

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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1.0. Background

The Zimbabwe Open University started to operate as a Centre for Distance Education of the University of Zimbabwe in August, 1993. Three years down the line, in 1996, it was upgraded to the University College Distance Education status; and now it has graduated to the new Zimbabwe Open University.

The University was established to address the need to provide university education to thousands of people, who each year, have been denied this level of education for a multiplicity of reasons including restricted entry into the conventional universities and the prohibitive cost of conventional university education.

The Zimbabwe Open University has a fairly decentralised structure that is commensurate with its mission to bring "university education to every doorstep". Zimbabwe Open University delivers its services through the National Centre in Harare, ten Regional Centres and 55 District Study Centres in all the Provinces of Zimbabwe.

Over 129 000 post secondary school learners ('O' level) are left without the opportunity for further education every year. This excludes those who are accommodated for the High School Certificate - A Level (10 000) and those who are admitted into technical, vocational and professional colleges (10 000). Only a fraction of the high school graduates are accommodated into the five conventional universities. It is estimated that over 300 000 learners drop-up from the education system in Zimbabwe each year. The net result is that the educational market is left with over 300 000 students without opportunities for university education every year (Zimbabwe Government, 1998).

In addition to this figure, the majority of those who enrolled into the technical and vocational/professional colleges remain potential students to enrol for university education. The aggregate of all these are the natural market of the Zimbabwe Open University. This number is expected to significantly increase when the Zimbabwe Open University adopts more 'open' entry requirements for its courses.

Presently, the Zimbabwe Open University has a total enrolment of about 10 000 which is barely scratching the surface. There is an enormous potential as the projected enrolment for the end of 1999 is anticipated to swell threefold to the magnitude of 30 000.

It is evident from the outline presented above, that the students enrolled for courses offered by Zimbabwe Open University have a multiplicity of backgrounds both educationally and experientially. In order to provide them with high quality university education the need for a good and sound infrastructure in the form of learner support services cannot be over-emphasized. This is absolutely necessary as King et al (1980) similarly observed that the quality of both the materials and the support systems are critical to the success of a distance and open learning system.

2.0. Definition of Learner Support Services : The Zimbabwean Context

In the Zimbabwean context, what do we mean by learner or student support services? In this context we have elected to borrow the following definition by Tait (1996) who argues that learner or student support means those activities which are individualised or delivered in interactive groups (whether face-to-face, by telephone, electronically or in some other medium, such as tutoring and counselling, in contrast with the learning materials prepared for a mass of users without any actual individual or group in mind. It is a support services paradigm that recognises the critical importance of the affective, value-related and social dimensions of open and distance learning. It is not a 'purist' model of open and distance learning which advocates that students should receive the specially designed study material and work with it largely on their own, indeed making every home a mini-campus (Halpern, 1984). In such a set-up the distance learner is conceived of as an independent, adult learner.

This paper highlights the results of an investigation of the student support services provided by the Zimbabwe Open University through its Regional Study Centres.

3.0. Methodology

The survey was carried out in three of the 10 regions of the Zimbabwe Open University. The three regions were randomly selected and are representative of the other seven regions. A total of 630 questionnaires were distributed to second and third year students as follows;

Bachelor of Education	400
B.A English and Communication Studies	110
BSc. Agricultural Management	120,

and to 20 tutors in the Zimbabwe Open University. Fifty students and 10 tutors were interviewed using the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to evaluate whether students and tutors were satisfied with the support services provided by Zimbabwe Open University in four main areas namely; tutoring support services, reference and course material support services, administrative support services and guidance and counselling.

The questionnaire had closed and open ended items. The open ended items were meant to allow the respondents to give more detail on the problems faced and suggestions for improving the provision of student support services in the Zimbabwe Open University.

The questionnaires were returned by 510 out of 630 students and by 27 out of 30 tutors. This gives response rates of 75% and 90% for students and tutors respectively.

4.0. Results and Discussions

4.1. Tutoring Support Services

The results of the study (Table 1), show that while an average of 82% of the respondents were satisfied with the general disposition of tutors in the provision of academic support in the Zimbabwe Open University as reflected in their preparedness for tutorials, mastery of the subject, preparedness to assist students with academic problems and comments made on written assignments. The students (31%) felt that the assignments turn around period, sometimes stretching over to six weeks, was unsatisfactory. Students appear to have made a genuine observation because feedback on marked assignments is the most critical tutoring strategy in distance and open learning. The earlier this feedback is provided the more it is likely to have a positive impact on the students performance.

Table 1: Level of Student Satisfaction with Tutoring Support Services

Service	% Satisfactory	%Unsatisfactory
General disposition of tutors:		
Tutor preparedness for tutorials	82	18
Tutor's mastery of subject	88	12
Preparedness to assist in problems	83	17
Comments on written assignments	76	24
Assignment turnaround time	69	31

Face to face arrangements:		
weekend school	85	15
residential courses	55	45
orientation	70	30
district study centre visits	13	87
Student tutor discussions	48	52
Group discussions by students	75	25

Face to Face Contact

Concerning the opportunities provided for face-to-face contacts between students and tutors and between students themselves, 75% of the students and 96% of the tutors described weekend schools, orientation courses and revision courses offered as satisfactory (Table 1). All tutors and 87% of the students described district study centre visits by tutors to meet students as unsatisfactory and inadequate. These district study centres visits are very important because they provide the human element which is able to adapt the instructional package to the almost infinite variety of students needs (Stewart 1981). In fact, by providing minimum visits to district study centres, the University is denying students of the golden opportunities for academic and emotional support that are not only critical but vital for distance learners. It is absolutely necessary to re-energise and re-commit students into their study programmes. In all fairness, the wish to facilitate visits to district study centres by tutors has always been there but financial constraints have, for the moment been playing havoc to this wish.

Interaction : Student to Student and Tutor to Student

Commenting on methods of interaction between tutors and students and between students and students, 68% of the students and 95% of the tutors were happy with lectures, seminar presentations and group discussions. However, 52% of the students felt that they needed more individual student - tutor discussions. Respondents felt that such situations provided them with appropriate opportunities to open up and express their personal problems and weaknesses to tutors without fear of ridicule from colleagues. This position is supported by Keagan in Kember and Dekker (1987:12) who observed that "... the separation of the learner from the learning group --- is a characteristic feature..." of distance education and added that students are usually taught as individuals and not in groups. Most (67%) of the tutors in the survey indicated that they were willing to provide students with as much individual support as possible, but the long distances between tutors and students and the limited time available to tutors for individual contact make this noble intention impossible.

Radio and Telephone

In the Zimbabwe distance education programme, the radio has merely been used as a means of communication to reduce the distance between students and their institution as well as enrich the teaching process. In this study 59% of the students described the radio programmes as very helpful in their studies but 41% were not happy because they could hardly tune into the relevant radio channel. In Thailand, the radio has been used since 1950 to enrich formal schooling (Auzalone, 1987).

Another way of reducing the distance between students and their institution is through the use of the telephone. The majority (80%) of the students and all tutors in the survey described tele-conferences between tutors and students, as very important particularly when students faced sudden problems relating to their studies. Such conferences enable students to get individualized attention from the tutor (Rekkedal, 1983). However, the majority of the respondents felt that such tele-conferences can be very expensive and only a few students (20%) have access to telephone services.

Distance to Regional Centres

As if that is not enough, 49% of the students indicated that it was very expensive to travel to the Regional Centres. The respondents observed that they would travel much shorter distances to District Study Centres and make great savings on both time and money and such savings would enable them to meet their family obligations better, particularly for the married students who constitute 80% of the respondents. This is understandable because 47% of the respondents travel distances in excess of 100 kilometres to the

Regional Centres at a total cost of about Z\$120.00 per return journey (See Table 2). It is almost unbelievable, the hardships that some of the students go through during trips to Regional Centres. For example, some of the students reported that they have to put up on the way with friends or relatives in order to catch-up with buses that arrive at the regional centre in time for tutorials.

Table 2: Average Distances Travelled by Students to Regional Centres

Distance from Study Centre (km)	% Students
0 - 50	27
51 - 100	26
101 - 150	18
151 - 200	17
201 - 250	6
251 - 300	4
Over 300	2

Against this background, it is not unreasonable to believe that long distances are negatively impacting on the provision of open and distance learning in Zimbabwe in a similar way that Ryan (1984) observed that long distance seemed to deny students access to tertiary education in Australia.

4.2. **Reference and Course Materials Support Services**

Language Clarity

Commenting on the use of language in the course modules, 99% of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their clarity (Table 3). This is a great achievement for the system as, in the majority of cases, course modules form the basic course text and the only source of reference material available to individual students. Clarity therefore facilitates individual study and learning. In addition, relevant resources like appropriate textbooks and adequate communication promote independent study and serve as a comfortable mode of learning for most adults who have long been absent from any formal education institution (Beaudoin, 1990).

Table 3 : Students level of Satisfaction with Reference and Course Material Support Services

Service	% Satisfactory	% Unsatisfactory
Language clarity	99	1
Adequacy of reference books	33	67
Access to library	31	69
Relevancy of references	84	16
Course Content	93	7
Handouts	56	44

Library and Reference Materials

Table 3 indicates that 67% of the students 56% of the tutors in the study were unhappy with provision of library and reference material services by regional centres. The study revealed that 47% of the respondents live in excess of 100 kilometres from the regional centre library. As an intervention process, tutors provide some library books to students during the few district study centre visits they make. Another intervention process has been a deliberate policy on the part of tutors to provide handouts to students during and after tutorials. Again, while 56% of the students were satisfied with the contents of the handouts 44% felt that the handouts did not provide adequate and detailed information for their reference. The answer to this problem could be the establishment of district study centres that are fully stocked with relevant reference materials. And apart from opening regional libraries on Saturdays, a considerable

number of the students indicated that they wanted libraries to be open on Sundays.

4.3. Administrative Support Services

An average of 80,8% students were happy with the administrative support system which embraces the admission procedures, the registration process, accessing information from records, distribution of learning materials, submission of assignments for marking, arrangements for weekend school venues and the starting times for tutorials.

Table 4 : Level of Satisfaction with Administration Support Services

Service	% Satisfactory	%Unsatisfactory
Admission procedures	86	14
Registration procedures	74	26
Information dissemination	62	38
Distribution of learning materials	70	30
Submission of assignments	82	18
Weekend school venue	84	16
Starting times for tutorials	89	11
Distribution of marked assignments	57	43

However, 38% of the students were unhappy with communication concerning notification of examination dates and venues as well as the examination results. The students felt that such information should be forwarded to each individual student through the postal services.

Another bone of contention among students was the manner in which marked assignments are distributed. Forty three percent of the respondents felt that the practice had no privacy. The practice potentially exposed the marked assignments to every student and those who had not scored high marks felt humiliated and uncomfortable when it is commonly held that students should feel valued and should not diminish each other or be diminished by the tutor or institution in order to learn most effectively (Moore, 1993).

A considerable number of respondents felt that some of the non academic staff did not accord them the respect that is commensurate with their age and maturity. The general feeling was that students were being treated like school children. This is unfortunate and is what Moore (1993) calls the diminishing of students by an institution and is counter-productive as students will not enjoy their studies. Students should enjoy their studies as Tait (1996) observed, that it can be readily conceded that students should enjoy their studies, and indeed, with adult students, if this enjoyment is not present in any form, they are likely to withdraw.

4.4. Guidance and Counselling Services

While an average of 73,5% of the respondents indicated satisfaction with the guidance and counselling received in respect of orientation to studies by distance education including exposure to the requisite study skills, most (95%) students were unhappy with the pre-admission guidance which is virtually non-existent to assist them in the choice of courses (see Table 5). Course choice counselling is very important as it allows students to make informed decisions before they pursue studies by open and distance learning. Most students are badly in need of academic counselling before they pursue their courses of study (Arav, 1989).

Table 5: Level of Satisfaction with Guidance and Counselling

Service	%Satisfactory	%Unsatisfactory

Pre-admission counselling	5	95
Orientation	69	31
Course overview	82	18
Study skills	77	23
Examination counselling	67	33
Contact in sudden difficulties	38	62

The pre-admission counselling is therefore critical because a considerable number of students often choose the wrong course and find that they have made a mistake only when it is too late to change. Such students eventually withdraw from their course of study through lack of enjoyment (Arav, 1989; Tait, 1996). A significant number of respondents (62%) indicated that they experience problems in contacting tutors in when they encounter sudden difficulties which may seriously impinge on their study progress. A strong suggestion has been made for the creation of a full-time regional guidance-counsellor post which is presently non-existent. Counselling is intended to develop confidence, enable learners to make personal choices particularly for adult learners who face a myriad of personal and special problems which include role conflicts, financial pressures, learning difficulties and confusion about their goals (Heffernan, 1981).

5.0. Conclusion

The Zimbabwe experience in the introduction of distance and open learning appears to have succeeded in providing access to university education. However, in its implementation, while the general disposition of tutors in the provision of academic support for students is generally satisfactory a multiplicity of problems have been encountered by students. These include high travelling costs, long distances to study centres, lack of adequate reference books, limited access to libraries and absence of pre-admission counselling.

While some successes have been achieved in providing learner support services in the Zimbabwe Open University, there is room for improvement in order to provide students with high quality university education.

6.0. Recommendations

In the light of the above findings, it is recommended that:

1. The Zimbabwe Open University be creative in sourcing and raising funds for the effective implementation the delivery system to facilitate visits to districts by tutors, provision of more reference books, establishment of well resourced district study centres and the use of multi-media facilities for tutoring.
2. The Zimbabwe Open University communicates more with individual students through the radio and postal services system,
3. Provision be made for pre-admission counselling to students on course choices and the operation of the distance and open learning system,
4. The posts of guidance/counsellor be established at Regional and District Study Centres.

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