ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STUDENT RETENTION STRATEGIES AT ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The study aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the student retention strategies at the Zimbabwe Open University. It utilised the qualitative approach to collect and analyse data. The data was collected through interviews. The study sample comprised of sixteen participants, eight staff members and eight students. These were selected through purposive sampling since the study was qualitative. The findings show that ZOU had very lucrative strategies to manage student retention. Among them were management and leadership styles, peer teaching, mentoring and collaboration, orientation, and student-centred active learning. It also noted that ZOU had challenges in student retention which included resources, social influences, soft skills and teaching methods. The study concluded challenges faced by students were basically situational not institute based. Teaching methods like peer tutoring and collaboration were important as they created a conducive environment for learning. The study recommended that ZOU continuously trains its front desk employees and equip them with correct information. It was also recommended that the students be made aware of the learning styles in an ODL setup before taking up the studies.

Keywords: *Student retention, Student retention strategies, Open University*

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In its initial stages, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was the largest University in Zimbabwe in terms of enrolment. At some point it had an enrolment of 27 000 students compared to the current statistics of 13 000. The decline indicates that at some point, ZOU is losing due to some retention strategies in place. The figures indicate that ZOU was once popular since it could accommodate students from different backgrounds. The purpose of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) was or is to make sure that everyone who has the capability of attaining university education has done that. This mode of education has transformed many lives of incapacitated Zimbabweans in terms of education. ODL even changed the ordinary Zimbabwean. For example, people were made to end their education at 'O' level if they did not attain 'A' level qualification, but the advent of ODL made the majority to access university education. The establishment of ZOU created equal opportunities between men and women. In fact, there is equal participation in all spheres, be it education sector or industries. The main thrust of ODL was to create equal opportunities among disadvantaged and advantaged populations. Discrimination, stigmatization, and labeling were rampant, hence ODL helped solve all that. It has assisted in uplifting the lives of many people, locally and regionally.

However, to attract and retain students, ODL universities must identify and meet student expectations. The students' expectations play an important role in their retention in the university. To the contrary, student retention has become an issue of concern in all universities, whether ODL or conventional. As

Scott (2005) argues, even when interventions are designed and implemented to improve student retention, they tend to fall short. Though there may be many strategies in place for student retention in ODL, the attrition rate has remained high. It is, therefore, the aim of this study to assess the effectiveness of the strategies already in place.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Attrition rate remains high rate across all universities due to several factors. It was observed that student numbers were falling. Students enroll for a programme in a semester and the following semester they drop out. The decline in numbers is not faculty sided but it is across the board. This, therefore, means that there is something amiss contributing to attrition rate in all faculties. Thus, the focus of the study is to assess the effectiveness of the strategies on student retention in ODL education.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the challenges faced in student retention in ODL?
2. How best can these challenges be addressed by ODL?
3. What are the current strategies in place for student retention in ODL education?
4. To what extent are the strategies applicable in an ODL university setup?

4. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Several retention strategies in ODL have been identified through reviewed literature. These are presented in this section.

4.1 Management and leadership styles

Management and leadership lead in dealing with student retention. When management and leadership are correctly exhibited it means the university functions well and promotes student retention. Firstly, Bennis, (1994) defined leadership as a formal position with a concrete set of goals. Second, it can be defined as broad approval and commendation for success in accomplishing societal, organizational, or personal goals. Third, leadership can be defined in terms of a set of characteristics (e.g., vision, integrity, drive) commonly held by individuals who serve as role models in setting and accomplishing important goals. Finally, the concept can be described as a course of action or a way of behaving when defined in terms of leading, rather than in terms of the condition or state of being implied by the terms 'leader' or 'leadership'.

Management, on the other hand, is simply concerned with doing things right. Management is concerned with efficiency, and with control. When management and in those in leadership positions, work concurrently in student retention it therefore implies that learners can be retained. The leadership style that can be adopted by leaders and managers plays a pivotal role in student retention. The students tend to favour the participative style of leadership since it involves them as stakeholders. The students` input will find its way to management by being involved. The participative style give room and creates an allowance for the leadership to accommodate students in decision making processes. It gives freedom to students to express themselves, thus the way they feel, for example, if students are not given the opportunity to contribute towards the crafting SRC constitution.

4.2 Academic assistance: Retention is the business of all university staff

Kalsbeek et al. (2013) argue that retention is institutional specific and sometimes culture   specific and there are multiple factors interacting with each other that lead to high retention rates across all institutional types. Several studies on college persistence and student retention identified academic advising as essential to fulfilling the teaching and learning task of higher education (Act, 2010). Tinto

(1993) further affirms that academic advisement is at the very core of successful institutional efforts to educate and retain students. This is viewed as the art of building relationships with students, thus assisting them connecting their strengths and interests with academic life goals (White et al., 2012). Furthermore, student success statistics are commonly regarded as primary indicators of institutional performance. They have come to reflect the overall quality of student learning and intellectual involvement; how well integrated students are in campus life and how effectively a campus delivers what students expect and need. According to Tinto (1993), best known for his work on student departure from college, the first principle of effective retention programs and, therefore, assuring student success is institutional commitment to students." Tinto (1993) notes that it is a commitment that springs from the very character of an institution's educational mission.

Building of relationships involves time management, making informed decisions and making use of the academic and social services availed. This, however, indicates that frequent interaction with an academic advisor improves or increases retention. Noel (2008) declares that academic advising is not that good but poorly organized and ineffective in addressing students and institutional needs. The observation by Noel may apply to higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. For example, students may complain, but their complaints are ignored. There is much dissatisfaction by the services rendered to them which then negatively impacts on student retention. A study carried out at the College of Distance Education (CoDE) of the university of Cape Coast (UCC) positively supports the idea of student advisement.

Nevertheless, Crockett in Levitz (2008) declares that academic advising on many campuses today is of low status, poorly organized and ineffective in meeting students' and institutional needs. Students are always dissatisfied with the service of advisors. Wycoff as cited in Cuseo, (2007) asserts that despite students' dissatisfaction with academic advising, they still express strong desire for advisors contact.

4.3 Peer collaboration

According to Fieldman and Newcomb (1969), effective academic support programs for first year students capitalize on the power of peers. Interaction of students has long been known to have positive effects on student retention. It also intentionally fosters collaboration among students representing an effective strategy for promoting retention attrition because it fosters student's social integration into the university community (Tinto, 1993). Peer collaboration has also been found to advance student's cognitive development as evidenced by Kurfiss (1988) who concluded that the use of peers as resources is a powerful strategy for promoting the development of student's higher level thinking skills. Though peer collaboration is noted as one of the strategies in retention of students in open and distance learning, it should be known that face to face collaboration is limited. Students do their studies at home though they at times collaborate when doing online discussion. The cooperative learning structures work to achieve the same objective by reorganizing the college classroom transforming it from its traditional format of one large group of individuals working independently into small teams of peer learners who work interdependently and collaboratively. Interestingly, when learning community programming is combined with cooperative learning pedagogy, the positive impact of peer collaboration is further magnified, as evidenced by research conducted at Seattle Central Community College where students in learning communities who also experience cooperative learning methods in their classes, report greater intellectual gains than do learning-community students who are not exposed to cooperative learning methods in the classroom (Tinto, 2006).

4.4 Maintaining connections to family and community

This strategy gives recommendations for institutions to create programs that allow students to maintain a strong connection between the universities they attend and the communities they go back to when they finish their studies. This would allow students to stay connected to their families which are a major source of kinship leading to increased perseverance for students (Heavy & DeCelles, 2002). It is of great importance to create a family-like environment for students by making family members an

integral part of the educational process, which makes it a two-way street making the students stay connected to their families while allowing the family to participate in their education thus ,increasing the likelihood of students completing their education. This retention strategy is similar with one of the institutional goals of ZOU.

4.5 Student centred active learning

According to Grittish University study, student-centred, discussion based, and group-based learning activities promote student participation and interaction. It encourages students to share and express ideas. This to a larger extent is said to improve communication among the students and lecturers, hence building trust and better relations in a culturally diverse environment. It allows all students to give an input that benefits everyone, thus promoting students` retention in a way. Another study carried at the Australian Universities review, there is a consensus that interactive as opposed to didactic teaching improves academic success and promotes the inclusion of learners who might feel left out hence making students play a more active role in their learning process thus one feels obliged to carry on and finish their courses. Student active learning was indicated as imperative in student retention at Griffith University as it was seen to support student life cycle approach the recognizes and supports diversity and social inclusion.

4.6 Orientation and induction day

In ODL institutions, there are orientation days set so that students get to know the university systems and interacting with each other. This is supported by a case study which was done at Open University of Malaysia and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University where it was reviewed that new learners are most vulnerable to dropouts. Dropping out was or is said to be common, the major reason cited being unfamiliarity with the new learning systems and processes. As a result, orientation was introduced to overcome cited problems. At Open University of Malaysia, a one-day orientation programs known as learning skills workshop is conducted for all new learners at all learning centres throughout the country. Thus, before the beginning of tutorial sessions. The study noted that the workshop was found to have positive impact on the performance of learners up until they complete their programmes, (Latifah, 2007). To intensify the mission of the workshop orientation materials were further availed on websites for those who could not make it to the workshop. STOU conducts a similar programme for new learners at the beginning of the first semester in every province in the country. In this programme, new learners are introduced to the concept of ODL and what it takes to be a successful ODL learner (Latifah, 2007). STOU also provides a VCD containing the orientation materials for all new learners.

4.7 At risk learners` support

A study at OUM and STOU reviewed that they give special attention to at risk learners. At risk learners are those with a cumulative grade point average of less than 2.0 which is the passing grade (Latifah, 2007). Besides the normal face-to-face academic counselling, both institutions have leveraged on information and communication technology (ICT) by providing e-counselling to this group of learners. Academic counsellors at both institutions also conduct phone counselling and e-counselling to these at-risk learners who, for personal and other reasons, hesitate to engage in face-to-face counselling. Apart from the above, at risk learners are issued with an auto-generated letter, requesting them to discuss with the relevant faculties on how to improve their academic performance. The serious implications of being an at-risk learner for more than two semesters are communicated to them. Similarly, in STOU, letters are sent to learners with the same purpose. However, the study noted that STOU capitalised on the use of radio and television programmes to provide information and advice on how to be successful in distance learning to learners while OUM embarked on the use of Internet radio to reach out to all learners (Latifah, 2007).

4.8 Academic and student affairs collaboration

Other factors to be considered for complete being of a university student include cognition, social adjustment, emotional stability, and personal wellness (Boylan, 1992). This is supported by systems theory which takes everything around the person to be contributing towards either success or failure in life. Boylan (1992) in his research reviewed that academic support programs which include different program features, targeting different student needs, are more effective than single-focus programs. Another research by Kuh et al. (2000) noted student retention is more effectively promoted at institutions whose campus culture is characterized by collaboration between academic and student affairs, this is so since every department dependency on each other. For example, academic registry cannot work in isolation of another department. Engelkemeyer (1998) argued that managers and leaders can rethink the conventional organization of colleges and universities to create more accepted and conducive structures and processes that integrate academic and student affairs and offer professional-development opportunities for people to cooperate across institutional boundaries.

4.9 Challenges faced in student retention

Some previous research indicates that students withdraw for many reasons. However, the reasons are rarely the same. In most cases, the picture is complex, and students leave because of a combination of inter-related factors. A study carried out in Australia and UK highlighted several categories of reasons why students withdraw from universities. The reasons include poor preparation for higher education, weak institutional and/or course match, resulting in poor fit and lack of commitment, unsatisfactory academic experience, and lack of social integration, financial issues and personal circumstances (Jones, 2008). Thus, some students withdraw for reasons beyond the jurisdiction of the institution, including personal reasons and changed personal circumstances, wrong or poor course selection and movement to other courses that meet their interests and aspirations more directly.

Other factors have been noted to be contributing on student retention of which the most significant is the students' experience of university (Scott, 2005) and the need for students to be engaged in their studies. Crosling et al. (2008) agree with Tinto (2006) on the range of factors in contemporary higher education that have an impact on students' retention. These include pre-entry information, preparation and admission processes, induction and transition support, learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum development, social engagement, student support, including financial and pastoral services, and improved use of institutional data. Scott et al. (2008) argues that student retention found the following interventions that enhance student preparedness to study: create an effective orientation and transition experience, increase personal communication with and advice to students, provide early detection and intervention for students at risk, enhance the quality of the learning experience, and increase student engagement and quality with their peers, with staff and of the campus experience. In Australia and world-wide, student engagement is generally acknowledged as a key factor in student retention and enhancing student engagement is a fundamental strategy for improving student retention, success, and outcomes (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007).

Krause et al. (2008) point out that in first year studies, it is crucial to encourage and assist student engagement as the foundation for successful study in later years. Student engagement is defined as a student's academic commitment and application, (Horstmanshof, et al. 2007) and shown in time and energy devoted to activities that are educationally purposeful. This also connotes the quality of student effort and students studying for meaning and understanding, thus reflecting a constructivist approach to learning (Lawrence, 2005). However, engagement is not the sole responsibility of the student as it concerns students interacting with the learning environment (Bryson, 2007). Thus, teachers have some responsibility to provide a setting that facilitates students' engagement and learning, that gets students to participate in activities that lead to success' (Kuh, 2003). This involves students being immersed in

authentic curriculum contents and tasks that are challenging and relevant to students' lives and futures, appropriate orientation or induction procedures, and the integration of study skills.

4.10 Distance and access to computers

ODL as opposed to conventional institutions has its students scattered all over the place. Distance learning requires the use of both the internet and a computer, so those that embark on such programmes must have access to these and knowledge of appropriate skills and technologies to complete the program. If one is not computer-literate or do not have ready access to appropriate technology, then online education may not be the best route to take. This thus poses a great challenge to the institution and its major stakeholders which are student. Students are supposed at some instances to submit hard copies assignments. Thus, it becomes costly adding another burden. For the students who do not have laptops, if they submit assignments online, it therefore means additional cost on top of school fees which might demoralize the students and parents paying the fees. ODL is said not to promote social learning as alluded by Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Tinto's Interactionist Theory. Its domains are linked to individualistic learning where students learn on their own at any given time but with stipulated assignment deadlines in place. Interaction systems are highly limited since interaction can only be done via emails, chats, or group discussion on e-learning with which some of the students who are in remote areas do not have access to the internet.

4.11 Drop-out rates

Ormond (2014), at Open University in the East indicated that some dropouts were beyond the power of any institution to influence. They may be due to illness, social issues and employment circumstances and other factors interacting in various ways. This is supported by another study done at STOU which highlighted that reasons for high attrition rate have not been fully understood since in many cases reasons are situational.

4.12 ODL instructional methods

Instructional methods can be a challenging issue in ODL with which tutoring is the proper way of teaching. It is however, noted with concern that despite the theoretical benefits of tutoring, Gisbert and Font (2008) warn that learning through tutoring is not well received by students. They expect the lecturer to provide every learning material yet in this case the students are supposed to do intensive research and when they go for tutorials, they discuss their difficulties with the help of the tutor. Students in ODL institutions expect that the teaching that is done in conventional institutions be the same as that in the ODL system. While students maybe expecting guidance and support from the tutors, it is the duty of the institution to take the responsibility of explaining to students how the ODL functions especially on orientation dates. Face-to-face tutoring if well attended promotes interactions as purported by Tinto (1993) in his Interactionist Theory. Interaction leads to group discussions which is an important method in teaching. It makes all students participate and be corrected when a wrong answer is given. It also builds confidence in students at the same time being prepared to enter the world of work. Communication as a soft skill required in the world has its way when there are group discussions. Topping (2001) recommends that tutorials be well structured and use pragmatic tutorial delivery approaches that consider tutor's style, students' capabilities, students' prior knowledge and the content being taught. If not well structured, students tend to resist, and this is most prevalent among students who have been accustomed to expository teaching methods. To this end, Felder (2005) asserts that low tutorial attendance reflects students' resistance to innovative learning strategies adopted in tutorials, which may be different from what they already practiced at high school. Such students may have different expectations. Chin et al. (2011) acknowledge that getting the students to be fully involved in their learning and to commit themselves to their learning goals is difficult. He further noted that students benefit when they consistently attend tutorials.

4.13 Motivation

Topping (2001) further explained that students who require an extra push or who need to be motivated to complete work may struggle with their work in an ODL system. Motivation is considered important in student learning. Motivation comes in two forms. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation pose challenges in retention of students in ODL systems. Extrinsic motivation is that one which is exerted by external forces. In this case the lecturer and peers are classified as external motivators that pushes from outside towards the attainment of set goals. As opposed to extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation uses the individual approach since it emanates from oneself. The push comes from one's internal locus of evaluation. In this regard, Topping (2001) argues that students in an ODL system mostly require self-motivation for them to complete and succeed with their studies.

4.14 Resources and time constraints

Resources and time constraints to a larger extent are a challenging issue in retention of students in ODL as there seems to be little support available to students. Instead, students are expected to find their own resources for them to be able to complete their assignments and tasks.

4.15 Soft skills

These soft skills range from a wider perspective. These are communication, leadership, interaction, critical thinking, and problem solving and teamwork skills. Soft skills are the intangible, non-technical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator (Robles, 2012). The Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning interprets soft skills as incorporating aspects of generic skills which include non-academic skills such as communicative, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, life-long learning, entrepreneurship, ethic and professional moral, and leadership (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study adopted the qualitative research method which works well with intepretivism paradigm. The adopted paradigm seeks to study the phenomena in its natural setting to give a detailed description and to illuminate it. The study used participatory action research which was more suitable as it gave the researcher the opportunity to interact with core informants. In addition, the case study design was also adopted since the study dealt with ZOU, as a case. Both primary and secondary data were collected. The sources of information included various websites, books, journals, and manuals. Primary data was collected from students and staff with the aid of interviews. The data collected was analysed qualitatively. Creswell (2013) argues that formation of codes and categories lie at the very core of qualitative data analysis. The process of data analysis involved firstly, looking at the responses from the interviews to ensure that initials ideas, hunches, categories, and tentative themes were captured. The study utilized qualitative data.

6. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population for the study consisted of ZOU staff and students in Mashonaland West Regional Campus. The study was confined to present ZOU employees and students in stream. The sample for the study was sixteen participants comprising eight staff members and eight students. These were purposively sampled as the researcher made use of the best available knowledge concerning the sample subjects (Cohen & Morrison, 2000). The researcher was familiar with specific traits of the sample which were useful to the study.

7. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings are presented according to the four research questions as cited above. For discussion purposes, the participants were coded. Participants from ZOU staff were coded from 1-8 while students were coded from 9-16.

7.1 Research question 1: What are the challenges faced in student retention?

From the findings it was established that students dropped out because of different reasons which are at times situational or institutional. Resources, time, and social influences has higher percentages (100%), followed by poor communication, distances and lastly teaching methods and motivation. Results indicate that all the participants agreed that the challenges being faced are universal meaning they apply to most students.

Participant 1-16 agreed in their responses on resources and time. Some of the responses are provide below:

> *We are workers, family people and have more other responsibilities so it is sometimes difficult to meet deadlines with which ZOU is supposed to bear with us.*
>
> *With these economic hardships how honestly can ZOU expect us to pay all the fees at one goal/, we value the education of our children first. We are not saying we do not want to pay but children's fees first and hours later.*
>
> *The computers in computer labs are outdated yet internet access requires the fastest machines. At times we come to the campus but there will be no internet services, yet we would have travelled for long distances.*
>
> *Computers in the labs should meet first class standards as incorporated in ZOU mission, to be the world class learning institution in the year 2020.*

Participating students agreed on resources and time. Participants 5, 10, 11,15 and 16 also blamed themselves for failing to manage their time.

> *As responsible learners we should manage and prioritise, "ndipopanotangira" time management our work. Can ZOU manage time for us. "Ngatisangotizvese ZOU ZOU". At times let us own our failures and appreciates the existence of our university.*

The students had the same sentiments and appeals to their institution to provide computers that are faster. At the same time, they appealed that ZOU should consider that most of its students are parents. Participants thus 9-16 echoed that social influences pose a great challenge in student retention since our students have several responsibilities. These influences are individually, or institution based. Students may just decide to drop out of the colleges because of certain reasons which are beyond the institution. The institution could make a follow up but to a certain extent. One of the participants said:

> *We are adults, ladies, and gentlemen we supposed to act as responsible citizen who have goals to achieve at the end of the day. If we have some challenges let's put them through to the offices so that we can get help, that is why we have students Advisors here with us. Colleagues when we enrolled with ZOU, we knew it was a distance education and we decided to proceed with that in mind. Unoda kuteerwakubvunzwa why wasiya programme pano pane mwana mudiki here (You want someone to task someone to be behind you after leaving the programme, why?), be responsible for leaving the programme If you want to drop then back later do the correct way.*

Distances travelled by students to the regional campus were very long. Mashonaland East Regional Campus catered for students who were far away from provincial town where the regional campus office was located. With exorbitant transport charges, it would be very disturbing to visit the office and does not get the services. In that case student participants indicated that it is better to do the programme with other universities that offers on block release. They will be guaranteed that required services would be availed.

Teaching methods were also cited as a challenge in student retention in ODL. Responses from participants 9-16 were almost similar, as provided below:

> *Participant 9: When we come for learning, we expect teachers to give us the material.*
>
> *Participant 10: "ndauya kuzodzidza ndakunzi ndiswere ndichitsvaga inini information yacho" is that learning.*

Participant 11: We do not have time to go on internet and search for information, it is the duty of the teacher to provide learning material.
Participant 12: We are adults with many responsibilities. So why giving us someone`s work who is paid for that?
Participant 13: The tutoring learning method is not ideal for us we have other important things to do research is part of academic work.
Participant 14: I remember very well when we were doing 'o' level, our teachers would do everything why now given such much work to do.
Participant 15 and 16: Let them do the work they are paid for.

The above responses showed that students did appreciate the tutoring as a way of teaching. They expected teachers to spoon feed them through lecturing, as was during the era where internet was not yet introduced. The researcher noted that students used to play a passive role in their learning; when students were expected to be active, hence there was much resistance as witnessed by the responses above.

Poor communication was viewed as posing challenge in student retention. When students enquire about information maybe on registration dates staff members at times seems not to have full information on registration details. The students are at times refereed to National Centre where when they enquire by calling their airtime might finish without given the correct information. This affected many students to extent that they no longer had confidence with the staff member. The staff participant reserved their comments as they were puzzled by student responses.

The research findings show that there were some challenges that caused students to drop out of colleges. The causal explanations are not one sided by they involve both the institution and its stakeholders. These explanations were termed as characteristic and background variables by Bean et al. (2000). Some of the causes were beyond the institution. These were cited as illness, social influences, and employment (Bean et al., 2000). Distances travelled by students was not institutional. Hence, such challenges in the end frustrate students and thus they left for other nearby universities.

Learning resources and time constraints are of paramount importance in ODL. Learners are expected to have different learning gadgets. Access to internet is not feasible with all ZOU most students are rarely online that frequent because data is expensive due to this reason, they miss important discussions and notifications. Students largely agreed that without having the knowledge of internet and computer usage, it becomes a challenge for both the institution and students. Students echoed that it would be very important for the university to have maybe elementary course on computer usage undertaken by all learners, so that learning becomes easy and likeable. With only 51.9% of Zimbabweans having mobile phones with access to the internet, we also realized that the students also lacked devices to connect to MyVista which is vital to the ODL model. Time as cited in the literature review that most of our learners are family members, employees and have other responsibilities in the society. These responsibilities at times do not permit learners to do the tasks on time. The same with ZOU there are times when students seek for assignments extensions dates.

Participants noted with concern that there were scattered all over the province. So, the distances they travelled were a burden to them considering the economic hardships. In support of the assertion, it is purported that these distances do not promote social interaction as alluded to by Bandura Social Learning Theory. The theory concurs with Tinto`s (1993) interactionist theory which assumes that students were expected to interact with the environment. Distance limits social interaction.

Teaching methods were cited by the research participants as a challenge. While ODL focuses on tutoring, students expect the lecturer to come and give a lecture. This is supported by Gisbert and Font (2008) when they mentioned that learning through tutoring in not well received by students. It was witnessed during the face-to-face tutorial when the turnout was low. Felder (2005) revealed that low tutorial attendance reflects learners' resistance to innovative learning strategies. Therefore, tutors and learners should work together and come up with methods that best suits both sides. If students were included from the beginning the researcher feels that learners would not resist but comply since their

input would have been considered. Tinto (1993) further noted that face to face tutoring if well attended promoted interactions hence improvement of student retention. The researcher feels that students should be informed of the teaching or instructional methods so that they knew their roles during the learning process. This should be disclosed on orientation days or when the student enquires on programmes of interest.

Motivation of students was a challenge, which when not looked at created some gaps in the university system. Students and even staff members needed to be motivated so that negative psychological emotions were prevented. In English they say prevention is better than cure. Students are motivated by the institution for example, by providing conducive learning environment. It is, however, important to note that students who require normally work after being motivated might struggle in an ODL system. In fact, students in ODL system mostly require self-motivation for them to complete their studies. Toppings (2003) explained that self-motivation works well with students already at work who awaits promotion.

Interaction skills were to a greater extent cited as a great challenge where students were facing unfair treatment at some point. Though there were a number of these soft skills, communication was cited as a major crisis. Staff was said to lack communication skills hence, causing students to drop out of the college without completing the programme thus compromising student retention. Students further clarified that lack of soft skills in the university compromised the standards of the institution. It puts the university at the disrepute.

7.2 Research Question 2: How best can these challenges be addressed by ODL?

ZOU as an open and distance learning institution could address the challenges in different ways. Since ZOU offered programmes to adults, the participants echoed that adult learners have control over their learning hence there was not much ZOU could do on some of the challenges since there were situational as alluded to in the literature review. When a student failed and decided to leave the institution, it was the role of the institution to find out on the causes of dropping out but at the end of the day the student has the final decision. Of course, the students' dropout statistics were important as they helped the institution to change some of its strategies that might be a cause for concern.

Below are the responses from the participants. Participants agreed in the ways to resolve challenges in ODL setup.

Learning in an ODL setup is individualistic hence it is in the honors of the students to resolve challenges identified.

As students, let`s work on ourselves, blaming the institution will not help resolving these challenges. Participant 9-16.

But the university should be considerate at the same time. For the university to exist we students "tofanira titoripo." So, there should be a way to keeping us, maybe student advisement.

Participants 1-16 agreed internet should always be up so that we do not travel for nothing. Travelling has become too expensive these days.

If the university wants us to know something let it be posted on the portal to avoid anxiety to the students. You know information is easily diluted by the time it reaches us it will be contaminated.

ZOU should have experienced staff members who understand the ODL mode of learning. That will make our life easier at the university.

Seems ZOU has the waste ICT staff. There system is always down. Imagine travelling from Kariba only to be told the system is down. Something should be done.

ZOU has students' management department which is the bridge between the students themselves and staff members. The staff in that department should have skills on dealing with those who would have failed.

Part time tutors are complaining about late payment, yet the money paid is very little, surely ZOU should be serious. "Tingapasa here ipapo" (Can we pass in this situation?).

ZOU has a role to play in addressing the challenges which were being faced by students during their learning. These challenges could be addressed in several ways depending on each challenge since every challenge is unique. Resources were cited as a challenge hence ZOU can appeal for donations from its former students those in alumni association to help if they can with the resources to keep the university going. ZOU might address time constraints by continuously reminding its students through MyVista Portal. Sending in reminders would help students to manage their time.

On distances travelled, the university should have study packages ready during the registration period. If the packages are not yet ready the university should try and send the packages to the students. Motivation boosts moral of the students therefore the institution should motivate its students to complete their programmes. The researcher suggests the use of giving prizes to those who would have passed at least two modules in the 2.1 range. Thus, rewarding which has its' roots in behavioural theories. Social influence was highlighted as a challenge which the university should address. It might be difficult for the university, but it is important to note that these social influences are inevitable. It is, therefore, the role of the university to treat each case differently as it comes.

7.3 Research Question 3: What are the current strategies in place for student retention in ODL education?

From the findings, there were several student retention strategies in ODL education adopted ZOU. The study revealed that the retention strategies in place were well placed but at times they are not adhered to. For example, management and leadership styles was said to be effective as in involves students in decisions making. For example, students were well represented at the Senate meeting with SRC members. However, Bennis (1994) highlighted that there were many leadership styles and that students favour most is the participative style of leadership since it involves the stakeholders. It is important to have students represented at all forums so that their concerns are addressed and have student retention which is higher at the end of the day. The participative style give room and creates an allowance for the leadership to accommodate students in decisions making (Bennis, 1994).

Participants echoed that connections between families and communities should be maintained as this is a student retention strategy in an ODL setup. This was revealed by Heavy and DeCelles et al. (2002) when they argued that connections between families and communities creates a family-like environment for students by making family integral of the educational processes. Involvement of parents or guardians in student education open avenues for communication lines between the parents and university. The research study revealed that maintaining connections to family and community is of importance in students' retention. When the community and universities have a common goal of building the university it means that all parties are playing their roles in the upbringing of the students and the development of the university. ZOU has alumni department with its focus being on resource mobilization from its former students. Though it is on resource mobilization the department is creating a conducive environment whereby the society and the college have strong bound relationships. The strong bound relationships allow community members to share new ideas and even to make some corrections for the well- being of the institution hence students retention is maintained.

Peer teaching, mentoring and collaboration as alluded to by the participants were important in student retention. Tinto (1993) argued that peer teaching, mentoring and collaboration fostered student social integration into the new learning environment as these advanced students' cognitive development (Kurfiss, 1993). Students built relationships which then helped them to work as a team. Teamwork called for everyone to participate and built confidence at the end of the day. A college student should leave the university fully baked so that they easily fit into the industry. It begins at the college where soft skills are learned and put into practice. These strategies allow students express themselves. For example, platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook students can have their discussions at designated times that best suits the majority (DeCelles et al., 2002).

Student orientation was another strategy that kept the students in stream up to the completion of their studies. ZOU holds orientations in their regional campuses though on different dates. The research findings are in tandem with reviewed literature that revealed the importance of orientation in ODL institutions. In line with this, OUM and STOU ODL institutions set aside a day such as this for the

students to meet and interact with their peers, lecturers, and other university staff (Latifah, 2007). The orientation had a positive impact on learners' performance as they got to understand their programme demands.

Assistance given to at-risk students was an important strategy in student retention. At risk students are those who would have failed two courses and above. The at risk programme is monitored by student management department where students are identified and considered for counselling. Counseling of the at-risk students is done by student advisors. ZOU has ten Regional Campuses, and each Campus has a student advisor who is a bridge between students and the university. the findings were consistent with the results of the previous study carried out at OUM and STOU which reviewed that at risk students are given special attention to continuously curb the failure rate. This, however, retained students as feelings of being accepted were realised though they would have not made it to the next stage.

Extra curricula activities like debate, public speaking and sporting are viewed as a key retention strategy which is effective in ZOU. As such ZOU has ten Regional Campuses that converge yearly to undertake the activities. For example, ZOU has the Vice Chancellors' games which are normally held in September of each year. Thus, when students' talents are identified and nurtured. The study revealed that the activities are motivational. Hence motivation is key in educational environment. There is intrinsic and extrinsic. Both types of motivations are considerably critical. Intrinsic motivation is individualistic while extrinsic involves the outside world. When students are motivated the assumption is that they stay and complete their programmes thus student retention is maintained at higher levels.

7.4 Research Question 4: Are the strategies applicable in an ODL university setup?

The research question was directed to all the participants in the research. The participants were required to give their views on the current strategies in place that are being utilized by distance education institutions with major focus on ZOU.

As reflected in the findings, all participants highlighted that leadership styles are essential as retention strategies. Participants further commented that focused managers and leaders quickly address students' queries hence improving student retention. Listening managers and leaders give an ear and always there for the students. Peer tutoring and mentoring were strategies that were raised by all participants. The participants agreed that peer tutoring and mentoring played a key role in student retention. Participants echoed that students interacted with each other and the teachers. Peer tutoring allowed students to present work closely together and correct each other therefore, it was applicability in the ODL.

Student-centred active learning was a teaching method which was used in teaching and learning. It spelt out that students did most part of the work. At times students were put into groups and research on a topic and make some presentations. This method of teaching had focused on students as active learners, unlike the traditional teaching where students were given everything by their teachers. This enhanced student confidence, thus therefore applicable to ODL institutions like ZOU, which maintained connections to family and community was stated as critical retention strategy. All the participants supported the idea of these connections as they allowed families and students to communicate and interact with each other. One of the participants openly indicated that *ZOU should have vibrant connections with its previously enrolled students*. In this regard, ZOU had alumni department with its focus being on resource mobilization from its previously enrolled students.

Participants mentioned the existence of orientation where students all over the country get oriented on how they go about with their studies in an ODL setup. Participant 9-16 appreciated the existence of orientation days as they give students enough time to mix with their peers. Students also interact with the university environment. Further to that guidance on assignment writing, reading and time management is given. Participants 1-8 acknowledged the existence of the orientation days but indicated that most of the students did not attend orientation programme which might lead to production of poor assignments. Because of the reasons cited above, student participants argued that no matter the percentage that attend the programme they still appreciated it and urge the university to avail the orientation information on MyVista portal where everyone has access. It benefits those who

would have missed the orientation.

Extra curriculum activities were stated as strategy that keeps the students up to the completion of the programme. Participants 3,4,5, 9, 10 and 15 had similar responses when they said that activities like debate, sports, public speaking, if well directed kept the students into stream until the completion of the programme. Therefore, the student management department should work treeless to have the programmes done frequently. Participants mentioned that the activities allowed students to mix since the events invited students from all ten regional campuses. The students could exchange ideas which was part of learning.

Another important strategy shown above is on at-risk learners. At risk learners are students who would have failed more than two courses in each semester. These students were counselled by Student Advisors who engaged at risk learners at the end of each semester to ascertain the explanatory causes of failure. A study carried out at OUM and STOU reviewed that at risk students are given special attention to continuously curb failure rate. The study also argues that high failure rates put the universities into disrepute.

7.5 Other important strategies raised by participant students

According to the findings, 8 interviewed students indicated that MyVista portal was critical in students' retention. These were in support of MyVista portal where students could interact with lecturers. In addition, most of the notifications came through MyVista portal. However, they indicated that the portal should be frequently updated. The student participants highlighted the need to have Students Representative Council. The council represents students up to the senate level. They argued that students should have equal representation at all levels as this effectively maintains student retention. Students were of the view that affordability of fees was a strategy that majority of universities look down upon thus conventional or ODL institutions (Chakuchichi, 2013). Shortage of study packages in ZOU was echoed as a serious challenge when reviewing retention of students. Students went on to justify the need to have study packages ready all the time. As indicated by most students, ZOU was not a conventional institution where they stayed and having not collected the study package on registration day would mean another journey to collect the package. This was a waste of resources on their part. Hence, all students agreed that if ZOU was to give its students complete study packages on registration, students would not leave the institution.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above findings, the study made the following conclusions:

- Students are fairly represented at all levels in the University.
- The strategies in place are critical to lift the banner of ZOU and aid in student retention.
- Staff members lack training on soft skills, especially communication.
- Fees being charged with university are beyond the reach of the majority.
- The programmes being offered by the university are less market driven, less matching the current situation in the industry, thus affecting retention.
- Challenges faced by students are basically and mostly situational rather than institute based.
- Teaching methods, like peer tutoring and collaboration, are important in teaching and learning as they create a conducive environment for learning thus enhancing retention.
- The retention strategies in place are not continuously revisited to make some positive amendments to current strategies.
- Students are less involved in decision making through Student Representative Council to enhance retention.
- ZOU charges college fees which are affordable hence reducing student attrition.
- Teaching methods like peer mentoring, collaboration and tutoring are used to less extent to the detriment of retention.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings, study recommends that:
- ODL students to be fairly represented at all levels in the university.
- The strategies in place are critical and should be adhered to lift the banner of Zimbabwe Open University
- Fees being charged with university are beyond the reach of the majority hence need to reconsider fees structure.
- The programmes being offered by the university should be market driven, matching with the current situation in the industry.
- Challenges faced by ODL students are basically situational not institute based.
- Teaching methods like peer tutoring and collaboration are important in ODL teaching and learning as this creates a conducive environment for learning.
- ZOU to continuously visit the retention strategies in place and make some positive amendments to the current strategies.
- ODL students be involved in decision making through Student Representative Council.
- ZOU should continue to charge college fees which are affordable for the ODL students.
- ZOU to continuously train staff on soft skills which helps improving interaction between staff and its stakeholders.
- Teaching methods like peer mentoring, collaboration and tutoring be more used so that students familiarize and appreciates their existence in the learning forums.

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