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Student dropout a cause for concern in ODL: A case of ZOU Midlands Region 2007 to 2013.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors contributing to the student dropout rate in ZOU Midlands region. The participants, namely lecturers, students and support staff were purposefully selected, commensurate with the qualitative research design which was employed in this research. Data were collected using face to face interviews, focus groups and document analysis. The research revealed a number of factors that led to student dropout. These included lack of guidance and counselling services, domestic problems, financial constraints, lack of course materials and negative attitudes towards ODL programmes, prompting the students to dropout. It also emerged from the empirical findings of the study those other factors, such as failure to adjust to the ODL mode of delivery, the demands of the programmes, health problems, bereavement, lack of discipline and work related demands, contributed to dropout. Suggestions and recommendations made included coming up with a clear counselling policy, government providing cadetship schemes to ODL students and ZOU promptly providing all course materials as soon as the student registers. Rigorous marketing of ZOU programmes was further recommended, as well as including research methods as a compulsory module in all programmes as a way of equipping students to handle research projects.

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the study.

After independence in 1980 Zimbabwe fulfilled one of its manifesto goals and provided education to the masses. Schools, colleges and universities were built to cater for the exponential growth of pupils and students in order to fulfill one of the manifesto goals which apparently tallied with one of the millennium goal of universal education. Student enrolment in Zimbabwe swelled to unprecedented levels both in schools and tertiary institutions. This also led to introduction of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in 1993 to cater for the working class and marginalized communities that had failed to access education during the colonial era. In other words, to ensure that the demand for education conformed to the growth in educational facilities was to introduce a well organized Open and Distance Learning System (Ofoegbu, 2007).

ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place and offering learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO, 2002). Thus ODL is meant to expand equitable access to education and bridge inequalities. ODL reaches a diversity of students located at different places and separated from their teachers and other students. Ojokheta (2004) posits that there are positive links between the demand for education and the age for education. According to 2007 statistics, ZOU had a total number of 19 676 registered students, enrolled in all its faculties. Concomitant with

student enrolment, there was a high rate of dropout to date. Research studies have revealed that in Open and Distant Learning, dropout rate is higher than in conventional universities ((Barefoot, 2004).

A study by Simpson,2008 shows that the dropout rates in the UK Open Universities stands between 40 - 50%, in contrast to 20 percent for that of conventional higher education. It has been observed that some students who register within the Open University do not complete their programmes. Dropout is viewed as an indicator of quality (DEST, 2005). In the United Kingdom, public funding for higher education is now based on the number of students who successfully complete courses (Simpson, 2005). Dropout is a form of educational wastage (UNESCO, 1989). In ZOU Midlands Region, 2007 second semester a total 1235 students registered in all programmes. A significant decline of 49.87 % in student registration was observed from 2007 second semester up to 2013 second semester. Student attrition is an important impending factor that decelerates human capital formation for national development (Okopi 2011).The table below shows the student registration trends. Although some figures are missing, the general trend is that there was a drastic decline in numbers in ZOU Midlands region during the period of study. This decline in enrolments made it imperative for the researcher to highlight the major factors behind dropout of students registered in ZOU programmes and to proffer possible solutions to mitigate the adverse factors.

STUDENT REGISTRATION STATISTICS FOR THE PERIOD 2007-2013

YEAR	SEMESTER 1	SEMESTER 2
2007		1235
2008	-	-
2009	-	659
2010	539	666
2011	773	796
2012	727	619
2013	640	619

Research Objectives.

- To establish the main factors that lead some distance students to dropout from studies.
- To proffer interventions to mitigate dropout problems.

Research Questions

- What could be the factors responsible for dropout in ODL?
- How do the factors operate to affect dropouts?
- How can attrition be improved in ODL programmes?

Purpose of the study.

The purpose of the study was to establish the factors that make the ODL students dropout from their studies at the Zimbabwe Open University, Midlands region and to proffer solutions that might mitigate student attrition.

Review of related literature

Open Distance Learning (ODL) is now considered as a reputable method of education as evidenced by the establishment of numerous ODL institutions worldwide and increasing enrollment of students in these institutions(Fozdar, Kumar, and Kannan,2006) However ODL programmes have suffered low completion rates due to several factors exposed in various researches. “The percentages of students finishing their studies are extremely low –between one third and two thirds of initial entrantsfail to complete their studies” Vaght (1994;2) in (Perraton,2000.)The causes of dropout stem from a combination of factors that are namely institution related factors, student related factors and family related factors.

Financial difficulties among the country's large pool of poor black students are, unsurprisingly, largely to blame for dropout. MacGregor (2007). Biswas and Mythili (2006) summarises the factors leading to dropout as follows;

- lack of time due to work commitments,
- lack of time due to family commitments,
- loss of interest,

- lengthy and difficulty course content and the course content not relevant to the career courses they are studying.

Okopi (2011) posited that the factors that lead to dropout also include difficult course content, socio-economic status, quality of student learning packages, difficulty in combining work and family life with study, rejoining academic after a long break and lack of confidence. Also among other factors include ineffective and inefficiency of support services, discrepancy between their profession /personal interests and course structure, social and personal adjustment problems, feelings of inadequacy and financial problems. Student support services have a very important and vital role to play in helping students successfully complete their programmes of study (Peach, 2005).

Lack of time due to work related and family related commitments makes it difficult to balance their personal obligations and their personal pursuits therefore some students are left with no choice but to dropout (McGivney, 2004). Furthermore students may opt for ODL because they think these programmes will be easier (Carnevale, 2000). Some students are subsequently shattered when they realized that ODL programme courses require the same efforts if not more—than traditional courses (Fozdar and Kumar, 2006). Students who come from conventional forms of education that practice teacher centeredness as opposed to student centeredness may find the transitional period of becoming an ODL student more challenging (Dzakiria, 2004). Research by Okopi, 2011 revealed that effective communication is hampered by factors such as poor road network, lack or erratic electricity supply, lack of phone links, lack of internet facility, and delays in the delivery of course materials through postal and courier services. Network challenges especially in the rural areas have proved to be a drawback in the provision of internet services thereby hampering collaborative e-learning (Kurebwa and Nyaruwata, 2013).

Research methodology

The researcher used the qualitative research design. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln (2000: 3). Data was collected from lecturers, support staff, dormant students and students returning to the university to rejoin the ZOU programmes through individual interviews and focus groups. These participants were purposefully selected. Purposive sampling seeks individuals and sites that can best supply relevant information needed to answer the research questions raised (Creswell, 2008:214). The researcher also analyzed documents to find out the trends of dropouts within the research period. Data analysis proceeded concurrently with data collection. The overlapping analysis with data collection does not only give the researcher a head start to analysis, but more importantly, allows the researcher to take advantage of flexible data collection (Eisenhardt, 2008). Themes which emerged from interviews, focus groups and document analysis formed the basis for further collection and analysis (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

Findings and discussion

Factors leading to dropout.

As stated earlier the major objective of this study was to find out the factors that contribute to dropout in the Zimbabwe Open University, Midlands region. All the factors found were firstly grouped into institution related factors, family related, and student related factors. Sub categories of these categories were also included.

Family related factors

Financial related factors.

It was found that financial related factors led to dropout in ODL. According to MacGregor (2007) financial difficulties are largely blamed for dropout among black students. ZOU students are self sponsored or sponsored by their employees. The study revealed that sponsorship had an effect on dropout. The following statements illustrate the student's view points.

“Most of us are parents and would want to educate children. Priority is on paying fees for the children as such it becomes difficult to pay fees for oneself”.

“The economic environment is not friendly at all. I wish the government would give us grants so that we are able to pursue our studies. It's really difficult for us students”

“My late wife was critically ill and my children were in school, so I could not afford to pay my fees. Later my children joined tertiary institutions after their mother's death who was also working. My net income of \$400-00 could not sustain the family. I am rejoining now because my children are grown up.”

Many such statements were made by students. Financial problems were a common complaint among students. Out of the thirty students who were interviewed 60% highlighted financial constraints as the major reason for dropout in ODL. The student affairs department and staff in the accounts department also concurred with these findings and highlighted that they believed that the majority of the dropouts were due to financial reasons. This tends to suggest that most of the Zimbabwe Open University students are parents who compete with their children for financial resources. Some of the children were also University students who drew their fees from parents. As such, in the event that the parents had financial difficulties, priority was given to the education of the children and the parents dropped out of the university.

In addition social issues such as illnesses and deaths led to dropping out in ODL. As indicated in one of the statements echoed by one of the students, illness and deaths has led to dropout. Some spouses become incapacitated to pay fees once the other had passed on. Perusing some documents in the university it was discovered that some students died before completing their programmes. Domestic problems were also included under social issues.

Domestic problems.

Domestic problems were mentioned by some of the students as contributing factors that led to dropping out especially among female students. Some indicated that their husbands, who had not acquired degrees, would not want to see them further their studies. After enrolling into the university some female students lamented of the terror that was unleashed to them by their husbands until they made a decision to drop out. The following sentiments were advanced;

“My husband tore my modules accusing me of neglecting him because I spent most of my nights reading especially during the examination period”.

“All my assignments were tone by my husband who accused me of being too headstrong because of the degree I had enrolled in.”

“I dropped out when I was working on my research project. My supervisor was a man and my husband accused me of having an improper association with him. My home was hell on earth. It is easier to read modules at home.”

“My husband denied me the opportunity to go for group discussions. This really de-motivated me.”

The student affairs records indicated to have dealt with four similar cases during the period of study. While some husbands might be supporting their wives to further their studies as was unraveled in this study, it would appear abuse in the home, misunderstanding by the husbands on how research projects are carried out and suspecting spouses of infidelity led some female students to dropout due to frustration.

Institution related factors

Lack of guidance and counselling services.

Provision of guidance and counselling services for students in the university is very crucial for their success in their academic and non-academic endeavours. Gysbers, and Henderson, (2000) strongly suggested that provision of guidance and counselling to students is vital to make students understand the environment, to develop success skills, career awareness and educational planning, understanding self and others, and develop interpersonal and communication skills. The research revealed that counselling services were ineffective although the counselling office was available in the ZOU Midlands region. Most of the students who were interviewed confirmed that they were not aware of any counselling services. When asked why he dropped out before visiting the counselling offices one of the students professed ignorance of the services and said, “I never knew that such services were available in the university. In fact I just stayed at home and took care of my problems the way I regarded fit”.

The student affairs department also confirmed the ineffectiveness of the counselling services when the following sentiments were exposed, “Counselling services were supposed to be carried out with every student who intends to join the university so that the mismatch of programmes and careers is avoided. However this is not possible considering the way we operate”. Due to a mismatch of programmes and careers some students confirmed that they ended up dropping out of ODL programmes. Furthermore a few students who attended counselling services did so serendipitously or were either identified from a list of those who deferred their studies or referred by some programme coordinators. The student affairs department also confirmed that there was no deliberate effort to do group counselling for students so that students problems were addressed before they dropped out of their respective programmes. These views tend to suggest that there is no clearly laid down counselling policy and if the policy was there then it was not clearly disseminated to all students for their benefit.

Course materials

The study established that the inefficient delivery of course materials contributed to dropout. Some students complained of not receiving course materials in time. While the students received most of the course materials, modules were found to be the most leading factor which led students to dropout from the Odl programmes.

Research projects

Results indicated that most students dropped at the research project stage. Students in a focus made the following statements,

“I found the research project very challenging and demanding”.

“My lecturer made a lot of amendments on my document to extent that I got tired”.

“My lecturer stayed too far away from my station of work and it became too expensive for me to visit the lecturer for guidance.”

“I have phobia for research because I do not have the language for research. I wish the university would give us an option of five modules more rather than doing research.”

The findings tend to reveal that among other factors the students had insufficient preparation for writing a research project. Although most of the programmes had a course on research methods most undergraduate students revealed that handling research projects was a mammoth task which led some of them to dropout.

Student related factors

Negative attitudes towards ODL programmes.

The study revealed that some students were dropping out of ODL programmes because of negative attitudes that emanated from misinformation about ZOU programmes and their mode of delivery. In other words some students were of the impression that ZOU programmes were inferior to those of other state universities and they looked down upon ODL programmes in general leading to dropping out of students. One student pointed out that, “Some people in society think that ZOU is a private university which does not offer degrees that are similar to those of other state universities”. This tends to suggest that in the event that the student decides to dropout for one reason or the other, he /she is likely not to get any encouragement from society because of these negative perceptions.

The negative perceptions were exacerbated by the publication of the suspension of the Counselling degree and Diploma in education by ZIMCHE (Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education) during the period 2011- June, 2013. Although the suspension on the Counselling degree was lifted, one student passionately said, “I had to drop because your programmes are not recognized by ZIMCHE .I cannot invest my money on such programmes”. On further investigation it was observed that the student who made the above comments did not belong to the Counselling programme or Diploma in education, but this became a general perception which led to dropout in other programmes as well. This view was also supported by one of the students in a focus group, who said,

“When it was published in the papers that the ZOU Counseling degree was suspended I received a letter from my friend to say ZOU degrees are not recognized across the board .You are wasting time. I have since dropped and intending to join other universities”.

A perusal of records further indicated that a significant number of students who were pursuing the diploma in Education and the Counselling degree dropped out after the publication of the suspension of the programmes. McGivney (2004: 39) confirmed this and said that, “Dissatisfaction with a course or institution is also a common reason for non-completion, and if this is on top of a range of external constraints and pressures, there is a strong likelihood that students will abandon a programme before completion”

Other student related factors.

The participants interviewed also indicated that other factors such as failure to adjust to the ODL mode of delivery, the demands of the programmes, health problems, bereavement, lack of discipline to be organized and work related demands, contributed to dropout. This supports some of McGivney’s (2004) findings that lack of time due to work and family related commitments makes it difficult for the students to balance their personal obligations and their educational pursuits and are left with little or no choice but to dropout.

Conclusions

From the study findings, it is clear that there were various factors that contributed to the dropout rate among distance learning students at the ZOU Midlands region. The researcher is of a belief that such problems should be sorted out in order to slow down the dropout rate.

Recommendations.

Based on the findings of the study the study comes up with the following recommendations:-

- Coming up with a counselling policy to facilitate the counselling of students before registration and during the course of learning.
- The government should provide cadetship schemes to ODL students as is obtaining in conventional universities.
- Providing all course materials as soon as the student registers.
- Rigorous marketing of ZOU in order to spruce its image as well providing the general populous with accurate information about ZOU programmes.
- More publicity must be made about the lifting of suspensions of the formerly suspended degree programmes so that it reaches all the stake holders.
- All programmes should include research methods as a module.
- Providing students with sufficient preparation to handle research projects.

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