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The role of Zimbabwe Open University in open and distance learning in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the growth of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) since 2000. The article examines characteristics of open and distance learning (ODL) with specific reference to circumstances in a developing country such as Zimbabwe. It considers the numerous challenges faced by the institution and makes projections into the future both of ZOU and ODL in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: developing countries, distance education, solutions to problems

INTRODUCTION

In 2005 the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) celebrated its fifth year of existence. They have been eventful years of growth with numerous challenges, some of them bruising. Today open and distance learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe is almost synonymous with the ZOU but ODL predates the institution. The article examines characteristics of ODL with specific reference to conditions of a developing country such as Zimbabwe. It discusses the early years of ZOU's predecessor, the University College of Distance Education (UCDE), and how it laid foundations for the ZOU. The article then looks at the establishment of the ZOU in 1999 and traces its growth in the last five years. It then turns to challenges that the institution faces and how it is working to overcome them.

The final section makes projections into the future of the institutions, that is, what direction it will probably take as it grows in the next ten years.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ODL

The characteristics of ODL can define it. Ndeya-Ndereya et al. (2003, 4) identify the major characteristics of ODL as follows:

- It embraces a wide range of forms of study in which students are not in a position to be tutored immediately and at whatever time . . .
- Teaching distance education is not continuously carried out. There are many gaps between one teaching session and the next one.
- The teacher and the learner are separated from each other in terms of space and time . . .
- Face-to-face tutoring, electronic tutoring and other kinds of academic support to learners form an important component of distance education . .

Mercer and Petit (2001, 111) dwell on the isolation of the ODL learner as a major characteristic of the distance learner: 'educators are unlikely to ever meet most of their students. Many of the students may live in relative isolation, and have to study without the kind of intellectual companionship which is usually available to students in conventional institutions.'

These descriptions give a glimpse of the ODL situation in Zimbabwe. Many of the students live in remote areas where the roads are inaccessible, especially during the wet season. Telecommunications are virtually nonexistent. Mobile telephones have somewhat improved the situation, but in most of the areas the network is often very poor. It is upon this platform that UCDE was set up in 1995 as a college of the University of Zimbabwe.

CHALLENGES FOR THE OPEN LEARNER IN ZIMBABWE TODAY

- Distance – most students live in remote areas and transport costs are very high.
- Telecommunication facilities are inadequate. Materials are often limited to the learning module with very little support materials to build around the module.
- Students have very little access to information technology (IT) facilities, especially in the rural areas.

A SHORT HISTORY OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING IN ZIMBABWE

ODL in the former Rhodesia was driven mainly by commercial correspondence colleges. There were limited opportunities for blacks in the formal system of education and thus the commercial colleges were a response to the need for education among the blacks. The formal education system created bottlenecks for the black population. Government only came in as a regulating body to maintain standards. The Central African Correspondence College was opened in 1954 and many blacks took the opportunity to study through it (Zindi and Aucion 1994). Rapid Results College was set up in 1956, and this was followed by several other institutions such as the Transworld

Tutorial College, International Correspondence School, Wolsey College and the British Tutorial College (Zindi and Aucion 1994). Colonial governments in Africa did not see education of the local people as a priority, so it was left to the missionary and higher education was largely left to the commercial colleges mentioned above. Distance education was relatively cheap in that it 'made minimal demands on the national fiscus since new no buildings, no text books and no per capita grants were provided by the government' (Zindi and Aucion 1994). Most of those who wanted to do degree programmes registered with the University of South Africa (Unisa).

Independence saw the expansion of distance education in the form of the Zimbabwe Integrated Teacher Education (ZINTEC) programme. It took a different dimension altogether in that it turned to the teacher training sector and this is where it recorded its success. It was based on experiments started in the liberation war by educationists such as Dzingai Mutumbuka and Fay Chung. It was designed to meet the needs of an education system that expanded rapidly after 1980 (Chung 2006). Four colleges were set up throughout the country and they enrolled 5 000 trainee teachers in the first six years of their existence. Each year, four colleges under ZINTEC enrolled 2 400 students (Chivore 1992). In the programme the students spent 16 weeks in residence learning theories and practice of education then went into the field for three years where they were supervised and monitored by lectures. They were also given modules and assignments. They came back to college for a final 16 weeks and to write final examinations. ZINTEC was phased out towards the end of the first decade of independence. After 1980 ?? (ZDECO) which turned out to be a strong player in ODL in Zimbabwe. It was a privately owned college that was set up after independence and it also saw rapid growth in the early years of independence. Among many other courses, ZDECO offered secondary education and by 1990 it had 20 000 students.

It is upon this background that the University College of Distance Education (UCDE) was set up by the University of Zimbabwe in 1993.

UCDE

UCDE was set up with a view to meeting the educational needs of the disadvantaged groups who, for various reasons, had limited access to formal education in the 'conventional' universities. Benza (2001, 18) outlines the aims of UCDE:

- increasing access to a flexible, quality student-centred university education,
- creating and maintaining stimulating learning and working environment that promotes critical and independent thinkers,
- providing cost-effective and affordable learning conditions,
- developing a human resource base for the country to its full potential, promoting professionalism, integrity and well-informed decision-makers, and achieving academic excellence.

With these goals in mind the University of Zimbabwe established the college to offer degree and non-degree programmes through distance education.

The history of UCDE is closely related to the development of a B.Ed. degree in

Educational Planning and Policy Studies (B.Ed. EAPPS) that was launched in the Faculty of Education at the University of Zimbabwe in 1991. The programme was designed to upgrade the quality of administration in Zimbabwean schools at primary and secondary school level. As the programme grew, the decision was made to set up a college of distance education and that is how UCDE came into being in 1993 with 749 students. Table 1 shows the enrolment from 1993 to 2002.

Table 1: Enrolment figures 1993–2002

Year	Number of students
1993	749
1994	3 064
1995	3 175
1996	3 429
1997	5 429
1998	7 620
1999	14 313
2000	16 995
2001	23 161
2002	17 770

(Student enrolment statistics compiled by S. Muchengetwa : ZOU)

The figures show several trends. There is a steady increase in enrolment from 1993 to a high of figure of 7 620 in 1998, when BAECS BSCAM and DCTD were introduced. The figure doubled to 14 313 in 1999 due to the launch of several new degree programmes. There was another leap in growth in 2001 when Commerce degrees were launched. The year 2002 marked the decline of the enrolment figures to 17 770. This probably marked the optimal level of enrolment and indicates the carrying capacity of the university in the foreseeable future. A few points can be put forward to explain the decline in numbers:

- Students drop out because during times of economic difficulties they struggle to raise fees. The adult learner is also the same person who has to send children and other dependants to school. Naturally, the parent will sacrifice his or her own education in order to let children go to school.
- There is the challenge of materials production which will be discussed in some detail below.
- Some students find independent learning difficult, especially securing learning resources beyond the module. As a result, some students drop out. This was common in the early years when the drop out-rate was high.

A pro-vice chancellor responsible for distance education was appointed and one of his briefs was to turn UCDE into a university. A directorate ran the college, and it was responsible for academic affairs, administration, materials production and tutorial services, student services, extension, research and evaluation. Programme coordinators, the subject experts, designed and administered degree and diploma programmes. Their brief was to design programmes that were relevant to national needs and at the same time they did not duplicate courses being offered at conventional institutions. Programme coordinators were also responsible for the development of tutorial services and this meant identifying expertise in their respective areas to assist the learners. Tutors were recruited from conventional institutions and from the public sector. Another task was supervision of the teaching and assessment process.

Materials development entailed the design and writing of learning materials that were reader-friendly. Materials development meant writing learning modules, tutorial letters and other supplementary materials. A distinct feature of this period was the radio programmes that supplemented the printed materials. This was discontinued after a few years due to high costs. Negotiations are under way to resuscitate this facility.

To facilitate access to the programmes offered, ten study centres (regional offices) were set up in all the ten provinces of the country and they were run by regional coordinators. These were representatives of the institution in the regional centre who had academic and administrative roles to play. They managed the registration processes, tutorial sessions and consultations, and administer examinations. It is at the regional centre that the student picked up study packages, assignments and all other learning materials. It is the same point at which they submit written assignments and wrote examinations.

The regional coordinator kept student records, procured and maintained university property in the region. Where relevant, he gave academic guidance in his or her own area of specialisation. He also represented the institution in all matters pertaining to distance education in the region. In short, the regional coordinator was the chief executive officer in the regional study centre and enabled the university to 'go beyond the traditional boundaries of tertiary education in the country' (Benza 2001, 18). The regional centre is an important part of the ZOU structures and has carried out these roles from UCDE to the ZOU.

FROM UCDE TO ZOU

The UCDE was given a charter in 1999 and the ZOU was born with three faculties: (1) Education, Arts and Humanities; (2) Science; and (3) Commerce and Law.

The Faculty of Education, Arts and Humanities established three departments: (1) Education, (2) Languages and Media Studies, and (3) Social Sciences. The Department of Education runns the B.Ed. and M.Ed. programmes. It is also running a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The Department of Languages and Media Studies offers a BA degree in English and Communication studies and the BA degree in Media Studies. Social Studies is the latest department and offers three degree programmes, B.Sc. (Psychology), B.Sc. (Counselling) and B.Sc. (Special Education).

The Faculty of Science has four departments: (2) Health Sciences, (3) Agriculture,

(3) Mathematics and Statistics and (4) Geography and Environmental Studies. The Department of Health Science offers a Degree in Nursing Science, and a degree in Physical Education and Sport Management. Both programmes were established in 2000. They are designed to meet specific national needs, for example, sports administration and management is set to improve in Zimbabwe when graduates from the programme participate in the running of sports in the country. Nursing is already benefiting with most of the graduates being absorbed as tutors in the nursing schools in the county and elsewhere. These programmes have met numerous teething problems but this was expected in an environment where ODL is just finding its feet. Obtaining the relevant expertise in these different areas of specialisation has been an incessant problem and this had a negative impact on the development of learning materials. A degree in laboratory technology is on the drawing board.

The Faculty of Commerce and Law is the biggest faculty and has three departments in it. There is a department of Postgraduate Studies which handles the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programme and the Executive Diploma in Business Leadership (EDBL). These programmes are in great demand, since many business executives are striving to improve their managerial and entrepreneurial skills. There is the Department of Banking and Finance Management and Business Studies; Department of Accounting; the Department of Human Resources, Marketing and Labour Relations. These departments offer the following programmes B.Comm. in Accounting, B.Comm. in Banking and Finance, a Bachelor's degree in Human Resource Management and a Bachelors degree in Management of Industrial and Labour Relations. These programmes were introduced in 2001 and one of their greatest challenges has been development of learning materials.

Table 2 shows the programmes the ZOU offers and when they were introduced.

Table 2: Programmes being offered by ZOU

Programme	Year introduced	Status
B.Ed EAPPS	1993	UCDE – running one programme – B.Ed.APPS
B.Ed EAPPS		
N. Ed EAPPS		
DAPP	1996	
BA ECS,	1997	
B.Sc. AM, DCTD	1998	
GEOGRAPHY, MA EAPPS, B. Sc. MS	1999	ZOU granted charter and three faculties established
BA MS, (COUNSELLING). S. PED, PGDE, BSNS, MBA	2000	
B. Comm. (Sport), Psychology	2001	

The full names of the different programmes are given in the glossary.

As shown in Table 2 the only programme that was on offer in the early years of UCDE were the B.Ed. EAPPS programme, which was launched in 1993. It was a four-year programme that was inherited from the Faculty of Education at the University of Zimbabwe. In 1996 a Postgraduate Diploma in Applied Accountancy – developed in partnership with professional institutions of accounting in Zimbabwe and South Africa – was launched. In partnership with Rotary International and Litraid, a Diploma for Teachers of English (DCTD) was introduced in 1998. These two diploma programmes have since been discontinued. The BA in English and Communication Studies (BA ECS), and B.Sc. in Agricultural Management Studies (B.Sc. AM) came on board in 1997. Geography and Environmental Studies (B.Sc. GES), Media Studies (BA MS) and Mathematics and Statistics (B.Sc. MS) were launched in 1999. The launch of each course was the culmination of no less than two years of planning, course design and materials development. Over the years the institution developed learning materials of high quality, some of which has been written by scholars of distinction in the country and region. By the time the new university was granted its charter, it had six degree programmes and a postgraduate diploma in its portfolio. Table 2 shows the graduation figures between 1997 (when the first graduation ceremony was held) and 2003.

Table 3 shows student graduating statistics from 1997 to 2002.

Table 3: Student Graduating Statistics

Year	Number of students	Programmes
1997	1 810	B.Ed. EAPPS,
1998	213	B.Ed. EAPPS
1999	752	B.Ed. EAPPS
2000	725	B.Ed. EAPPS
2001	855	BA ECS, BSA CAM, MA EAPPS, PGDE
2002	1 867	BA ECS, BSACAM, MA EAPPS, PGDE

(Source: ZOU graduation book 1997–2002: compiled by S. S Muchengetwa)

There are several points to note in Table 3:

- The first group graduated in 1997 and this was the B.Ed. APPS group that registered in 1993.
- The numbers graduating are not the same as those enrolled for several reasons.
- The sharp drop in 1998 is evidence of the high drop-out rates in the first few years of the programme.
- Some students graduated with later intakes and this modifies the numbers.

SOME CHALLENGES

Like any other growing organisation, the ZOU has its fair share of challenges in the development of IT, expanding its research base, building up library resources at regional centres, materials development and building its own campus. The institution has a positive attitude where it sees a window of opportunity in every challenge. This has encouraged innovation and creativity in an environment with severe constraints and the ZOU aggressively engages every challenge emerging with local solutions that keep the institution running. Out of the several challenges mentioned above this article focuses on a few that are seen as critical to the growth of the institution.

These early years were difficult and much time was put into course and materials development. It took anything between 24 and 36 months before a programme could be launched. There were also extensive consultations at different levels and expertise was sought from other ODL institutions (see Petit and Mercer 2001). The pioneers of UCDE worked outside normal hours to ensure that the ODL programmme was kept afloat. This is a trend that Petit and Mercer (2001, 116) confirm, 'Distance education usually involves more work than academics, administrators and others at first imagine'. ODL impressed unique demands on the adult learner. The learner had to manage the new role of being a student in addition to his or her existing ones such as being a parent, spouse, in-law, employee and community leader. In some cases spouses were not supportive and in extreme cases students were compelled to drop out. There was a team of staff who gave guidance and counselling to students with different learning problems. They assisted the student in managing their studies under different conditions and demands they encountered as adult learners.

The ZOU has over the years tried to go beyond written materials into the electronic media in order to enhance learning activities. However, the institution has not been able to procure and set up hardware suitable for e-learning. This is a common problem in most developing countries and the ZOU experience is not an exception (see Khan and McWilliams 1998). Setting up IT infrastructure is very expensive and the institution has other capital projects to consider. Once it is set up it needs maintenance and the suitable software. IT development and e-learning require skilled human resources backup to maintain the system. In addition, the new technologies need electrical power to operate. Electricity is not widely available where it is needed most – in the remote rural areas of the country. There is a fear that e-learning might end up being inaccessible to the disadvantaged student. The ZOU is considering different options to resolve these problems and these have been incorporated in its current five-year plan.

Materials production is another area given the limited nature of other modes of learning. In the absence of electronic delivery modes, the module, the tutorial letter, the reader and other printed matter remain at the core of learning process. Modular materials are in limited supply due to several constraints. For instance, there is a shortage of trained writers. Those who were trained have left for greener pastures and it is a costly process to train new writers. In the development of learning materials the writers might be subject experts but it is one thing to write in one's area of expertise and quite another to produce learning materials. Coupled with this are the difficulties of putting together

writing teams. The best modules are produced by teams and not individuals. Established open learning institutions use writing teams and produce high-quality learning material (Vengesayi 1999, 2005). The writing team is the best way to produce learning material for the distance learner, but it is difficult to put together a writing team and some experts do not tolerate critical reviews of their work. Mercer and Petit concur (2001, 116) with this in their experience in the open university: 'Some very eminent external authors have not been prepared for their work being criticized and altered . . . and [despite diplomatic efforts] have withdrawn from OU [Open University] course teams'.

The course team approach encourages communication and links between all players who have something to do with the module, be it the writer, the editor, the content reviewer or the typesetter. This requires a lot of training and practice, and the ZOU is still to put these course teams together. The ZOU could probably learn a lot about materials production from the Bureau of Learning development at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

The ZOU has put together a development plan which sets objectives to be achieved in the next five years. The university has set a corporate vision of being an institution of world-class standards, delivering quality products by 2009. It has identified several key areas of growth.

It intends to expand student enrolment at an annual rate of five to ten per cent over the next five years. To meet market demands, the university intends to review existing programmes and to introduce new programmes. Programme review is an ongoing exercise which entails writing regulations designing new courses, and writing new materials.

Postgraduate programmes are being developed at special honours and Master's level. To manage the expanding student population, the ZOU has incorporated a human resources development programme in the plan. In the realm of IT the institution intends to set up computer laboratories in the study centres. As the IT infrastructure develops, there are plans to develop the full range of e-learning materials and there are plans to get access to radio and television to beam academic programmes.

The institution has ambitious plans for research and development. It has supported research and publication as reflected by the establishment of the *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning*. There is also a steady stream of individual publications that are accredited to ZOU staff. More funds will be directed into the research effort, and every academic in the institution is being encouraged to conduct research and publish refereed articles and books every year.

Another highlight of the ZOU's future plans is to establish strategic partnerships with different stakeholders in tertiary education and other players. These links should benefit the student in the end. Good examples are the memorandum of understanding between the ZOU and Unisa. Both institutions stand to benefit from this partnership.

SUMMARY

This article has made a survey of ODL in Zimbabwe over the last 50 years and then narrowed it down to the ZOU. It discusses the ZOU's predecessor (UCDE) and how it made way for the ZOU. The article then traces the growth of the ZOU in the last five years. It gives an outline of some of the major problems and how the institution is trying to overcome them. The last part makes projections into the future of the institutions' namely what direction it will probably take as it grows in the next ten years.

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