

**ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION AS A NATIONAL STRATEGY
FOR DEVELOPMENT:
THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY CASE**

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INTRODUCTION

Development suggests a change of an irreversible nature, the characteristics of which are determined by that which is being developed. This involves moving from an existing to an end state, through a process (R.S. Peters and Hirst). As African countries seek to develop, the production of an enlightened or educated community becomes critical. This development seeks to address the challenges of poverty, conflict, disease (HIV/AIDS), to name but a few, at national, community, family and individual levels.

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) which enables as many people as are willing to attain education even at tertiary level has been embraced as a plausible strategy for this development world-over as corroborated by Lord Sutherland in a Keynote paper to the Vice Chancellors Round Table at UNISA on June 24, 2003. He said that ODL was very popular in the Far East, specifically in the Peoples' Republic of China. It also fulfils the felt-needs at all levels. This could for instance be the need to improve education at national level by having graduate teachers and school heads manning the nations school system, as was the case in Zimbabwe in the early nineties. According to Prof. Barney Pityana, the UNISA Principal and Vice Chancellor, presenting at the same meeting, ODL turns people around from where they are and brings them to where they would want to be while instilling in them a sense of pride and achievement, hence development. In fact in view of the global economy, developing countries have pressure to go ODL since it is, in the long term, more affordable than the conventional. The student can no longer afford to leave full time employment to study for three to four years. Hence demand for ODL continues to grow as it provides an affordable alternative to accessing the tertiary education. Keegan (1986:72) however points out that despite its popularity across the world, distance education is still little known and less studied. In fact the literature on distance education in many libraries in developing countries in particular bears testimony to this fact. If one finds any literature it is very old.

Distance education has several characteristics the most observable one being the distance between the learner and the tutor, which does not allow direct interaction. It employs a variety of media based forms of communication. The teaching and learning therefore assumes a self-study format, which can be guided by a tutor on specific occasions. This self-study approach is actually the tacit goal of higher education as it produces scholars who can work independently. The other characteristic of distance education is that the student does not stop working for a living. This makes it very attractive to adult learners who have family and other responsibilities and even those who were not privileged enough to afford a conventional form of education. Due to the openness of teaching and learning in distance education, the learners operate with a degree of autonomy and self-direction. By learning in the familiar environment of one's home or office or even car, one enjoys a pleasant feeling of relaxation while being productive. (Harry John and Keegan (1993:12). Unlike conventional education, distance education appeals to learners from diverse backgrounds, the working and non-working, the young and the old, married and unmarried. Most distance education institutions therefore boast of overwhelming student numbers, usually making them the largest institutions in any given nation. The University of South Africa, the Open University UK, and even the Zimbabwe Open University are cases in point.

Given the above characteristics and description of distance education, its main objectives could be summarised as:

- To provide a second opportunity to study for those who missed it earlier in life.
- To improve the quality of education engendering learner autonomy through self-study.
- To provide lifelong education for working people and even homemakers.
- To meet professional training needs.
- To provide an opportunity for tertiary education that is accessible to a large segment of the population.
- To provide cost-effective education and training.

However, it is essential to note at this early stage that necessary as it may be, like medicine, education is **expensive**. This problem is compounded by the way it clashes with **the visions and/or dreams** of the nations, communities, families and individuals. As all these various groups seek for the noblest and most fulfilling vision, the cost of attaining that vision is usually beyond their reach, hence the clash.

Be that as it may, the desire or yearning for tertiary education still has to be addressed at all levels. This then calls for one to critically analyse this whole concept of Open and Distance Learning as a developmental strategy; the dreams it is meant to fulfil; the mission of the institutions involved; the challenges they are confronted with and the realities and advice that can be derived from experiences. The ZOU will be used as a case example in this paper.

BRIEF BACKGROUND OF THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY:

At independence the Zimbabwe government adopted a deliberate policy of Education for all. The major objective of this policy was two-fold. Firstly it meant to address the issue of equality of educational opportunities. Secondly it meant to address the manpower needs and development of the country. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education was created to address the critical skills shortage experienced in many economic sectors of the country. To emphasize the need for high skilled manpower the 5 Year National Development Plan (1991 – 1995) stated that:

“Investment in human resources development is investment in human capital and complements investment in physical and technological innovation. The natural environment can support higher population levels only through technological progress, which requires continued investment in human resources development. Since 1980, GOZ (the Government of Zimbabwe) has aimed at creating an education system that would address the socio-economic needs of the country”.

Accordingly university education was going to play a major role towards the realization of achieving the manpower needs and objectives of Zimbabwe. The University of Zimbabwe, the single university in the country then, could not cope with the demand for university education. Several stakeholders meetings comprising mainly of politicians and civil servants were held to deliberate on the need for a second university in the country and the specific type of university it would be. The stakeholders expressed much enthusiasm and recommended the need for extensive government support, materially, financially and infrastructurally. These meetings further recommended the institution of commissions to investigate the problem in greater detail.

Two commissions were set up, namely, the Williams Commission (1981) and the UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE Feasibility Study (1986). The commissions recommended that a second university focusing on the sciences be established, hence the University of Science and Technology was established. Still the demand could not be met, particularly that of educationists who needed to upgrade their levels in order to improve on their management skills. In July 1994, a committee was set up to investigate the modalities of the further development of university distance education. The element of distance was necessitated by the fact that the manpower that was available and already working yet needing retooling and upgrading was too little to engage in full time university studies. They therefore needed to study using the distance mode. Based on the findings of their study, the commission recommended the need for distance education at university level for skills upgrading and also “to provide a continuing education facility for the adult population.” They also emphasized that this would require heavy initial capital investment.

These recommendations witnessed the establishment of the Center for Distance Education in the Faculty of Education of the University of Zimbabwe in 1993. Its main purpose was to upgrade the qualifications of schoolteachers who had attained Diplomas in Teacher Education to degrees in Education at both Bachelors’ and Masters’ level. With a student population of 749 in that first year, this proved to be a very popular program since the teachers did not have to leave work or their homes to go back to a residential institution. They found the distance approach very flexible and accommodating of their time and learning environments. The popularity of the program resulted in the student numbers growing to 3429 by 1996 leading to the establishment of the University College of Distance Education, a College of the University of Zimbabwe. At this stage, new programs in Agriculture, Mathematics and English and Communications were being introduced into the College, which resulted in a further phenomenal student population growth being witnessed. Hence the establishment of a fully-fledged autonomous Zimbabwe Open University which is currently serving 18 000 students. Like UNISA, and with the introduction of the Bachelor of Commerce degrees and a Master of Business Administration degree, many school-leavers and business executives are enrolling with the ZOU thus making the student base a mixture of youths and adults, but with the majority being working adults. This has made a huge contribution towards addressing the need for tertiary education for skills improvement for many, hence answering the national skills shortage challenge.

There were several challenges at the beginning of this new institution as would be expected. Some have been addressed while the others are still being worked on. The challenges included the market perception and appreciation of a university qualification attained by distance; the development of learning materials; funding; recruitment of staff with the relevant qualifications and experience and suitable infrastructure. These and other challenges will be discussed in detail in the Challenges section of the paper.

As mentioned earlier, there was marked political support for the establishment of an open and distance learning institution at tertiary level since this was in line with the national developmental plan. The political pressure regarding the principle of education for all, hence the need to upgrade teachers and school heads led to the urgent starting of the institution as a Center for Distance Education. This pressure also enabled the newly formed College for distance Education to recruit key and seasoned regional heads from the Ministry of Education and Culture to head the Regional centers. This had the ripple effect of boosting the confidence of the public in the distance mode. The government support was demonstrated by initially accommodating all the regional centers in government buildings in which most of them still are. To date some of the regional centers have since bought or are renting premises due to expansion. The findings of the Committee for the Further Development of University Distance Education were based on surveys conducted across the nation. These revealed the society’s need for an open and distance learning institution. This national representation presented the social pressure, which resulted in the need to set up a regional center in each of the ten provinces of the country. This is different from the UNISA and Open University UK where there is an average of four regional centers across the whole country. The urgent need for such an institution as expressed by the society and the politicians alike led to the institution

having to start its programs with materials from existing open and distance learning institutions and adapting them to the local environment. This geographical dispersion also caused the thin spreading of the already limited staff, hence calling for the need for urgent staff development.

The growth of the institution by student numbers per year and their distribution by gender are shown in Appendix 1.

The values that guide the ZOU are, among others, lifelong learning, open learning, entrepreneurship, accountability, transparency, integrity, professional ethics, teamwork, intellectual freedom, total quality management, effective communication, timeliness, mutual respect and being market driven. (The Zimbabwe Open University general brochure).

The University is a multi-disciplinary and inter-faculty institution that offers degree and non-degree courses to both youths and adults. Its guiding beacon is the philosophy of lifelong learning for social inclusion. This provides the pillar as it imparts knowledge, competencies and dispositions that are necessary for the development of competitive human resources. It has three faculties, which run 24 programs. They are the Faculties of Science, Commerce and Law and Arts, Education and Humanities and the medium currently in use is the print medium. This is ideal given that over 70% of the population are rural and the national rural electrification program is yet to be completed. The majority of the ZOU's student population is in remote areas where even radios have no clear reception. The technology-aided learning is being studied with the hope of putting some of the learning materials on line to augment the print mode. The advantages of the print mode would include ability to reach the remotest learner, durability, portability since it can be used anywhere with no need for special infrastructure, and familiarity as a learning mode with the learner. The shortcomings include the cost of producing the material, bulkiness in weight for some of the modules as compared to computer software, requirement of storage space.

While using the print mode, the ZOU has deliberately employed a combination of open and distance learning. Open learning implies open with regard to entry qualifications, choice of learning venue, no age, race, gender or geographical restrictions, and choice of course to be learnt and degrees. Distance learning on the other hand refers basically to the distance between the learner and the tutor. The ZOU has come up with a mixture of the two to start with as it develops towards pure openness. The entry qualifications are still defined as well as the degree programs and the specific courses the learner has to take. However there is openness with regards to age, race, gender, geographic location and learning venue. The distance is there indeed but there are face-to-face tutorial sessions at which the students meet with the tutors for a given number of hours per module. The distance is also reduced by regular communication between the student and the tutor through assignments submissions and feedback. District study center visits by tutors also remove the distance. So for the new institution, a combination of the open and distance is being pursued until all systems are in place for a purely open learning institution.

A Council of 31 people, including the Vice Chancellor and Pro Vice Chancellors who are ex officio members, drives the ZOU. The rest of the members represent the university staff, through senate, students, and representatives from all the sectors of the economy and society. This is a balanced composition, which ensures the protection of the interests of all stakeholders. The governance issues they deal with include policies on the quality of academic programs, student enrolment, staff appointments, student fees, a variety of ordinances, which are authorized by the Minister, the structures of the university, university infrastructure and many others. These issues are by and large similar to those in the conventional universities. The difference would be in the areas of infrastructure and the general structures of the university given the geographical dispersion of the ZOU.

While the main administration is centralised, the ZOU's operations at student services level are decentralised into ten Regional Centers, one in each of the Provincial capitals of the country. Plans are underway to go closer to the student at the District level. These regional centers are the points where the students interface with the institution. That is where the activity is.

Structurally, it is headed by a Vice Chancellor who has two Pro Vice Chancellors, one responsible for Academic Affairs and the other for Strategic Planning, Finance, Marketing and Income Generation. The next level has Directors for Registry Services, Finance, Information Technology and Library and Information Science. The rest report to this hierarchy.

The student and all other records are managed through an MIS which was adopted from the University of Zimbabwe, DATAEASE, where the data was originally stored. After a successful migration the ZOU tailored the system to its needs. The university is currently running the following systems from its MIS; applicants system, student's registration, timetable system, examination system, graduates system, nominal ledger and student accounts, payroll and several other systems. The ZOU is currently developing a website to facilitate more effective communication with the students.

THE VISION

As an institution, the ZOU's vision is that of becoming one of the leading Open and Distance Learning institutions in the region (Zimbabwe Open University Strategic Plan 2001-2004). The vision is alert to the reality of the existing and potential competition in the area.

While the institution has its own vision, a developmentalist can not afford to ignore the vision of two critical stakeholders namely the Nation and the client, in this case the student. The Nation's vision in establishing the ZOU was to have a tertiary education institution, which would provide access to education to as many people as possible across the nation. The structure of decentralising the service provision to all the ten Provinces of the nation through Regional Centers was one of the strategies.

The individual students have as many and varied visions as they are registered. These would include the vision or dream of having a degree certificate; acquiring knowledge; and or acquiring wealth due to having a University degree. These visions are of course influenced by the nation or students' value systems. In a developing economy like Zimbabwe, academic qualifications are critical for meaningful career development. There is also the drive for self-actualisation in the case of established officers or entrepreneurs in accordance with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

The ZOU is thus aiming at equipping these students sufficiently to realise their dreams.

THE MISSION

As an institution, the Zimbabwe Open University has a specific Mission to accomplish. Its Mission is "to provide access to relevant, quality, flexible, individualised and cost-effective tertiary education and training services to learners, wherever they are." (The Zimbabwe Open University Strategic Plan 2001-2004).

The ZOU is very sure of its calling which is to educate the marginalized as well as the busy and employed people. The marginalized are those learners who were denied access to tertiary education during the colonial times as it was being limited to only 12% of those who completed High School. Due to economic hardships some became marginalized by lack of tuition. As a result of the economic pressure and the culture, the girl-child became marginalized as the limited resources were used to educate the boy-child. The girl-child thus aspired for marriage, usually getting into it fairly early, hence being done with

childbearing and child rearing by age 35-40. This then is the ripe market for the ZOU. The flexibility, affordability and relevance of the education offered by the ZOU demonstrate care for the student, particularly the busy, employed student. It offers a warm and friendly environment in all its offices both for the internal and external customer. Students' queries are responded to urgently as a matter of policy.

As can be seen from the table in Appendix 1, the male student population through the years, since the Center for Distance Education day's averages 68% of the total, while the female student population for the same period averages 32%. While this might appear a lower percentage, it is actually quite high given that most of the ZOU students are mature students and back then when these students grew up the girl child was not exposed to education as stated above. ODL does lend itself well to women because of the other numerous responsibilities that they have.

The ZOU markets its services to potential and existing students, which is unusual in the conventional university system. In fact the ZOU is the only university, out of the ten universities in Zimbabwe, both private and public, that has a Pro-Vice Chancellor responsible for Marketing. The ZOU offers learning in the most familiar environments namely in the student's home, office, or wherever he or she is comfortable, demonstrating flexible accessibility. The techniques and assignments are given in the learning materials.

To a very large extent the ZOU accomplishes its mission of providing access to affordable, relevant, flexible tertiary education to the market with a commendable attitude, approach and method, regardless of the diversity of its market. In fact various sectors of this market testify to the success of the fulfillment of this mission. The graduate teachers who have since 1977 graduated in thousands are contributing to national development by teaching in and heading institutions of higher learning, locally, regionally and internationally because of their ZOU degrees. The latest incentive from the Ministry of Education has been the recognition of degreed teachers by awarding them higher salaries. The BComm. and MBA degrees and the Diploma in Business Leadership have had a tremendously positive impact on the economy since the students on this program and the graduates thereof would be the managers who drive the process of industrial development.

CHALLENGES

In spite of having this clear vision and a mission, which is very customer-focused, the ZOU is embattled with severe challenges. These include issues of resistance; lack of a critical mass of educators trained in the methods and management of tertiary distance education; quality assurance and resource limitations. The gravity of these challenges varies as they are being addressed both at policy and at operational level. These challenges will be addressed in detail.

RESISTANCE

The ZOU as explained above, evolved from the University of Zimbabwe. At that point of inception the University of Zimbabwe regarded it as its 'baby' and thus saw it as a complementing institution. Given its age and size the University of Zimbabwe still regards it as such. However, resistance could be experienced by the ZOU as a reaction by other smaller and younger universities in the country who are coming up with Centres for Distance Education.

As all universities are developing small Centers of Distance Education within their structures for income generation purposes, the ZOU is resisted as competition. Hence **competition** is the source of resistance.

This challenge of resistance from sister-institutions of higher learning can be addressed by forging partnerships and complimenting one another's distinctive competencies and avoiding duplication of

efforts such as offering identical courses, since the resources for all state universities come from the same source which is the state treasury. The National Council for Higher Education is encouraging this approach of forging partnerships and enhancing complementarities instead of competition.

The issue of resistance is also a function of **attitudes**, especially of the market. The ZOU's market initially viewed instruction by distance as of "inferior" quality. The source of resistance there was the attitude. This attitude could also be fanned by the natural reaction of **resistance to change**. Open and Distance Learning (ODL), representing a change from the conventional system, has faced untold resistance.

Educating the students and persuading them to make a paradigm shift, and value and espouse their own university since their negativity would result in a negative perception of their degrees by the public have addressed this. This would obviously prejudice their competitiveness in the job market. The students are addressed during orientation sessions and throughout the tutorials. The Tutors on the other hand are also coached on how to leave the learning to the student and only serve as a facilitator of the learning process. The ZOU will in the near future be publishing handbooks for ODL students and for ODL tutors. Currently the tutorial letters that are given to the students on registration also give the requisite orientation. Nationally, ODL has been validated and hence is gradually getting accepted because most of the high-ranking politicians and government leaders acquired their education through ODL while they were in detention camps or in prison. Our State President, His Excellency, Robert Gabriel Mugabe is a UNISA alumnus. Many captains of industry are also doing post graduate studies through ODL and this has validated ODL in industry. UNISA again is one of the major service providers. The majority of UNISA's 5700 students in Zimbabwe are studying commerce.

Another source of resistance of the Open and Distance mode is the students' **culture of having a teacher stand in front** of them and teach. This is the educational culture inculcated from pre-school to University level, in the conventional mode. Due to the distance between the tutor and the student, certain emotional dimensions and overtones of instructional interaction are cut off. Thus depersonalising the whole process. The ZOU has addressed this form of resistance by incorporating face-to-face tutoring in its delivery modes. This is however, one of the biggest cost drivers in the institution's budget pushing the institution towards more of true distance learning.

Yet another source of the resistance is the **elitist education culture**, where university education is only for a few. Those graduates of conventional universities who felt that their exclusiveness was being challenged resisted opening up entry into tertiary education. This was further enhanced by their belief that ODL products were inferior to conventional universities' products (Daniel, 182). This challenge is being addressed by producing quality-learning materials while educating the market in general on the serious nature and authenticity of the ODL qualification.

SHORTAGE OF DISTANCE EDUCATORS

The lack of a critical mass of trained ODL educators and managers is a challenge that the ZOU has battled with since inception. The principal strategy that was employed was however that of in-house – training. Resource persons were recruited from the Open University UK, Commonwealth of Learning, UNISA and Australia to induct staff in the following key competencies, to name but a few, expected of a distance educator: The concept Distance Education, Module Writing, Effective Tutoring and the Role of the Tutor, The Role of a Regional Center, Marking of Assignments in an Open Learning institution, Student Support Services and Student Counseling.

Initially heavy funding was sourced to cover these training programs. Such bodies as the Commonwealth of Learning and the British Council donated the funds for this training. In some cases educators were

issued with certificates on completion of the training. Over and above the training costs the basic initial capital required to start the university according to the 1994 committee's report was, at today's rate Z\$38 billion or US\$46 million. Currently ZOU staff reading for their doctoral studies in distance education is sponsored from the institutional budget under the staff development program. A few have managed to secure private sponsorship.

Secondly, practicing educators of the ZOU were sent on attachment or visits to similar institutions such as UNISA, Open University (UK) and the Open University of Tanzania. Critical skills were imparted to staff through these attachments.

Thirdly over 30 ZOU academics and administrators are pursuing Post-Graduate Studies, particularly doctoral studies in Distance Education. This Staff Development strategy is meant to build the critical mass of trained personnel in ODL both as educators and as managers.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The issue of quality of Learning Materials, Modes of delivery and the overall service provision is another pressing challenge. It is a challenge that is compounded by the culture of resistance to change. To address this challenge the ZOU has done the following:

It has and still endeavors to hire both academics and administrators of repute and proven work experience. This as a quality measure engenders confidence in the stakeholders, especially the students.

To ensure quality customer service, it has embarked on running Customer Care training seminars for all staff including Senior Management. For a service providing institution dealing with large volumes of students and other stakeholders across the country, Customer Care is an imperative.

The quality of academic staff is also ensured by the employment of part-time lecturers from the conventional universities. This has allayed doubts on the part of the students.

The ZOU has an Academic Programs Management Committee, which meets regularly to plan and assess academic processes and procedures to ensure smooth and quality flow of work. This covers all the processes from the student's admission to the exit point after examinations.

This committee also monitors learning Materials' production. The materials are co-authored in most cases and are content reviewed, again to engender quality. Surveys are also conducted with the students to evaluate the learning materials. The feedback enhances the quality of the materials.

Examinations are set in collaboration with professors and other academics from sister-universities. These fellow academics and those specialists from other countries also serve as external examiners, which is also the case in conventional universities. This engenders quality in the whole examination process and content.

Joint certification of graduates in collaboration with the University of Zimbabwe up to 2002, has instilled great credibility in the ZOU programs. The University of Zimbabwe is the country's oldest university, which is accorded a high ranking on the academic ladder. There is no way by which the University of Zimbabwe would threaten its reputation by collaborating with an open learning institution whose instruction standards are inferior. The ZOU offered its degrees in collaboration with University of Zimbabwe for four years between 1999 to 2002. Joint graduation ceremonies were also held to further demonstrate the confidence that the University of Zimbabwe had, not only in the qualitative instructional ability of the ZOU, but in its assessment capacity and the final product, the graduate.

There is however no vertical or horizontal articulation of credits yet within the higher education system. The teaching and learning is evaluated by means of assignments, tests and soon to be introduced, tutor evaluation instruments to be completed by the students. The students in the first two intakes evaluate the study materials and they are reviewed after five years.

The printed material must be instructive, interactive and dialogical. Besides the printed modules, students receive recommended book lists, and readers, in some courses. Students also receive assignment tutorials as part of the feedback in the form of comments from the tutor. The assignment is considered a critical teaching tool in distance learning since it is through the assignment that the student is motivated to learn and master the knowledge and skills expected of him by the department and the university. The tutor then assumes his teaching agent role by going through the assignment and assessing it for the student's ability to communicate, his writing skills and style, his content, analytical skills, presentation skills and ability to address the demands of the question. After the assessment the tutor writes a page or more of commentary to assist the student, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the answer and suggesting solutions.

This detailed assessment is one of the ways through which the university communicates with the students. The tutorial letters given at the beginning of each semester are another form of communication and so are the letters to individual students under special circumstances both from the region and from the national center.

In designing the learning materials the major challenges for the instructional designer are that adult learners are a homogenous group. They have highly varied life experiences, academic backgrounds and learning and motivational abilities. All these factors have to be taken into cognizance when designing the learning materials. The material designers therefore need intensive training to be able to deliver quality materials.

Students communicate with each other in their localities through their learning circles and district study groups. There are part time field tutors who organize these groups while also serving as the conduit between the students and the regional center.

The ZOU has also employed the strategy of attracting strategic or key students from various walks of life. These include Members of Parliament, Executive City Mayors, Ambassadors and High Commissioners, Bishops and captains of commerce and industry. Having such a client base has enhanced the positive perception of the institution's quality.

Apart from the above, the ZOU has a deliberate policy of marketing its graduates in the world of work. Some Zimbabwe Open University graduates have been appointed as Regional Directors of Education, School Heads, Education Officers as well as some public service positions. In some instances state colleges and universities have employed ZOU graduates as lecturers. The Zimbabwe Open University Alumni Association is in the process of establishing a directory of its own successful members in their careers and public life. This is particularly prevalent at regional level where the Regional Administrator would liaise with heads of organizations and institutions regarding the suitability of ZOU graduates for specific positions. This could also be at the graduate's request.

These and many other quality engendering strategies are and continue to be embarked on.

RESOURCE LIMITATIONS:

Being a different kind of university in the country, the ZOU has peculiar demands from the conventional ones. Again as observed by Prof. Pityana an ODL institution of higher learning requires high levels of infrastructure for effective delivery since the learner is self-driven and thus continuously engages with the process and the institution as a whole. Its resources, namely human, material and financial meet higher levels of stress.

In respect of human resources, the challenge has been multifold. It ranges from the non-availability of ready-made ODL specialists (implying the need to recruit and train), to the retention of those who are specialists, without losing them to regional competition.

Material resources range from infrastructure to equipment and consumables. The ZOU, unlike other State Universities, was not established at a specific location. Its initial home belonged to another institution, which has led to its current location in the Central Business District of Harare. This has resulted in high rentals for the National Center and even for most of the 10 Regional Centers. This has drained the meager finances of the institution. Efforts are underway to address this challenge.

Besides the infrastructure, equipment such as computers, office furniture, vehicles and consumable also pose a challenge for the ZOU. As a State institution, its funding comes from the government budget. This has the effect that the institution is modestly resourced. One of the several strategies to deal with this challenge has been that of the introduction of the Income Generation unit, as a strategic unit. This unit, under the headship of a Pro-Vice Chancellor, has the responsibility of broadening the funding base beyond the usual government source. Some of the projects have been seeking strategic partnership with industry, forming a ZOU Alumni Association and a Friends of ZOU Association. The strategic partnership with industry has proven to be the most rewarding to date, given that these efforts are less than two years old. Industry is appealed to for donations in cash and/or in kind based on the fact that ZOU is developing their human resources for them.

Financial resources are a perennial challenge for the Zimbabwe Open University. Unlike the old and long established ODL institutions such as the OU (UK), UNISA, Open University of Israel, the young Zimbabwe Open University has no endowment to finance its activities. As stated above, it is a state-funded institution. Another, though small and very variable or volatile source of income are the student fees. Currently the average undergraduate fees per year are Z\$280,000 i.e. US\$340 and the postgraduate fees are Z\$ 360,000 i.e. US\$440. These cover tuition, learning materials, practical classes and field trips and other administrative charges. The unit cost per student would vary according the programs in question and whether the program is at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Due to limited financial resources, the students have to pay their fees up-front per semester or per year, depending on the program. Students that have not paid their fees neither register nor write assignments or exams and they do not get any learning materials.

To address the challenge of continuously escalating costs, the ZOU has set-up a Cost Saving Committee, which meets weekly to approve all purchases centrally. This has made a major contribution to the cash flow of the institution as departments are now demonstrating a cost-effectiveness culture in all decisions. Thus in spite of the geographical dispersion of the institution, financial controls can still be affected.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN ESTABLISHING AN OPEN UNIVERSITY

Creating a successful national Open University depends on a number of factors and actions. Experience gained in establishing the Zimbabwe Open University provided the following lessons.

First, it is important to convince the government (politicians) that the Open University will provide a viable alternative to the provision of university education, especially in great numbers to assist the masses and enhance national development. The goodwill and support of politicians is critical if the project is to secure national funding and other material and capital resources to establish the institution. As already mentioned, the notion of ODL is familiar with most of Zimbabwe's politicians having attained their education that way themselves. At regional level however, further efforts can be made such as inviting some of the politicians to be patrons of the Regional center. Holding regional graduation ceremonies to show the regional citizens that large numbers in the region have graduated and are thus going to contribute to the region's development. Enrolling some of the politicians onto the programs so that they get a first hand appreciation of the programs also enlists their support and appreciation of ODL as a viable alternative in university education.

The second critical action to be taken is to appoint experienced and reputable academics and administrators who share common values and philosophy to launch the university. Distance educators are often regarded as second-rate teachers in the eyes of conventional academics (Daniel 1982). In order to dispel this myth and establish an academically strong Open University, a deliberate attempt should be made to recruit staff that has sound training in distance education so that they capture the confidence of the students.

The ZOU's experience has also taught us that marshalling adequate financial resources is a major criterion in establishing a successful Open University. Daniel (1982: 62) warns that, "without adequate continuing grants, distance institutions will deteriorate into substandard coaching academics". The original plan for the ZOU was for it to be fully government supported by way of infrastructure and all other capital resources. Given the macro-economic conditions this did not materialise. However the institution was launched with minimal support. At inception this was manageable since it started as a College of an established University and therefore enjoyed their resource base. When it had to be on its own and operate as an autonomous entity the stress began to manifest. The institutional leadership is constantly working with the government to improve on its financial position. Internal efforts are also being made to engender strategic partnerships with industry to get sponsorship. This has been fairly successful with one bank at one time meeting all printing costs of the annual diary and prospectus in exchange for slotting a few of their adverts in those publications. Industry can be persuaded into partnership using the rationale that the Open University is developing their human resources for them, who are actually, implementing the knowledge they acquire on the spot and hence enhancing the industry's efficiency. Before launching an Open University therefore, it is critical to ensure that all resources, financial, human and material are in place.

Another aspect to consider in the creation of a National Open University is the curriculum. The curriculum has to be one that produces scholars and thinkers and not just technicians. The development of technicians is the responsibility of vocational training institutions. As a University should, the Open University should develop graduates who understand the principles underlying the particulars. The B.Sc. in Agriculture program, for instance, should produce a graduate who understands the meaning of an excellent tobacco leaf based on his or her understanding of the chemical processes that take place in the formation of that leaf and all the necessary conditions. This graduate should be different from the technician who has the tobacco grading and packing skills only.

To ensure that courses are demand-driven surveys have to be carried out in detail before a program is launched. The survey should be conducted among the stakeholders, which should include the potential employers of the graduates. This also ensures a good working relationship with the employers of the university's graduates. The majority of the ZOU's student body comprises of teachers and the institution enjoys very good relations with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, which is the employer. In

fact, government as a whole supports the ZOU by offering learning facilities. Both Government and industry support ZOU by meeting the student fees because they have confidence in the programs.

Further, the curriculum should be relevant but also scholarly. Teaching students such value-laden courses as philosophy, ethics and several others, is core to the holistic development of the human being. The curriculum should thus not only focus on practical courses in the name of relevance for poverty alleviation. Development of the human mind also entails developing one to be a responsible truthful citizen. A fully developed and equipped graduate should be one who can reason, argue and provide evidence even as he/she applies the practical training. Regardless of the genius a student might possess in scientific orientation, he or she still needs values training to ensure that he or she has civic responsibility for all his or her life endeavors.

Most critical of the factors to consider is the one of strategic thinking and planning. Strategic Planning emphasises a future orientation in one's thinking. (Fred David, 1988). The creator of an Open University must have a clear vision, mission, objectives and strategies, all conjured within the environmental context in question. The ZOU started with a four year Strategic Plan which clearly articulates all the above. The plan has clear action plans for each operational objective with time lines to ensure effective and efficient evaluation of the whole institution's performance. Such an overall plan must cascade in greater detail down the hierarchy to ensure the operationalisation of strategies and hence the achievement of objectives. This plan needs to be constantly reviewed in view of the environmental dynamics impacting upon the institution. A thorough analysis of both the internal and the external environment should always be done at unit or departmental level and on a quarterly basis at top management level. From the ZOU experience lack of strategy review has on occasion caused the institution to crisis-manage.

With a clearly articulated plan, performance management becomes possible. Every unit's objectives provide the key result areas, which must be stated and the strategies for achieving them within a given time frame, taking into cognisance the possible constraints that might be encountered. These details form the context of one's performance contract, which is reviewed during performance appraisal resulting in policy guided rewarding and or correction.

From the strategies one then derives the policies, procedures, rules and regulations. Again, these must be clearly articulated by the steering team before the institution is launched. This is critical because once the institution is launched operations begin and they have to be guided by clear policies and procedures. Even when an open University is incubated in an existing conventional university, it has to develop its own policies and procedures because its business is different from that of a conventional university particularly regarding the operations. The structures are different and they have to be organised and co-ordinated differently. The ZOU still has to revisit the policies and procedures regularly. As a national university certain policies have to be approved by the respective government ministries. Thus the planning process has to have all these in place and appropriately authorised for timely implementation.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the several challenges an Open and Distance Learning institution might encounter, it is heartening to observe that distance education has an exciting future. For developing economies its affordability makes it attractive. Its flexibility, which allows a student to choose his or her own pace of study, makes it very attractive to the busy and cultural responsibility-laden African. With more people having access to tertiary education societies and nations can only get better. Creating a national Open University is an achievable task, going by the ZOU experience, but challenges should never be underestimated. The key to success in distance education is efficient student service and Regional and District centers thus play a pivotal role.

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Appendix 1**ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY****STUDENTS REGISTERED PER PROGRAMME FROM 1993 - 1999**

Year	Male	Male %	Female	Female %	Total
1993	573	77	176	23	749
1994	2,184	71	881	29	3,065
1995	2,166	68	1,009	32	3,176
1996	2,324	74	1,105	26	3,129
1997	3,857	71	1,572	29	5,429
1998	5,007	66	2,613	34	7,620
1999	9,697	68	4,734	32	14,313
2000	10,775	63	6,342	37	17,117
2001	11,432	61	7,392	39	18,824
2002	8,149	59	5,687	41	13,836