and acquaintance with new technologies, and that teachers are prepared and trained to use these new resources.

According to UNESCO (2002), Internet devices make it possible on the one hand for larger numbers of people to share a common learning experience, in real time, or on the other, to enable an individual learner to have a unique personal interaction with a teacher or with another learner, no matter where located. This therefore, makes the service very effective at the district centre. Among the benefits expected from new information and communication technologies, besides that of outreach, are efficiencies derived from economies of scale and qualitative improvements such as greater individualisation of learning, easier access to information, and more use of simulation techniques.

Methodology

The present study is a survey carried out to establish the impediments that affect the decentralisation of services to district centres. Being a survey, the questionnaire was used to gather data for the present study. The questionnaire was pretested in a pilot study. This ensured high probability of the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the findings of the study.

Population and Sample

The population for the study was made up of 10 Regional Directors and 10 regional administrators. Due to the figures, all the 20 members of the population took part in the study as respondents to questionnaires.

Table 1: Availability of infrastructure to decentralise services to the districts centres

Infrastructure	Available		Available to a less extent		Not available at all	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Buildings	10	50	6	30	4	20
ICT gadgets	16	80	4	20	0	0
Internet connectivity	12	60	4	20	2	10
Electricity	20	100	0	0	0	0
Furniture	16	80	4	20	0	0
Vehicles	4	16	16	80	0	0
Library facilities	20	100	0	0	0	0

Data presentation and discussion

Table 1 shows that 10(50%) remarked that buildings were available whereas 6(30%) indicated that buildings were available to a less extent. Four (20%) indicated that buildings were not available at all. These respondents should be from those regions which are accommodated entirely on rented buildings. As regards ICT gadgets, an overwhelming majority of 16(80%) stated that these ICTs were available whereas only 4(20%) indicated that ICT gadgets were available to a less extent. It is therefore noted from these findings that some regions still find themselves without ICT gadgets. On Internet connectivity 12(60%) of the respondents pointed that they have internet connectivity in their areas of work and 4(20%) are of the opinion that the internet connectivity is available to a less extent. These regions could be partially connected in terms of internet and regions such as Mashonaland East which operate from two centres where one is

connected and the other is not falls in this category All the respondents agreed that they have electricity but they were also quick to point out that electrical load shedding was hampering their work Eighty percent of the respondents submitted that they have furniture and twenty percent pointed out that furniture was available to a lesser extent .The possible reason for the respondents who expressed skepticism with regards to furniture availability could be stemming from the fact that some regions rent furniture and buildings from other institutions especially during examination period Only 16% of the respondents are of the opinion that vehicles are available to do their day to day activities but the majority of the respondents(80%) submitted that vehicles are available to a less extent.Most regions are known to operate with only one vehicle for the various university activities and this inevitably negatively affect the operations of the university especially marketing activities and visits to the district centres. All the ten regions have libraries but what is lacking in these ten regions is the internet connectivity .In this era of technological development it is imperative that a university library should have internet facilities so as to facilitate effective research by students.

Table 2: The extent to which the lecturers are equipped to offer services in the decentralised set up

Aspect	Available		Available to less extent		Not available at all	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
ICT training	10	50	8	40	2	10
Knowledge of distance education	4	20	16	80	0	0
Management training	4	20	16	80	0	0
Possession of ICT gadgets	20	100	0	0	0	0

Table 3: Measures to enhance the process of decentralisation of service to district centres

Measures	Number	%
Avail ICT gadgets	16	80
ICT training	20	100
Training in distance education theories	18	90
Training in basic management	16	80
Forging synergies with other stakeholders	14	70
Purchasing instead of leasing buildings	10	50
Fundraising for the district centres	18	90

Fifty percent of the lecturers have received ICT training and are able to assist students using ICT but 8(40%) of the lecturers have been trained to a lesser extent with regards to ICT and hence their ICT competence is partial. Taking into consideration the fact that ICT forms the pillar of distance education it therefore means that these lecturers are ill equipped to adequately assist the students. Eighty percent of the respondents pointed out that the knowledge of distance education they have is low and this has a direct negative impact on the way distance education is handled. This finding could also be explained historically since most of the lectures went through the convectional educational system hence their knowledge on distance education is low. Only 20% of the respondents had received some form of training management and this implies that these lectures are ill equipped to deal with the decentralisation of services. Hundred percent of the respondents are in possession of ICT gadgets and this is a very good development as these lecturers are able to interact with these ICT gargets often hence improve on their ICT competence.

Availing ICT gadgets and ICT training were measures mentioned by 80% and 100% of the respondents respectively as measures which can be taken to enhance the process of decentralising services to the district centres. Training in distance education theories has also be cited by 90% of the respondents as a major measure which can be undertaken to improve the process of decentralising services to district centres. Knowledge in distance education theories will enable to be able to deliver their tutorials effectively. Training in basic management was cited by eighty percent of the respondents as very crucial to the process of decentralising services to district centres. For

effective management of programmes the lectures need to be able to manage the various programmes without much assistance from the national centre. Forging synergies with other stakeholders has been regarded as very important by 70% of the respondents as important in decentralising services to district centres. Purchasing instead of leasing buildings also assist in the organisation saving a lot of money. This was cited by 50%of the respondents Fundraising for the district centres so that they can build their own buildings, and buy their adequate resources was overwhelmingly cited 90% of the respondents

Major findings of the study

The following were the major findings of the study:

- The majority of the respondents indicated that buildings were available whereas only a few indicated that buildings were available to a less extent.
- ICT gadgets were available as these were felt to be a very essential component of ODL.
- Internet connectivity was available at the centres and places of work according to the majority of the respondents though only a few regions were of the opinion that the internet connectivity is available to a less extent.
- All the respondents agreed that they had electricity but they were also quick to point out that electrical load shedding was hampering their work
- Another overwhelming majority of eighty percent of the respondents submitted that they had furniture and twenty percent pointed out that furniture was available to a lesser extent.
- Only 16% of the respondents were of the opinion that vehicles are available to do their day to day activities but the majority of the respondents (80%) submitted that vehicles are available to a less extent.
- Library facilities were not a problem as all the ten regions had libraries but what was lacking in these ten regions was the internet connectivity.
- Most of the lecturers had received ICT training and are able to assist students using ICT but some 40% of the lecturers had been trained to a lesser extent with regards to ICT and hence their ICT competence is inadequate.
- Eighty percent of the respondents pointed out that the knowledge of distance education they had was low and this has a direct negative impact on the way distance education is handled.
- Only a few lecturers responded that they had received some form of training management.
- All the respondents were in possession of ICT gadgets and this was a very good development as these lecturers were able to interact with these ICT gargets often hence improve on their ICT competence.

Conclusions

Based on the above findings, it was concluded that:

- Buildings have to a less extent contributed to the university`s inability to decentralise services to district offices.
- ICT gadgets are not a challenge towards the decentralisation of services as these were available and are a very essential component of ODL.
- Only a few regional centres are not hooked to the net, thus decentralisation of services is viable.
- All the respondents agreed that they had electricity but they were also quick to point out that electrical load shedding was hampering their work
- Another overwhelming majority of eighty percent of the respondents submitted that they had furniture and twenty percent pointed out that furniture was available to a lesser extent.
- Unavailability of vehicles curtailed work on decentralisation of services
- Library facilities are not a problem as all the ten regions have libraries but a few have no internet connectivity and this may jeopardise decentralisation efforts.
- Most of the lecturers have received ICT training and are able to assist students using ICT but some of the lecturers have been trained to a lesser extent with regards to ICT and hence their ICT competence is inadequate thus they may not handle the decentralisation system adequately.
- A good number of the respondents have poor knowledge of distance education and this has a direct negative impact on the way distance education is handled.
- Inadequate training in management impacts heavily on the decentralisation process.
- All the respondents are in possession of ICT gadgets and this is a very good development as these lecturers were able to interact with

these ICT gargets often hence improve on their ICT competence.

Recommendation

Based on the above conclusions, the study recommends that:

- The university should avail ICT gadgets and offer ICT training to the lecturers and other staff to equip them in readiness for the decentralisation that needs heavy reliance on ICT.
- Training in distance education theories should be undertaken to improve the process of decentralising services to district centres.
- Staff should be well versed in the knowledge of distance education theories as this will enable them to deliver their tutorials effectively in a decentralised set up.
- There is also need for training in basic management as is very crucial to the process of decentralising services to district centres as lectures need to be able to manage the various programmes without much assistance from the national centre.
- Forging synergies with other stakeholders is important in decentralising services to district centres since these will provide infrastructure and other requirements to the university.
- Purchasing instead of leasing buildings is also recommended in order to assist the organisation in saving a lot of money.
- Fundraising for the district centres so that they can build their own buildings, and buy adequate resources.

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