



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

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

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF ADVANCED RESEARCH

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## FOSTERING ODL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL GROWTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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### Manuscript Info

#### Manuscript History:

Received: 10 November 2013

Final Accepted: 25 November 2013

Published Online: December 2013

#### Key words:

### Abstract

This study was a survey carried out to establish how community service programmes could bring about community development at the same time attaining institutional growth for the Zimbabwe Open University. In order to solicit data from respondents, questionnaires and group discussions were used. A sample of 40 lecturers and 100 students was chosen through a combination of the convenience and stratified simple random sampling. The study found out that the majority of the students and faculty were willing to take part in community service programmes which inevitably promoted the growth of the university while bringing about community development. Focus group discussions in the Faculty of Science and Technology, Department of Agriculture revealed that being a predominantly farming community, Mashonaland east farmers stood to benefit from the collaboration in areas such as tobacco growing, poultry production and horticulture. Responses from the Applied Social Sciences indicate that there were also a number of activities that could be carried out for institutional growth while at the same time bringing about social and economic development in the community. Some potential activities included teaching of sign language, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, Guidance and Counselling and campaigns against domestic violence. While the community benefitted from the programmes offered socially and economically, the university's visibility in the community was bound to increase resulting in high enrollments. The nominal fee paid for the services by the community would go a long way in boosting the financial resource base of the university. The study recommended that the university should harnesses the resources in the two faculties and mobilise the community for the various programmes. The activities should be well planned and be supported by top management because if implemented well, they have propensity to drive economic and social development of communities to the advantage of the university.

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### Introduction

Cavaye (2006) contends that the community is both the means and end of community development. Indeed, this was also echoed by Ali (2010) when he argued that holistic participation of the community in its development is essential to ensure that the community itself can become more vital, improved and can make better decisions in utilising resources, labour, knowledge, infrastructure, environments and financial capital. Communities are the countrys building blocks and the foundation of any country which can depict its attitudes and drive its progress. According to Cavaye(2006), the notion of development suggests more than just growth . Ali (2010) argued that when we speak of growth, we may mean more jobs, more schools, more infrastructure and et cetera. However, the term development indicates an actual improvement in conditions, e.g. better healthcare, less environmental damage, better living conditions and better investment for the good of the community. Therefore an important thing to

understand is that the idea of community development means that the community engages itself in a process to improve its own economic, social and environmental status. In addressing the 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Commonwealth Education Ministers in 2003, Professor Amartya Sen spoke of the need to address human insecurities through basic education. Even in its most basic form, education (or rather the lack of it) influences people's ability to understand and communicate; it creates barriers where there should not be and it can seriously impinge on a country's ability to participate in a global economy. Ali pointed out that making education the foundation for a community development strategy should be a target for every single country. With the need to boost enrolment and programme uptake rates, alter public perceptions of Open and Distance Learning and help improve lives for different communities in Zimbabwe, there is need for innovations that will culminate in the creation of programmes and projects that will help address all the three stated problem areas. For faculty, students, both current and former, at the Zimbabwe Open University the opportunity should be grabbed in an attempt to bridge the gap between the university and the community. Through their institution, students and faculty need to understand and appreciate their responsibility in helping to solve community problems in their areas at the same time raising the stakes for distance education amidst threats from competing institutions. The purpose of this investigation was, therefore, to collect data concerning students' attitudes with regard to community service programmes with the belief that such an undertaking would help bringing about positive attitudes towards ODL among all the stakeholders. At the same time such programmes would assist the prospective students, both young and old, through creating awareness in them of the existence of ODL as the first choice mode obtaining tertiary qualifications.

### **Background of the study**

Research in ODL has established that stakeholders, among which are prospective students, parents and employers are not enthusiastic about most of the graduates attaining their qualifications through the distance mode (Harvey, 1993; Hinde, 1997). Furthermore, until recently, the quality of instruction and hence that of graduates of distance education institutions have been regarded as being inferior to that of traditional institutions (Bates 1995). Despite all the negative perceptions harboured by the community, the Zimbabwe Open University has continued to survive despite the skepticism about its ability to compete against the traditional institutions in terms of quality.

In Zimbabwe, the only accredited state university to offer degrees through distance education is the Zimbabwe Open University, an institution which was established to cater for people who could not be accommodated in conventional universities. ZOU was established on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1999 through an Act of parliament (Chapter 25:20). Currently, (in 2013), 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. These faculties are offering more than 60 degree programmes and over 3 diploma courses. Starting with an initial enrolment of 624 students registered for the Bachelor of Education degree programme ZOU had a student enrolment of 25000 between 1999 and 2001. In 2004, ZOU became the largest university in the country. However, between 2002 and 2008 there was a drastic downturn in terms of enrolment figures and programme uptake which saw student enrolment plummet to around 13 000. Partly due to the economic crisis that faced the country during the period in question, stakeholder perceptions of ODL also had its toll on the enrolment rates. Thus facing stiff competition from the various colleges and universities in the country, the Zimbabwe Open University must seek measures that competitively place it in a bid to woo clients. One way of luring potential customers is to introduce initiatives that help link with the communities; hence the need for community service based programmes.

### **Purpose of the study**

The current study aimed at changing community perceptions about studying through distance education through community service programmes as a way to link university work and community programmes. Data that was collected was concerning with student attitudes with regard to community service programmes with the purpose of informing interventions that could give rise to changes in stakeholders' perceptions of ODL and subsequently increase the enrolment figures and help retain students at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study also would like to look at how the community and the university can work together for them to benefit.

### **Research Questions**

The following sub problems stood as research questions:

1. What are the community service programmes that ODL students revere?

2. How can community service programmes be used to benefit both the community and the ODL institution?
3. How acceptable is community service to the students as part of the university curriculum?

## **Conceptual framework**

### **Defining community service programmes**

Community service programmes can be defined as a service volunteered by individuals or an organization to benefit a community or its institutions. Community service is donated service or activity that is performed by someone or a group of people for the benefit of the public or its institutions.

It is compulsory unpaid work including a specified number of hours of activities, such as conservation work, cleaning up graffiti, or working with a charity.

Volunteers may provide community service, however, not everyone who provides community service is seen as a volunteer, because some people who provide community service are not doing it of their own free will; they are compelled to do so. For example, their government as a part of citizenship requirements, in lieu of military service, the courts, in lieu of, or in addition to, other criminal justice sanctions; their school, to meet the requirements of a class, such as in the case of service learning or to meet the requirements of graduation, or, in the case of parents, required to provide a certain number of hours of service in order for their child to be enrolled in a school or sports team.

Some employers involve their staff in some kind of community service programming as part of the corporate social responsibility. This may be completely voluntary or a condition of employment, or anything in between.

Community service is a term used to describe the act of volunteering one's self in order to provide services and help benefit the community. Community service can be performed through cleaning roadways, helping the homeless, or even organizing charitable donations.

### **Theoretical framework**

Community service programmes result from Community Based Learning (CBL) which has been defined by Kamai and Nakabo (2002) as a broad set of teaching/learning strategies that enable youth and adults to learn what they want to learn from any segment of the community. The Community Service Act of 1990, which sees CBL as service-learning which it defines as a method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organised service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community under the coordination of an institution of education, so as to enhance the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled.

Community Based Learning may therefore be seen to be experiential learning where students and faculty collaborate with communities to address problems and issues. Simultaneously both are gaining knowledge and skills and advancing personal development. There is an equal emphasis on helping communities and providing valid learning experience to students. According to Schwartz cited in Bauer et al (2007), deciding whether or not to accept and participate in a humanitarian goes through phases. Schwartz came up with what has come to be known as the Altruistic Helping Behaviour Model which consists of four phases. The first phase reflects an individual's acknowledgement or awareness of a need for community service. This is followed by a belief that oneself is morally obligated to act on such awareness—the second phase. The third phase is an individual's evaluation of the costs and the benefits of participating in a community service activity. The fourth and final phase is an overt response, or an action that is taken with respect to community service. Theoretically, an individual passes through each phase in a sequential order before reaching the final phase in which the individual makes the decision to engage in community service. This framework can be adopted to solve community problems in institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University. With faculty initiative the programme can be fused into the university curriculum, however, not only due to its potential to solve societal problems but also to assist in the transformation of community attitudes towards ODL.

**Table 1: Areas to consider for community service programmes by faculty**

Faculty	Activity	Beneficiary
Arts and Education	Tutoring children with learning disabilities.	Schools
Applied Social Sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleaning nursing home gardens</li> <li>• Helping out at a local library.</li> <li>• Helping the elderly in nursing homes.</li> <li>• Cleaning a park.</li> <li>• Collecting items for charity such as clothes, food, or furniture.</li> </ul>	Community
Science and Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cleaning nursing home gardens</li> <li>• Helping the elderly in nursing homes.</li> <li>• Cleaning a park.</li> <li>• Cleaning roadside verges.</li> <li>• Engaging in environmental awareness campaigns</li> <li>• Sponsored walks for the benefit of various disadvantaged organisations</li> <li>• Reclamation of wasted land through, for example, donga closures</li> </ul>	Community
Commerce and Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing small scale traders, vendors and flea market stall owners with basic accounting procedures and entrepreneurship skills</li> </ul>	Community

**The benefits of participating in community service**

In some colleges and universities and even high schools, for example, one requirement for graduation is for students to accomplish a specified number of hours in community service. One obvious effect of this program is that students are, in fact, enjoying the programme. As these kids try to explore their interests in the various jobs available, they often come to know themselves better and feel a sense of achievement. In the process, they are able to serve others.

Community service provides the programmes and projects to serve and improve the immediate area in which the students work and reside. The skills they learn through community service are a constant presence in the future of their everyday life. They can be used in the workforce and ensures they know what they're doing when their company or corporation asks them to volunteer on their behalf.

According to Latham (2000), communities enjoy benefits far beyond the financial aspects when youth contribute to service projects. When youth volunteer, adults tend to volunteer also, resulting in a life long volunteer. The community will learn to appreciate gains obtained from working together with universities when these universities make a commitment to improve the lives of the ordinary people.

While benefits to the communities served can be translated to a monetary figure, the benefits reaped by the university community offering their service have a positive impact on them personally both immediate and into the future. Beyond the personal benefits, the volunteering communities are rewarded in society through appreciation whenever they offer voluntary service to different communities (Latham, 2000).

Some societies hold negative beliefs about some learning institutions in general. They look down upon some of the programmes on offer which they feel are not qualitative enough to be admired. In conventional systems, students are associated with rowdy behavior. The media portrays negative images of some universities. In community service programmes, opportunities provide an environment for people of different generations to work together for a common goal, as well as offering an opportunity for mutual understanding (Latham, 2000). Hence this may assist to a great extent, in removing the negative myths of distance education.

Major reasons cited by student for involvement in community programmes:

- Students feel compassion for people in need; they can do something for a cause in which they believe; they believe that if they help others, others will help them.
- Students think their efforts can have a positive impact on their communities.
- Students feel they gain important job skills and experience.
- Students expand their social circle and enhance their social awareness as well as that of their university.
- Student and the institution build connections.
- The community takes care of all its members because they have been empowered and may result in the reduction of crime courtesy of university involvement (Latham, 2000).

### **Role of open and distance learning institutions in community development**

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), were introduced to address eight major issues, i.e. poverty and hunger, basic education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, diseases, environmental sustainability and the Global Partnership for Development. These goals are both global and local. The MDG educational objective is to ensure universal primary enrolment, a target that has not been achieved by most developing Countries According to (UNDP, 2010), countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Niger and Djibouti still report a net enrolment ratio below 50 per cent. Ali (2010) is of the opinion that as we march further into the second decade of the new millennium, assuring continuity for individuals with basic education and coping with ever-growing demands at a national level are challenges that now fall on higher education. Universities are the place for knowledge generation that can drive and transform the community. The World Bank, in its 2000 report, states that higher education is a public interest; it can improve individual and societal lives, raise wages and productivity, bring cultural and political benefits as well as encourage independence and initiative. Further advantages for the community also include a better trained workforce, better tax streams, shelter, healthcare and improved national output. By unlocking the community's potential, universities help knowledgeable and talented people to gain advanced training and develop human capital into a key national resource. Through ODL university education, individuals can play a real part in creating an environment that will drive economic progress in their own communities.

(UNDP2010) report pointed out that nowadays communities need ODL universities and higher education more than ever before. ODL universities serve the people; they advise governments in policymaking decisions; they help develop skills, create knowledge and train leaders. They are at the centre of crucial research, through which a country can stimulate innovations as well as attract foreign investments and engage in scholarly and scientific commerce. When ODL universities are given the opportunity to thrive, they can also help to promote an open, modern, civil, tolerant and democratic community – for it is only through higher education that deeper ethical and moral values can be inculcated. The role of ODL universities in community development is to create a sense of equity for all individuals within that community. ODL education will prove vital for every single member of the community to have the opportunity to seek education and gainful employment.

Today's educational trend, especially through an approach like open and distance learning (ODL), leverages on technologies to deliver and complement academic programmes. Without commensurate technological infrastructure, the poor will remain deprived of both education and development. The investment in technologies is an imperative and will be the first step for many nations before they can truly progress in education. An equitable education also involves enhancing the quality of the workforce. It is necessary for the workforce to be imbued with knowledge and skills relevant to the current environment. Equitable access must thus also encompass access to quality education. At the higher education level, this is particularly pertinent. If universities attest their function as the grounds for knowledge creation, then the knowledge must also attest to be useful to their students, and at a larger scale, beneficial to the country. Therefore, educating the workforce has a direct impact on a country's economic output and the quality of life enjoyed by the community. ODL universities and higher education play a pivotal role in educating the work force. As asserted by Sharma (2010), ODL universities are uniquely positioned between communities and governments and are answerable to both. ODL and higher education institutions and communities

must work together to create, mobilise and apply knowledge that are needed in managing and creating sustainable community development initiatives.

The Zimbabwean Government has long ago realized that education and training are very important in bringing about socio-economic development. In an effort to buttress this idea, the Zimbabwe Open University has taken it upon itself in playing this role in educating and preparing people to participate meaningfully in their socio economic development. Since inception, Zimbabwe Open University has enabled thousands of teachers, nurses, human resources officers and many government workers to acquire degrees and diplomas. Zimbabwe Open University allows its staff members to work closely with the community so that they appreciate the problems in the community. The working together of the University and members of the community provides a fertile ground for shared understanding of important issues which affect both the University and the community. Open and Distance Learning enables people with families who are far away from a university campus to learn in their own environment and to immediately implement what has been learned. The communities can learn better ways of tackling some community problems like the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a result of collaborating with the universities in their areas.

### Methodology

In an attempt to establish students' attitudes towards community service programmes, this present research study went about collecting data from a convenience sample of drawn from students on their views on the efficacy of community service programmes in transforming the perceptions of stakeholders on the ODL mode of attaining education. The study was a descriptive survey targeting all students currently registered with the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region. These were chosen as respondents since they were the ones directly involved in the implementation of the programme. On these, questionnaires were administered to establish their views on the matter at hand.

### Population

The total population for the present study was made up of 560 students. The total population consisted of students from all the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University.

### Sample and sampling techniques

Out of the total population of 560 students, 100 were chosen into the sample. Convenience sampling was used owing to the geographical dispersion of the ODL students.

### Presentation and discussion of results

In general, male students had more positive attitudes with respect to community service than did female students. This result suggests that students believed negative perceptions currently held by some members of the public were likely going to change through their direct participation in community service programmes. As for the different age groups results show that the younger generation were more eager to engage in community work than the elder counterparts.

**Table1: Community service programmes students would prefer to carry out in the community**  
(N=100)

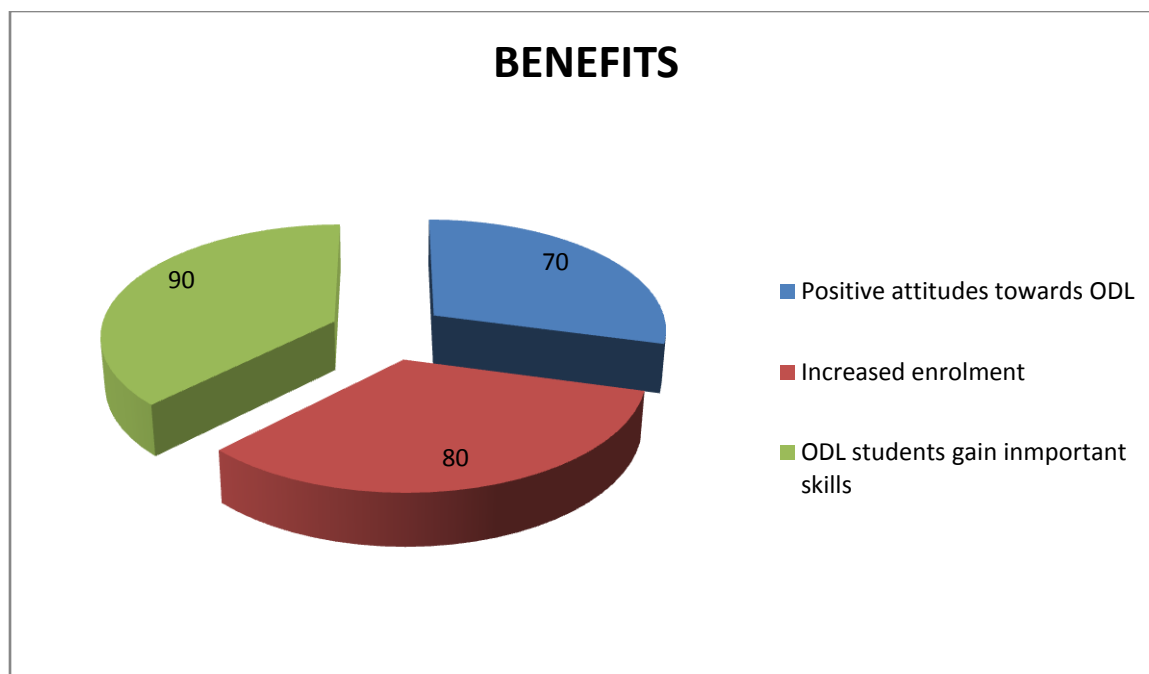
Community services programs	% Response
Environmental awareness	30
Charity work for nursing homes	75
Sponsored walks to raise money to assist HIV/AIDS orphans	70
Provision of basic agricultural knowledge	55

According to the results, 75% of the respondents indicated that they would prefer to carry out charity work for the nursing home, while 70% of the respondents pointed out that they would prefer to carry out sponsored walks to raise funds for assisting orphans and provision of basic agricultural knowledge respectively

### Benefits gained by ODL institutions through carrying out community activities

(N=100)

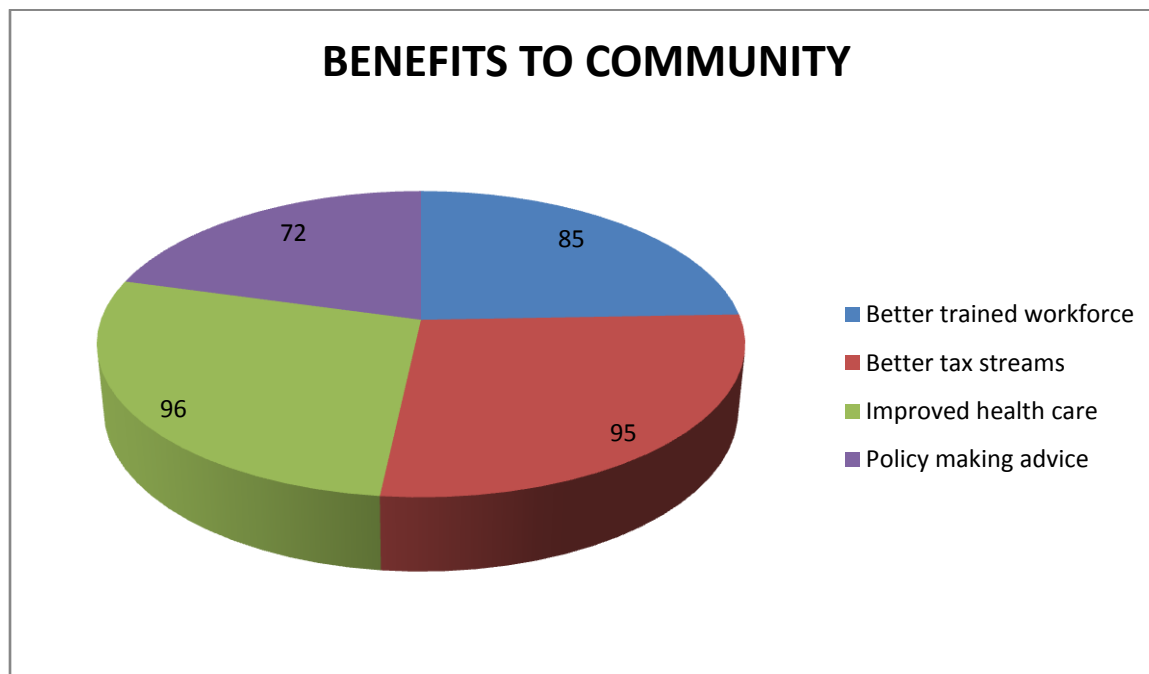




**Figure 1: Benefits gained by ODL institutions through carrying out community activities**

Ninety percent of the respondents pointed out that the ODL institution stand to gain in that their students gain important skills as a result of engaging in community service programmers. Seventy percent and 80% of the respondents respectively indicated that there is likely to be an increased positive attitudes to ODL education and an increased enrolment receptivity. These results are in concurrence with Latham (2000) who also pointed out that the skills students gain are a constant presence in the future of their everyday life.

**Benefits gained by the community through collaborating with ODL institutions**  
(N=100)



**Figure 2: Benefits gained by the community through collaborating with ODL institutions**

Better trained workforce and improved health care took top priority with regards to community benefits with 95% and 96% respectively. Other respondents (72%) are of the opinion that the community gains with respect to advice given to government on policy making. The sentiments echoed by respondents were also in tune with Shaima (2010)'s opinion who argued that ODL institution and communities must work together to create and apply knowledge that are needed in managing and creating sustainable community development initiatives.

### **Acceptability of community service by students as part the university curricular**

All the respondents (100%) are of the opinion that community service programme should be part of the university curriculum. Some of the respondents went further to explain that the students at an ODL university are part and parcel of the community, and collaboration with the community will assist the student in appreciating problems which may be in the community. ODL is there to serve the community, hence its mandate is to work closely with the community, so that both symbiotically benefits.

### **Major findings of the study**

From the presentation and discussion above, the following major findings are drawn:

- The findings suggest that lecturers and students hold positive views about community service activities owing to their propensity to lure student into the ZOU programmes and help in solving community problems. Both the community and the ODL institution stand to gain if they work together.
- There are vast resources in the community that ODL can use to its benefit.
- Most respondents are of the opinion that ODL can partner the community in cultural, and recreational activities to the community.
- Most faculty and staff were prepared to take active roles in various local and national community, service, business, and professional organisations to the benefit of the institution and the community.
- There were concerns from the majority of the respondents that ODL institutions should make career assessment and educational opportunities to persons displaced from their jobs, unemployed or underemployed who are living in the community.

### **Recommendations**

The study makes the following recommendations from the major findings:

- ODL institutions should fuse community service programmes preferred by students into the curriculum of various programmes they offer.
- ODL institutions should use community-based physical, financial, and human resources available to complement those within the ODL institutions to increase interactions between the community and the ODL institutions.
- ODL institutions should provide educational, cultural, and recreational activities to the community.
- ODL institutions should develop workforce development programs through alliances with hospitals, universities, business, industry, and professional and governmental groups to meet the changing workforce requirements and to enhance the ODL relevance in the community.
- ODL institutions should provide career assessment and educational opportunities to persons displaced from their jobs, unemployed or underemployed who are living in the community.
- ODL institutions should actively participate in the economic planning and development of the community.
- ODL institutions should encourage faculty and staff to take active roles in various local and national community, service, business, and professional organizations.

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