

Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Region Tracer Study of Former Students from 2010 To 2014

Gift Rupande

Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Applied Social Science
Zimbabwe Open University
The student Advisor for Mashonaland East Region
grupande@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Higher education is there to produce highly skilled manpower whose mandate is to drive the economy of the country. It is therefore critical to ensure that the university products are meeting the expectations of the business community. One of the requirements for quality management in higher education is the consideration of different perspectives when trying to assure quality of teaching and learning. In this context, tracer studies represent an inclusive tool for incorporating graduates points of view. The relevancy of the curricula offered by the university depends very much on how its graduates are performing in the job market and employer perception of the type of products being produced by the university is critical. The purpose of the study was to examine the adequacy of the diploma and degree programmes offered by ZOU for manpower needs of all sectors. The employment and unemployment situation of graduates, relevance, and competence of graduate employees, employer perception, both graduates and employer feelings were sought. Data for the study were obtained by means of questionnaires. The study was conducted in nine districts and stratified random sampling technique based on districts was adopted. The population of the study were one thousand graduates, fifty employers. Data was presented using tables and graph and analysis was carried out picking on trends shown by graphs. The tracer study found out, among other things, that the majority of ZOU graduates were employed by the government and generally unemployment for ZOU graduates was insignificant. Ninety five percent of the research respondents were grateful for studying with ZOU since they were promoted on the basis of the qualification they got from ZOU or they were able to pursue further studies as a result of the qualification they obtained from ZOU. Five percent of the respondents interviewed were not happy as their qualifications in Bachelor of Science in Counselling was not recognised by the Public Service Commission and hence could not be promoted on the basis of the qualification they obtained from ZOU. Some students who did diploma in education (primary) were also not happy since initially their diploma was not recognised by the Public Service Commission, though later through government intervention the qualification was later recognised. It was recommended that more hard science degree programmes should be offered by ZOU and ZOU should meet its alumni at specific intervals. The study also recommended that ZOU should make follow up of past graduates after graduation, not to wait when it will be carrying out tracer studies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This tracer study aimed to find out how former learners perceive their experience of studying with Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The researcher also sought to determine what has happened to former learners since they left the University, whether they went on to pursue further education and training or sought to determine whether they were promoted on the basis of their qualifications obtained from Zimbabwe Open University. The researcher also wanted to find out the experiences former students went through as a result of studying with ZOU and how best ZOU can improve so that it increases the marketability of its graduates.

2. BACKGROUND

ZOU is the only state Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, established on 1st March 1999 through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20). Initially the university operated as the Centre for Distance Education at the University of Zimbabwe before its transformation to the University College of Distance Education. After this transformation, ZOU was granted its own charter to operate as a fully fledged university. Currently, in 2014, ZOU has four faculties; the

Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, offering over 60 diploma and degree programmes. Students are drawn from the country's ten geo-political provinces as well as the Virtual Region encompassing students outside the country, wherever they may be in the world.

3. QUALITY MISSION

To promote, enhance and provide world class quality delivery and standards for the Zimbabwe Open University in line with the Vision of the University.

4. MISSION STATEMENT

The Zimbabwe Open University exists to empower people through lifelong learning thereby enabling them to realize their full potential in an affordable and flexible manner while executing their endeavours.

5. VISION

To become a World Class Open and Distance Learning University

6. CORE VALUES

- Dedication to highest levels of excellence
- Creation of an innovative culture
- Promotion of integrity
- Adherence to highest levels of ethical standards
- Delighting Stakeholders

7. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Tracer studies help higher education institutions to know their position in terms of their efficiency in providing applicable knowledge to students. The feedback obtained by a tracer study at the same time helps to identify the weakness of the graduate's and to improve for others who are still in the system. This study, therefore, derives from the concern with how adequate Zimbabwe Open University provides for manpower needs of all sectors in the country and beyond. How far and how well does Zimbabwe Open University satisfy the manpower needs of Zimbabwe?

8. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What educational programme(s) did you do with Zimbabwe Open University?

How has studying with Zimbabwe Open University helped you in your employment?

How has the ZOU qualification assisted you in furthering your education?

What were the challenging aspects of your studying with Zimbabwe Open University?

How could ZOU improve its service delivery?

9. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings are used in different areas of higher education development, as well as to improve services provided by the higher education institutions. To find the productiveness and cost effectiveness of programmes and to be able to change programmes so that they meet the expectations of clients and the business community. Tracer studies in a specific focus area, can point out errors for easy and quick rectification. Tracer study is useful to planners in determining the allocation of resources as well as to the educationist or training experts in designing curricula and training courses to meet employers' needs. Tracer studies assist planners in decision making, mending ways and developing greater rapport with clients, especially employers of graduates of higher education institutions. Tracer studies ensure curriculum relevance is maintained and increase the marketability of the graduates of the institution. Boaduo , Mensah , Babitseng (2009), submitted that tracer studies are important for the following reasons:

- To find out if graduates use the knowledge and skills they have learned during their studies;
- To use graduates feedback to improve the quality of the study programmes and more specific, to revise the curricular, if necessary.
- To assess the employment status and market acceptability of graduate.
- The generation of important information related to gainful employment.
- To develop curricular, syllabi and course programmes as well as instructional methodology in consultation with pass out graduates in line with latest trends
- The number of graduates who are not able to find work in their chosen field and who are currently unemployed.
- The number of graduates who take alternative jobs outside their knowledge and skills training environment

10. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following are the limitations to the study and greatly influenced the extent to which the findings of this study can be generalised and validated:

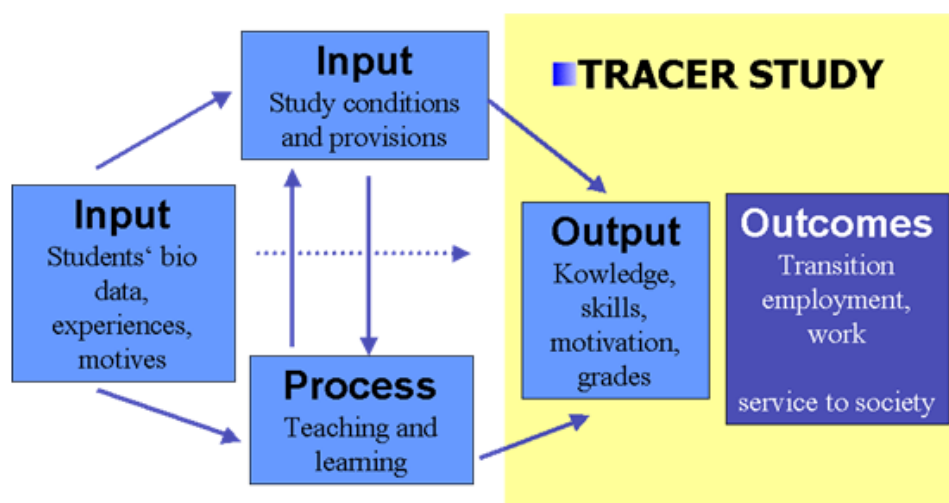
- Hwedza, Murehwa and Marondera are the districts whose response rate was one hundred percent but the other districts' response rate was fifty percent or below, so this obviously creates a bias towards these three districts.
- Some questionnaires from the respondents who were not initially selected were considered after those who were selected could not be located.
- The response rate of UMP Uzumba Maramba Pfungwe was forty eight percent so this should be considered when interpreting the results of this study.

11. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Tracer studies or Graduate Surveys describe a standard survey of graduates from higher education institutions, which take place sometime after graduation, usually two years. They are a means of following graduates to find out what they are doing with the education and training they received. Common topics covered in tracer studies include questions on study progress, the transition to work, work entrance, job career, use of learned competencies and current occupation. Boaduo, Mensah, Babitseng (2009), argued that tracer study refers to a period when institutions of learning set up regular intervals of time to venture into the field and follow their past graduates to find out what they are doing with the training they received and find out from them how best they think the institutions who trained them will be able to help them upgrade their acquired knowledge and skills through the reform and innovation of curricular and course programmes including work based training and scientific working environment and employer demands. A tracer study is a field based action research activity, which aims at tracing and locating graduates from a particular higher education institute in order to determine their path of movement with regards to employment and higher education achievements (Association of African University – AAU, 2002). The ILO Thesaurus 2005 defines a tracer study as an impact assessment tool where the “impact on target groups is traced back to specific elements of a project or programme so that effective and ineffective project components may be identified.” In educational research the tracer study is sometimes referred to as a graduate or alumni survey since its target group is former students. Schomburg (2003) notes that graduate surveys are popular for “analysis of the relationship between higher education and work.” They provide quantitative-structural data on employment and career, the character of work and related competencies, and information on the professional orientation and experiences of their graduates. Although the usual end of the course evaluation can ask for the student to assess whether they have gained the knowledge and skills necessary for fulfilling their personal objectives, there is really little proof of this until the student has completed the entire course of study and has entered the workforce. Schomburg (2003) argued that by surveying a cohort of graduates from: a specific institution; profession; discipline;

with regards to “Where are our graduates now” may supply information on income, job title, nature of employment, and years of employment. He also believes that surveys should also include information “about the kind of work task the relationship between study and work, and professional values and job satisfaction.” The information gained from survey items can be used by the graduate’s alma mater and indeed other education stakeholders for curriculum development and reform. Schomburg, (2003), pointed out that the retrospective views of graduates on higher education based on their career experiences, the extend graduates consider their education and training as a wastage or an opportunity and how broad or narrow is knowledge fostered in individual degree programmes in comparison to occupational tasks or major occupations are some of the key areas in which tracer studies would like to unravel. A model of analysis of the concept of tracer studies applicable to higher education is as shown below:

Model of Analysis in HE



Adopted from Harald Schomburg (2003) Handbook for Graduate Tracer Studies

12. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide) (2011), tracer studies have become a widely used tool for education or other types of institutions to determine the impact of their services on former learners or clients. The tracer studies encompass a wide range of diverse efforts which can provide intellectual building blocks for newer undertakings, if we can only learn to build on the old while attempting the new. The availability of such studies to the broader field of research and educational moves forward the potential of knowledge about high quality service. For institutions of higher learning to be able to monitor and assess their performance in terms of the types of graduates they are producing and their impact in the nation’s economic growth, then it is imperative that tracer studies be carried out to provide reliable data tracking graduates wherever they may be working so as to assess the continued relevance of the programs offered by the various higher education institutions. Saide (2011), pointed out that tracer studies need to be timed carefully, so as to ensure sufficient time has elapsed to provide useful results, while at the same time still being able to reach the learners. The important rule might be to ensure that the programme keeps good enough records from the very start so that tracing will be possible as and when it is decided to do so. While tracer studies may prove useful for improving the relevance and quality of the services provided, getting information from these former students is rather expensive judging by the geographical dispersion of the former students. Due to the low response rates in tracer studies it was sometimes necessary to use convenience sampling so as to get the information that the researcher required.

13. METHODOLOGY

13.1. Population of Former ZOU students 2010-2014

The population for this study was defined as all graduates who graduated with Zimbabwe Open University from 2010 -2014 and these were one thousand and fifty employers. The research

employed the stratified random sampling method and a total of two hundred graduates were selected and ten employers were included in the sample. The questionnaire was the data gathering instrument adopted and the researcher was aware of the poor response rate of questionnaires so the number of questionnaires sent to each district was way above the allocated number so that at least the required number was always met. Questionnaires together with stamped envelopes were posted to the research participants and telephone follow ups were made after two weeks so as to encourage the participants to complete and return the questionnaires were made.

The breakdown of the population included in the sample is provided below:

Table1. Breakdown of the sample selected by district

	Marondera	Hwedza	Goromonzi	Mudzi	Murehwa	Mutoko	UMP	Seke	Chikomba	total
2010	8	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	40
2011	8	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	40
2012	8	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	40
2013	8	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	40
2014	8	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	40
Total	40	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	200

It was the researcher's aim to contact as many former learners as possible but time and financial constraints were the biggest challenges, however the sample was deemed large enough to be representative. It is important to realise that more graduates graduated from Marondera and hence the number of respondents from this district were more as compared to the other districts. The total number of valid responses was 140. As the number of valid responses was more than half of the expected number of responses, the researcher considered this to be adequate to go ahead with the study.

14. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF RESPONDENTS

The following provides a breakdown of demographic details for the former learners who responded to the survey, including gender, age and region where they studied with ZOU.

15. GENDER

The total number of graduates who participated in the study was 48% females and 52% males. This is a mismatch when one regards the demographic structure of the Zimbabwean population where the females are more than males but these percentages are in sync with the cultural practices that are prevalent in Zimbabwe where males are normally sent to school at the expense of females.

16. AGE

The ages of respondents ranged from 20 to 60years.

Table2. Age Breakdown of respondents

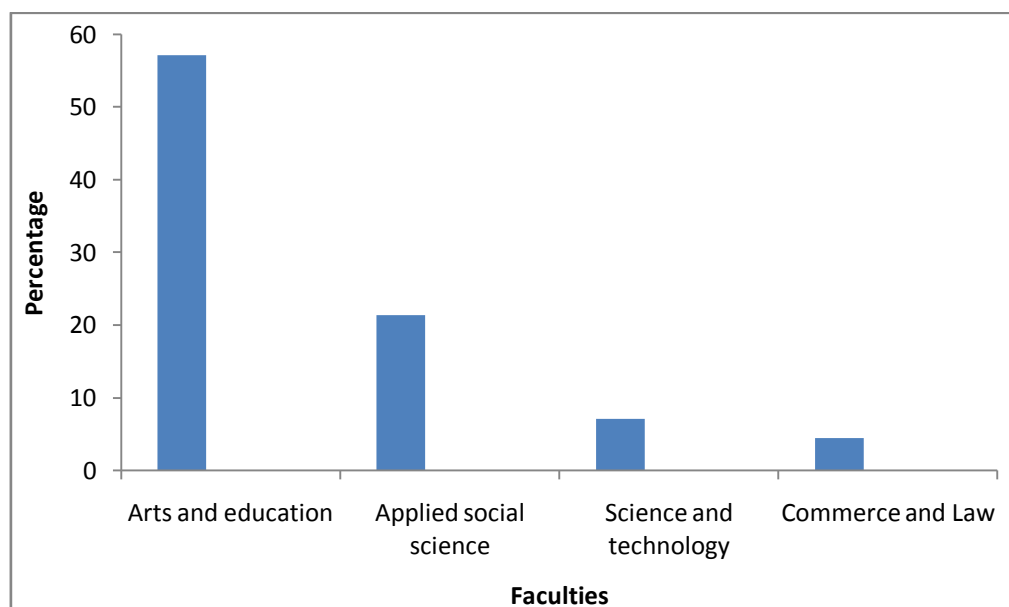
N=140

Age category	Male number	percentage	Female number	percentage
Under 20	2	1.4	1	0.71
21-25	5	3.6	3	2.14
26-30	7	5	4	2.9
31-36	10	7.1	8	5.7
37-40	12	8.6	12	8.6
41-45	20	14.3	18	12.9
46-50	15	10.7	14	10
Above 50	2	1.4	8	5.7

The age category of less than 20 years had the least number of respondents and this was generally expected as most people who engage in open and distance learning are people who are already working and those who did not have the chance to go to school when young for one reason or the other. The modal age category was 41-45 years where the males and females had a percentage of 14.3% and 12.9% respectively. In most cases this age group would have settled in their jobs and some of them would be seeking promotions hence the need to increase their chances by improving on their education qualifications. This age group also finds it difficult to leave work and attend conventional colleges because of the dependants such as school children who are in need of school fees. It is important to note that there were more females who attended ODL than males and one possible reason for this scenario is that some females are denied the chance to go to tertiary institutions due to early marriages and will only do so if the husband is interested in sending his wife back to school. The distribution of the respondents across the age groups gives a balanced and holistic picture of all the age groups which attend ZOU as an institution and this also affords the leadership of the institution to be able to roll out diploma and degree programmes which cater for these different age groups.

Table3. Respondents' distribution by faculty from 2010 to 2014

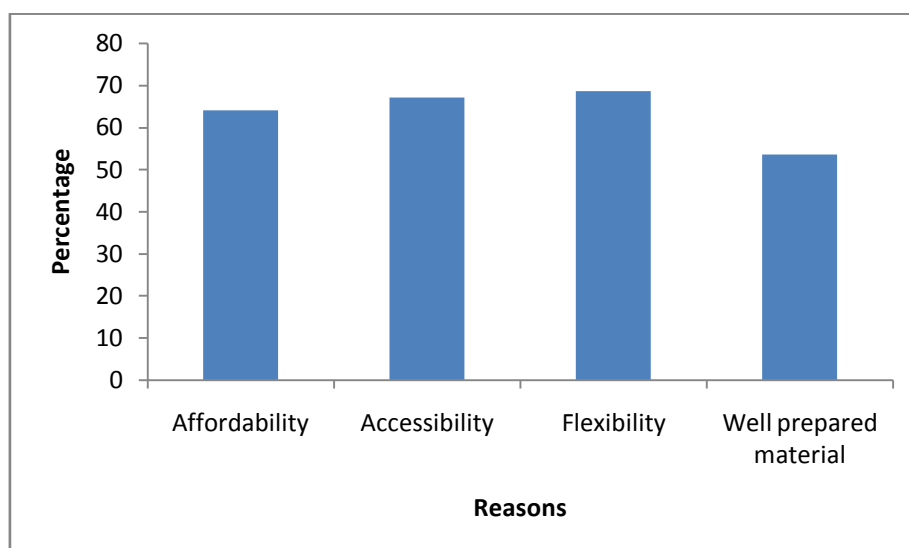
N=140



The most popular faculty according to the respondents is the art and education whose percentage is 57.14% followed by applied social sciences whose percentage is 21.43%. A possible reason for the high number of students in the art and education faculty could be that historically, ZOU started as a centre for distance learning under the University of Zimbabwe offering education related degrees only. The other possible reason is that most teachers find it easier to do their degree programmes through ODL when they fully utilise the school holidays to upgrade themselves. The small number of students in the faculty of science and technology can be explained by the fact that ZOU offers only five degree programmes in this faculty that is Bachelor of Science in Agriculture Management, Bachelor in Physical Education and Sport, Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and Statistics, Bachelor of Nursing Science, and Bachelor of Science in Geography and Environmental Studies. The small number of hard science degree programmes offered by ZOU has been a cause of concern as many prospective students have been complaining about this issue as many of them who would like to study through ODL doing hard science degree programmes could not do so. The other reason on the part of the ZOU leadership for not offering these hard science programmes is that programmes like physics, chemistry, or biology require laboratories where experiments are carried out and these facilities have not yet been put in place. Currently ZOU is engaged in partnership negotiation with other education institutions which can avail these laboratory facilities so that ZOU can be able to offer a wide range of hard science degree programmes.

17. REASONS FOR STUDYING WITH ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

N=140



Affordability, accessibility and flexibility are the prime reasons that attract students to study with Zimbabwe Open University as represented by 64%, 67.14% and 68, 57% respectively. Many of ZOU students are parents whose responsibilities are many, including the extended family and other dependents so they try to look for institutions which are cheap. Adults would like to work while they are also learning so ODL offers these adults the opportunity to access education without disturbing their everyday activities. Flexible in terms of study conditions is a condition which attracts many students to ZOU. 53.57% of the respondents pointed out that they studied with ZOU because ZOU's modules are well written and therefore enable them to pass their examinations. Some respondents argued that ZOU modules have adequate information to do all the assignments and do not put pressure on them to travel to towns and cities to look for libraries. Fifty percent of the respondents submitted that they enrolled with Zimbabwe Open University because they did not have a chance to study when they were young. These respondents pointed out that ZOU offered them an opportunity to catch up with their counterparts who were fortunate in accessing education when they were young.

18. WHAT DID YOU DO AFTER LEAVING ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Learners were asked what they did after leaving ZOU. Higher education and employment were the two areas which were mainly considered

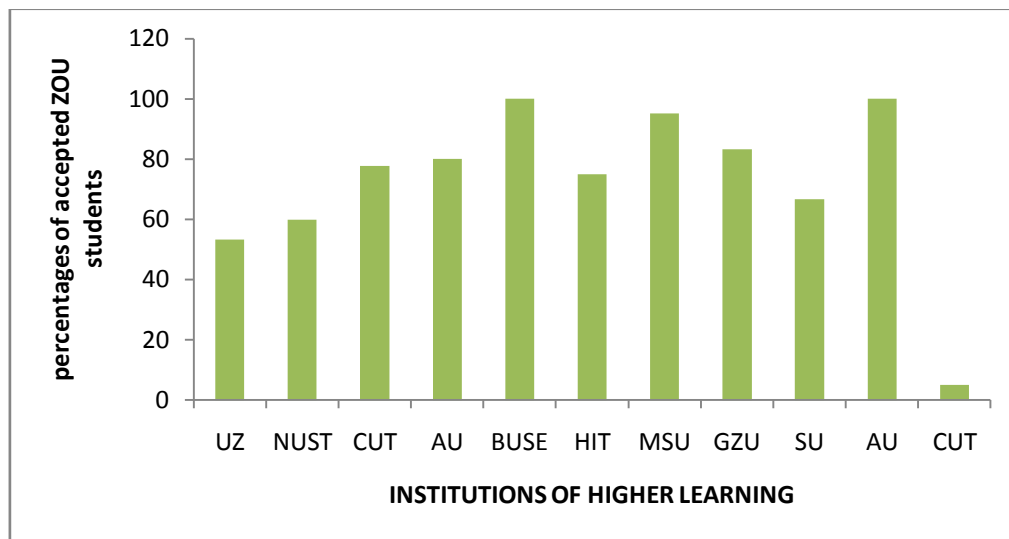
19. HIGHER EDUCATION

Graduates were asked if they had applied to study with a higher education or training institution. Respondents were also asked to indicate which higher education or training institution they had applied to. Some of the key institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe are as follows:

University of Zimbabwe	(UZ)
National University of Science and Technology	(NUST)
Chinhoyi University of technology	(CUT)
Africa University	(AU)
Bindura University of Science Education	(BUSE)
Harare Institute of Technology	(HIT)
Midlands State University	(MSU)
Great Zimbabwe	(GZU)
Solouse University	(SU)
Women University in Africa	(WUA)
Catholic University	(CU)

20. APPLICATION AND ACCEPTANCE ZOU STUDENTS AT HIGHER INSTITUTES OF LEARNING

N=100



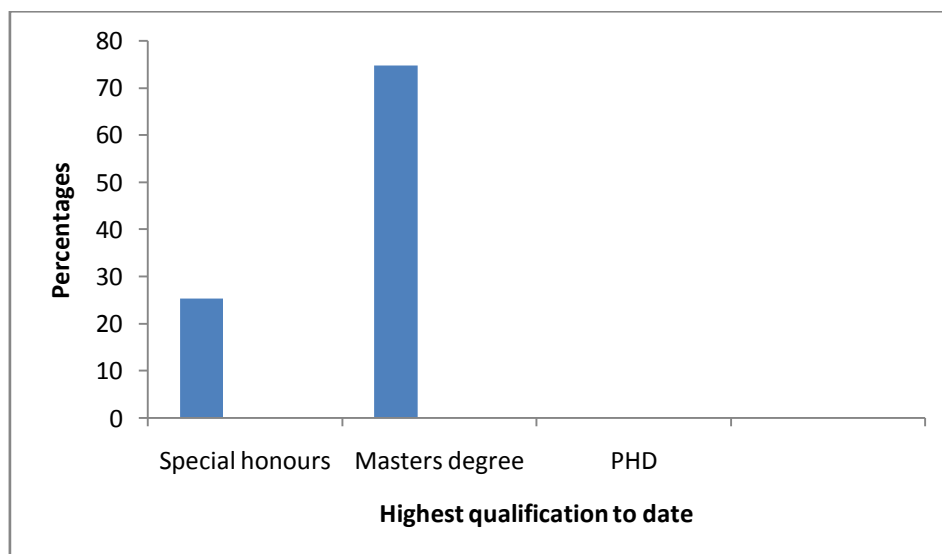
The acceptance rate of respondents who applied at Women University and Bindura University of Science Education was 100% and the acceptance rate of the respondents ranged from 50% to 100%. It is important to note that Africa University had a low number of students who applied because generally Africa University is rather very expensive so that its fees are out of reach of many students. Most graduates of Zimbabwe Open University went to GZU, WUA, CUT, and GZU while MSU absorbs the highest number. It is important to note that out of 140 respondents 100 of them applied for further studies in the various institutions of higher learning. University of Zimbabwe has the second highest rejection percentage of Zimbabwe Open University students and this could be attributed to the intense competition of places at UZ as it is still regarded as one of the elite Universities in Zimbabwe.

21. HIGHEST QUALIFICATION TO DATE

Learners were requested to indicate the highest qualification they had received to date, and the results are presented below.

Table 6: Highest qualification obtained to date

N=79



Seventy nine graduates who constitute 56.4% of the 140 graduates went for further studies and 74.68% obtained masters degrees from various institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe and

25.32% of the graduates obtained special honours degree programmes but it was sad to note that there was not even a single person who obtained a PHD. Three of the respondents are in the process of finalising their PHD programmes. The fact that so many Zimbabwe Open University graduates proceeded to some form of further education or training is very encouraging. Zimbabwe Open University should consider further diversifying its Programmes and qualifications mix so that learners who have enjoyed success at Zimbabwe Open University may be more inclined to continue with their studies at the same institution rather than with another one, if a suitable variety of options were made available. The former learners who did not proceed to further studies represent untapped market, which a strong alumnus division might be able to draw other potential students to Zimbabwe Open University if a wide range of options are offer to them.

22. EMPLOYMENT

22.1. Employment Rate among Former Learners

22.1.1. Employment Status

Table7. *Employment Rate among former learners*

N=140

Employment status	Number	Percentage	Government	Private
Are you currently employed?	120	85.71%		
Currently not employed	20	14.29%		
Full time employed	80	57.14%	57.14%	
Part time employed	25	17.86%		17.86%
Self employed	15	10.71%		

Former ZOU students who were currently employed constituted 57.14% while 14.29% indicated that they are not currently looking for a job and a further 17.86% are in part time employment. The remaining 10.71% are self employed. The percentages of ZOU graduates who are in full time employment are mostly in civil service and they did their degree programmes when they were already employed and the bulky of these graduates are teachers. Without comparative data for the conventional university system it is not possible to say whether studying through ODL provided a greater or lesser chance of employment. It is clear though that jobs where a tertiary qualification is a minimum requirement, successful Zimbabwe Open University learners stand a good chance of being employed. It is important to realise that Zimbabwe is currently going through hard times economically where companies are closing down and therefore companies are closing or are operating with a skeletal staff, leading many graduates to work part time. 10.71% of the graduates are involved in self employment and many are involved in buying goods from neighbouring countries and reselling them in Zimbabwe.

What was your experience of Zimbabwe Open University and how could it have been better?

Learners were asked to comment on their experience of studying with Zimbabwe Open University and how it could have been better.

Table8. *Challenging Aspects at Zimbabwe Open University*

N=140

Missing results were a major frustration in my years at ZOU	48%
Sometimes lecturers were late for lectures.	30%
Poor communication between the regional centre and the students	42.7%
The distance I had to travel to the nearest ZOU centre was too far	39.8%
I did not receive information on time	32.8%
I found the language in the study materials too difficult to understand	2.6%
Financial problems to pay fees	45%
At times the modules were out of stock	20.4%
- The duration of the lectures was too short	15%

The aspects that learners found most challenging were missing results 48% and financial problems to pay fees 45%. The ZOU students unlike other tertiary students who receive government assistance towards their tuition fees got nothing from the government because they

are considered to be working but with Zimbabwe undergoing an economic meltdown due to the closure of companies and increased investor reluctance to invest in Zimbabwe, many ZOU students are finding it hard to pay for their studies. There are studies which were carried out which suggest that while distance learners are more likely than conventional learners to drop out or terminate their studies early, the reasons are many and no single intervention is likely to succeed for all learners. Interventions to support some learners in one way have sometimes unintended consequences for others. Additional contact sessions to help students develop their self motivation and persistence strategies in the face of learning challenges may clash against those students who would have chosen open and distance learning due to tight work schedules. This suggests the need for a robust system for tracking student engagement and performance and proactive identification of learners at risk. The use of College's bulk SMS facility to remind learners of assignment deadlines and other important notices is critical for student support in an ODL environment.

23. HOW COULD ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY SERVICES/PROGRAMMES BE IMPROVED?

ZOU graduates were asked to make suggestions for improving the degree programmes, and their answers are summarised in Table 9 below:

Table9. *Improving Zimbabwe Open University Services*

More qualified skilled tutors	14%
More face-to-face sessions with tutors	15%
Computerise the library	58%
Simpler language in study modules	5%
Reduce the fees for studying with Zimbabwe Open University	40%
Introduce technical and vocational courses and hard sciences	38%
Enhance supervision and monitoring of tutoring	42%
Introduce e-learning options	30%
Provide a wider range of courses at all Zimbabwe Open University centres	25%
Improve on the turn-around time of assignments	75%
Open more ZOU district centres	80%
Smaller class sizes so that I can get individual attention from the tutor/teacher	2%

ZOU graduates suggested that more ZOU district centres should be opened (80 %.), improving on the turn-around time of assignments (75 %.) Computerising the library (58%) and enhancing supervision and monitoring of tutoring (42%). The aspects suggested by ZOU graduates are quality issues and it is hoped that if these are addressed then ZOU will be able to realise its vision of becoming a World Class Open and Distance Learning University and at the same time achieving one of its objectives of delighting stakeholders. Requests for additional face-to-face sessions are common among distance education learners, and may be pleas for improved reduction in the lack of social interaction between the student and the tutor. It is important to realize that learner preferences must be balanced against issues such as flexibility and sustainability. The content, direction and form of thought of learners are greatly affected by the teacher's presence so ODL should strive to ensure that programmes which help the student in achieving these processes are in place. The teacher also ensures that students are afforded the opportunity to construct knowledge in an environment where corrections can easily be done

24. RECOMMENDATIONS

- A robust alumni association might also be created to capture and maintain data and as a sounding board for possible future programmes offerings.
- Build a strong student feedback data management where students are asked to assess the organisational abilities, subject knowledge and teaching skills of their lectures, as well as rating the lesson plans and learning.
- Long term longitudinal study to trace the performance of ZOU graduates in industry and other organisations should be set up. A well designed conducted longitudinal research project is

likely to produce the most comprehensive and reliable data of the impact of studying with ZOU and this can best be done by indentifying a cohort of student and make regular contact with them over a period of time so that their progress and problems related to acquisition of higher degrees and better employment are adequately assessed. Longitudinal cohort study will allow for easier tracking with comparative trends over time.

- Make Contact with Employers to obtain their perceptions of Graduates. Some former graduates' encountered discrimination when seeking employment especially those doing Bsc Counselling and diploma in education (primary) because the qualifications obtained after studying with ZOU were seen by employers as inferior to the same certificates awarded to those who studied in conventional universities and colleges.
- Meeting of the alumni at specific intervals.
- Mobilise funds in order to enhance the overall capacity ZOU in order to enhance their overall capacity for the provision of vital equipment, study facilities and off study infrastructure.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on multiple and practical skills acquisition or practice.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Gift Rupande is a senior lecturer, an academician and an educationist who has vast experience in education spanning for over fifteen years. Gift was also a part time lecturer at Kushinga Phikelela Polytechnic college in the Department of Adult Education. Gift is a passionate researcher who has written several published research articles. Gift is a renowned ODL scholar and presenter who has presented papers at various international conferences. Gift Rupande holds a masters degree in educational psychology (Midlands State University) and is currently a DPhil candidate with the Zimbabwe Open University.