Content Analysis on the Utilisation of Open Educational Resources (Oers) in Dissertation Writing at the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract: *The study was undertaken to analyse the extent to which students at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) utilised OERs in the writing of their dissertations. The study also aimed at establishing the constraints that provided effective utilisation of OERs and provide possible remedies. The study used a mixed methods approach in which content analysis and survey methodologies were adopted. A sample of 50 dissertations from all faculties of ZOU was drawn from a total population of 78 projects submitted for assessment during the January to December 2012 academic year at the Mashonaland East Region. The 50 students whose dissertations were sampled were also asked to respond to a questionnaire which mostly required information pertaining to the use of OERs. Results from the study, among others, indicate that to a great extent, OERs were not being utilised by the students in the writing of their dissertation projects. Only 3(6%) cited e-books and only 1(2%) cited e-newspapers while unclassified web sites were cited in 13(26%) of the dissertations while the majority of dissertations 26(52%) cited the Wikipedia. The majority of the students cited issues of lack of access due to unavailability of electronic gadgets, computer illiteracy and lack of connectivity. Results also indicate that respondents had little knowledge and time to access OERs due to their geographical distances away from the regional centre internet as well as other internet cafes. The study recommended that the university should train students in the general use of computers leading to the specific training on the use of OERs and other Internet facilities. The university should develop enabling technological use in all the teaching processes in the institution. ODL institutions should support use of the digital document formats through policies that enable easy access to OERs, anywhere any time.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Open Educational Resources (OERs) have been well received among academics and students in higher and tertiary education, especially in the developed countries (Davies, 2003). The fact that UNESCO launched the OER World Congress in 2012, aiming at creating awareness on policy, governmental, institutional and user level (Pawlowski and Hoel, 2012), is a result of the realisation that OERs are significant in knowledge and information dissemination. However, of concern is their use, as exploratory findings reveal that students are still resorting to the traditional shelf library. This is despite the fact that most resources in traditional libraries are outdated and to the contrary, OERs provide up to date information. It was behind this background that this study was undertaken to analyse the extent to which students at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) utilised OERs in the writing of their dissertations. A dissertation, also called a research project, is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits to the student and others, the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area (Reckase, 1995). The major goal of project work is to assess the ability to apply knowledge to solve real-life problems. The student must take considerable control over the assessment through planning and applying knowledge in perhaps new and different ways. Dissertations, thus attempt not only to assess the end products, but to some extent, the process that went into creating them as well (Kangai, et al, 2011). Students are free to use any source of material they see fit for their dissertations, including the traditional book

shelf text, e-resources and the dissertations submitted by others in the previous intakes. To the contrary, however, Davis (2003) reports that faculty were concerned that student papers were becoming less scholarly through the inclusion of more unclassified Web sites and news sources. Thus, this entailed a content analysis of dissertations submitted by ZOU students in the 2012 academic year.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

ZOU is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, established to cater for a substantial component of people who, by design or unintentionally, could not be accommodated in conventional universities, by offering them the opportunity to study in their homes and in their workplaces through distance education. The ZOU started as a Centre for Distance Education in 1993 housed in the Department of Education at the University of Zimbabwe, offering only one programme, the Bachelor of Education degree in Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies with initial enrolment of 624 students. In 1995, the Centre for Distance Education was transformed into a College of Distance Education. On 1 March 1999 an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20), transformed the College of Education into a fully fledged university - Zimbabwe Open University - with its own Charter and Vice Chancellor. At the time of carrying out this study, ZOU has four faculties offering undergraduate and post graduate degree and diploma programmes.

All ZOU degree and diploma programmes require students to undertake research projects over two semesters. The research project topics are open thus students choose their own topics. The students are allocated a supervisor on the basis of the supervisor's proximity and expertise in the student's research topic. However, before the start of the research project, the students are required to undertake studies in introductory courses in research. This is meant to equip the students with the theory that they will use as they prepare their dissertation projects. As argued by Kratwohl (1985), lack of training and experience in research methods are obstacle to students' progress in research. Thus to counter this impediment, all students should first pass a course on research methods before undertaking the dissertation. Over and above this, ZOU has made provisions for internet services in all the regional centres to enable students to access internet based e-resources. However, it would appear students have not embraced the use of internet based resources to enhance the quality of their research projects. The present study sought to establish the extent of the use of OERs in dissertation writing by the students during the 2012 academic year and also ascertain the contraints to the use of these OERs against a background of internet facilities being put in place at the regional centres.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In an endeavour to promote quality in all aspects of the university including the quality of students` dissertations, ZOU has embarked on an extensive programme to provide internet linkages of all the regional centres to the World Wide Web. This has paved way for the provision for both faculty and students, an opportunity to access the vast OERs provided on the net. However, the question that still needs to be answered is: Why then have students refrained from the use of these OERs when they have been provided?

Research questions

This study was aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. To what extent are students using e-resources available on the internet for dissertation writing?

2. Which are the most preferred internet based sources of information by students at ZOU?

3. What impediments have hindered students from fully utilising internet based OERs?

4. What strategies need to be put in place so as to ensure maximum use of internet based resources for dissertation writing?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Concept definition: what are OERs?

In the context of this study, we adopt the definition by Kauppinen (2013) who has defined the concept OERs as teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses, course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge. This implies that Open Educational Resources (OER) are freely accessible, usually openly licensed documents and media that are useful for teaching, learning, educational, assessment and research purposes (Pawlowski and Hoel, 2012). Because of the use of technology to enable their access, they are digital resources which can be freely or otherwise, accessed and used for educational purposes. This therefore, means students undertaking dissertations are free to use these resources.

Wiley (2006) states that OERs originated from developments in open and distance learning (ODL) and in the wider context of a culture of open knowledge, open source, free sharing and peer collaboration, which emerged in the late 20th century. Thus at a distance, away from the tutor and other ODL learners, OERs become of much help on-line to the secluded learner.

4.2 The use e-resources available on the internet for dissertation writing

A study by Davis (2003) notes that the book citations in student bibliographies dropped significantly from 1996 to 2001, from 30 percent of cited sources to 16 percent. Davis (2003) also notes that journal citations have remained relatively constant but then rise dramatically when the professors set minimum requirements for scholarly sources. Magazine citations fluctuated and Web usage showed a significant rise as wide access to the Internet was established in student dorms.

Another study, the Global Student E-book Survey (2011) reported a greater preference for digital over printed books among students in the United Kingdom. The study notes that 58% of UK students stated they would "very often" to "often" choose the digital versions of resource materials. In the same study it was noted that over 85% of UK students indicated they use e-books up to 10 hours per week. However, a minority from the study stated that they never use e-books. There was also an overwhelming majority of the students who stated that their awareness of digital resources is excellent.

4.3 Challenges in the use of OERs

The primary goal in the use of OERs is to help equalise access to knowledge and educational opportunities across the world, including developing nations (Atkins, Brown and Hammond, 2007) but the impact of OER in developing countries is still 'modest' with respect to the need and potential (Atkins, Brown and Hammond, 2007). This is due to challenges, some of which are enumerated below.

One of the challenges facing the dissemination of knowledge in Africa is the lack of access to educational facilities and scientific information (Hoffmann, 1996). Most African universities cannot provide their students with the appropriate laboratory materials, ICT-equipment (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010; Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2012) or even with sufficient furniture. Such facilities are taken for granted nowadays by any quality education as a prerequisite for accessing and contributing to the world wide knowledge base. To add to this, academic libraries, if existent, are seriously under-funded and badly managed (Hoffmann, 1996) and to a large extent have outdated reading and resource material. African universities have also often found themselves having to contend with astronomical prices for access information through the subscriptions required to access such information. However, even if the appropriate infrastructure and equipment would be put in place, the problem of lack of access to educational facilities and scientific information would still not be solved (D'Antoni, 2006). D'Antoni (2006) comments that the costs of access to scientific information are prohibitory, even in developed countries. That means that countries with low level economies, including Zimbabwe and its SADC counterparts, are greatly disadvantaged in the scientific community. In concurrence, Albright (2005) cites lack of resources to pay high fees of commercially exploited scientific journals.

Burton and Chadwick (2000) argue that student researchers choose inappropriate sources due to lack of training, lack of time and lack of discretion. There are also financial demands, risks and vulnerabilities that users are exposed to in an attempt to use OERs (Kim and Sin, 2013). The most common impediments in the use of OERs include the technical difficulties presented by the gadgets as well as by the lack of experience by users in using digital resources to support academic tasks (Moreira and Monteiro, 2010, Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010, Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2012). Adika (2003) asserts that challenges in the usage of these internet based resources arise from lack of access to the internet itself and lack of training in platform usage. Al-Ansari (2006) argues that despite the Internet based OERs being mostly used having slow speed at accessing and retrieval, lack of time, and lack of access are the major problems confronting users.

5. SOLUTIONS

Bollag (2004) has argued that a great opportunity for using OER to improve access to educational facilities and scientific information comes from the lowering costs of ICT equipment and bandwidth, especially in relation to mobile technology. Bollag (2004) also advocates for African universities to enter into public-private partnerships in the provision and access to ICT and the internet to students at a little cost. The Global Student E-book Survey (2011) argued that the use of e-resources could have been due to the possibility that UK librarians were doing more in terms of e-book training and promotion. Hence it was incumbent upon the librarians to impress on students the use of OERs in their academic work. Other studies have advocated for the provision of these OERs so that they can be accessed and subsequently utilised by students (Moreira and Monteiro, 2010; Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010; Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2012; Al-Ansari, 2006 and Adika, 2003).

6. METHODOLOGY

The present study solicited data from respondents through multiple sources of data which consisted document analysis and questionnaire. The students` dissertations were subjected to citation analysis to find out what OERS, if any were cited and used in these reports. The sampled students were also issued with a questionnaire which required data on their understanding and use of OERs. The data were presented both qualitatively and quantitatively. Tables and figures were used to present the quantitative data in which percentages were presented on the responses. Qualitative data was presented in form of the direct responses from the respondents according to themes.

7. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The respondents for the study were drawn from students at the Zimbabwe Open University`s Mashonaland East region registered during the 2012 academic year and submitting their dissertations in the second semester of that academic year. Of the 78 students who submitted their dissertations, only 50 made it into the sample drawn proportionally through the stratified random sampling technique based on the existing four faculties of the ZOU.

8. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The 50 dissertations submitted by students from the various faculties were content reviewed to ascertain their use of OERs as cited both in references and in the text.

However, to begin with, respondents were asked what they understood by the concept OERs. The majority of the respondents seemed to have an idea of what was meant by OERs.

However, most definitions provided by the respondents did not go in line with that provided by Kauppinen (2013) who has defined the concept OERs as teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. The students` definitions showed their scepticism of the use of OERs on the assumption that they were somebody`s property, hence their use would be illegal. The majority, 38(76%) did not understand the issue of free use. However, some 23(46%) understood that OERS were meant for use by all who had access to them at times for free and times having to buy or subscribe. Of noteworthy, is one response from a student who indicated that OERs were e-journals on the Internet. This is an indication that some

students might not be aware of even the e-books and other types of OERs available in digital format. This result is in sharp contrast to the findings by the Global Student E-book Survey (2011) in the UK where the majority of students were quite aware of OERs and only a few from other different global locations tended to confuse OERs with on-line journals.

The content analysis entailed reviewing the references list and then going into text to find out whether in deed the listed references were used in the dissertation reports. Findings are presented in Figure1.
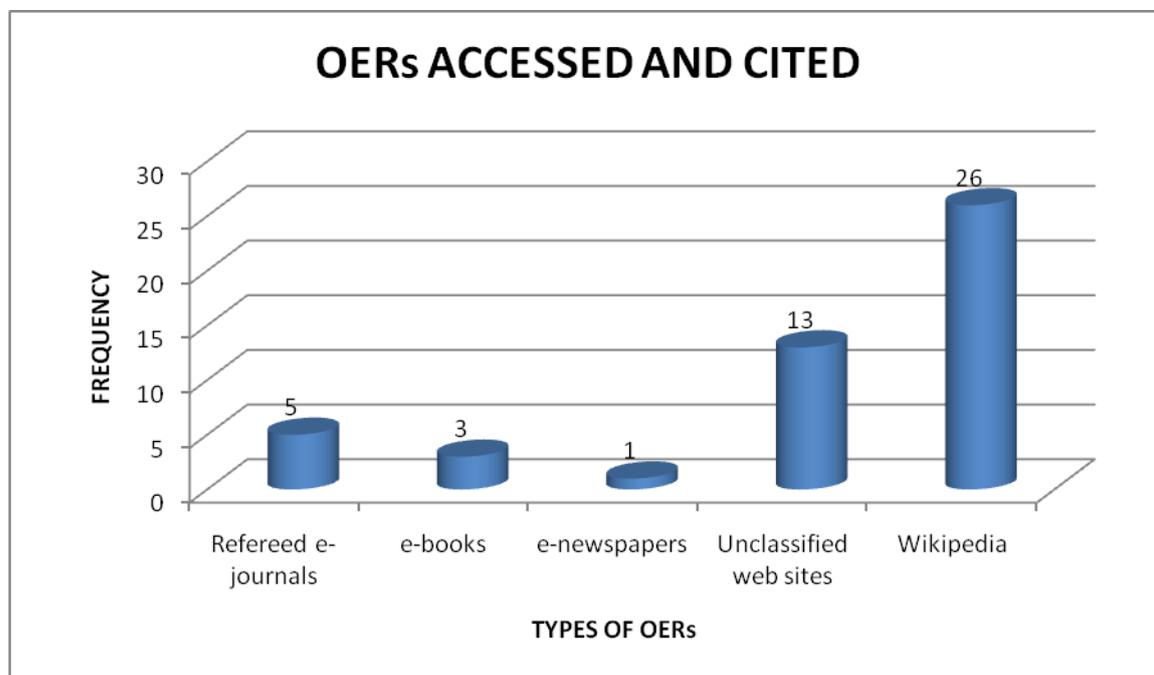
Figure1._The forms of OERs accessed and cited by students (N=50)_

The analysis of the students` dissertations showed that only 5(10%) of the dissertations cited refereed e-journals while 3(6%) cited e-books and only 1(2%) cited e-newspapers. These were the local dailies, The Zimbabwean Newsday and The Daily News. Unclassified web sites were cited in 13(26%) of the dissertations while the majority of dissertations 26(52%) cited the Wikipedia. Again the results of the present study contradict those by others elsewhere. A study by Davis (2003), for example noted citations of e-journal citations which rose dramatically when the professors set minimum requirements for scholarly sources. Furthermore, Web usage, according to Davis (2003) showed a significant rise as wide access to the Internet was established in student dorms. However, despite the introduction of the Internet for student usage, it would appear there is no significant improvement in the use of digital resources. Further to this, the Global Student E-book Survey (2011) also notes that a greater preference for digital over printed books among students in the United Kingdom where 58% of UK students stated they would "very often" to "often" choose the digital versions of resource materials, in sharp contrast with what is obtaining with students at ZOU.

Respondents were asked which types of OERs they knew. Figure 2 summarises the findings. The following OERs were known to the respondents. Peer refereed e-journals were known to 6(12%) while un-refereed e-journals were known by 12(24%) respondents. Only 2(4%) knew of scholarly periodicals while 23(46%) knew of e-books and 1(2%) of e-magazines. E-newspapers and unclassified web sites were known to 13(26%) and 30(60%) respondents respectively. Wikipedia was common to the majority and accounted for 35(70%) respondents. This familiarity with Wikipedia is demonstrated in the students` citation of the source in their dissertations. Davis (2003) and the Global Student E-book Survey (2011) have both noted that there are a diversity of OERs known to the students, more so, in the UK and other developed nations where digital materials are more preferred to traditional hard copies and as argued in some studies, the impact of OER in developing countries is still 'modest' with respect to the need and potential (Atkins, Brown and Hammond, 2007).
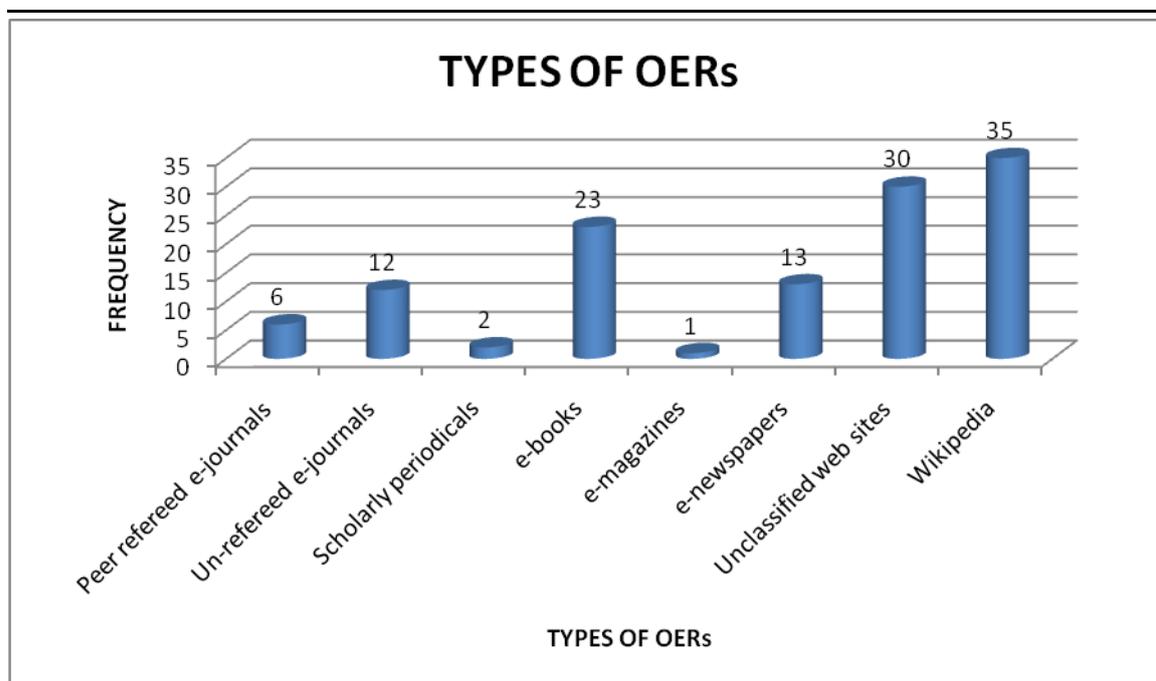
Figure 2. *Types of OERs known to the respondents*

Respondents were asked if they had undergone training in a course on the use of OERs or any digital format documents for use in their academic work including dissertation writing. Figure 3 below presents the findings.

The majority of 28(56%) respondents indicated that they had not undergone a course on the use of OERs at all while only 7(14%) stated that they had had training in the use of OERs. Adika, (2003) also identified lack of training in platform usage as hindrances to the use of OERS. With the availability of internet laboratories in the regional centres of ZOU, one would have thought that training was going to be carried in the use of these digital materials. Another 15(30%) indicated that they had received partial training on the use of OERs. This probably answers why most of the dissertation projects submitted by the students were devoid of citations from OERs despite a few citing Wikipedia and some few journals.

The students were asked what challenges they had faced in the use of OERs in dissertation writing.
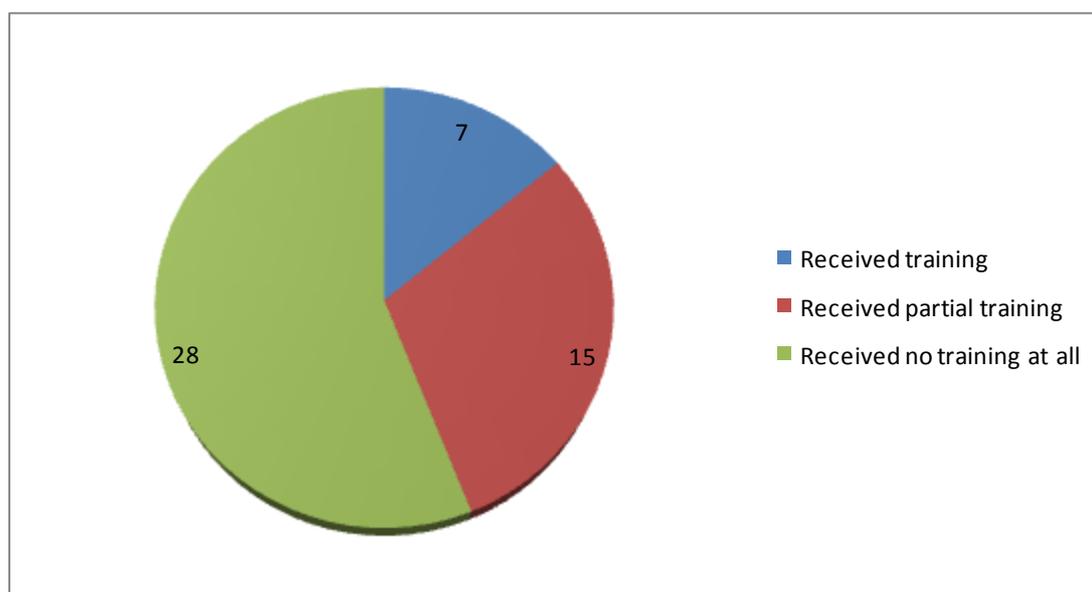
Figure 3. *Statistics of students who had/had not received training in the use of OERs*

From the responses provided in the questionnaire open ended item on the challenges confronting the students, the following responses were outstanding.

- I do not have electronic gadgets to use in accessing the OERs.

- I do not own a computer.

- I am computer semi-literate therefore cannot be able to access the documents for use in my dissertation.

- I always wrote parts of my dissertation away from where I could get internet connectivity, thus I could not access the OERs.

- Internet cafes are expensive therefore I could not afford to pay for downloading OERs for use in my dissertation.

- I am afraid of copy right laws.

- Traditional library books are easy to read and access.

- I do not want to be seen to be plagiarising from the OERs as I may fail the dissertation.

- Some texts on-line cannot be downloaded easily especially the PDF documents.

- Some e-books need subscriptions which I cannot afford.

From the responses one gets to deduce that issues of lack of access due to unavailability of electronic gadgets namely the computer and other compatible devices (65%), computer illiteracy (68%) and lack of connectivity (53%) are some of the challenges confronting the students at ZOU. Al-Ansari (2006) and Burton and Chadwick (2000) concur that despite the benefits presented by Internet based OERs, slow speed at accessing and retrieval and lack of access are the major problems confronting users. To add to that, where services are available, these are expensive to the ODL learner who has other economic responsibilities to look after, thus paying for subscriptions and accessing internet cafes becomes an added economic burden which cannot be met (72%). These findings concur with those by researchers elsewhere who have established that the most common impediments in the use of OERs include the technical difficulties presented the gadgets as well as by the lack of experience by users in using digital resources to support academic tasks lack of access to the internet itself and lack of training in platform usage (Moreira and Monteiro, 2010, Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010, Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2012; Adika, 2003; Burton and Chadwick, 2000).

9. WHAT DO YOU SEE AS OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PROVISION OF OERS IN YOUR ACADEMIC WORK?

Despite the challenges affecting the utilisation of OERs, the ODL student realises that OERs are very vital. Results from the findings solicited through the open ended items show that students are eager to use these OERs for the following advantages they help bring about. From the responses of students OERs:

- make work easy as one does not need to write everything down. You can copy and paste some parts but acknowledge the source;

- are available everywhere any time provided you are linked to the internet; and

- make it possible not to crowd around a book in the library but a number of users can access a single OER at the same time.

Despite enumerating these benefits, however, students could not bring out the fact the use of OERs could result in the production of more scholarly work, as argued by Davies (2003).

The students were asked how they thought the use of OERs could be improved so that they could access OERs for effective utilisation in their dissertation writing.

The following were the responses provided by the respondents. This entailed reviewing the references list and then going into text to find out whether in deed the listed references were used in the dissertation reports. Findings are presented in the table below.

Table 3 shows that most respondents 42(84%) suggested that there was need to train students in the use of OERs while the same number indicated that students should be trained on how to access OERs. Some students indicated PDF documents were some of the document formats that were inaccessible and hence the need to train students in accessing such forms of documents. The students also needed training on how to copy parts of such documents for use in their dissertations although they were also to be informed of the crime of piracy or plagiarism that goes with copying/cutting and pasting. A number of studies have also shown that there is real need for training on the use of electronic gadgets (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010; Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2012; Al-Ansari, 2006 and Adika, 2003). Thirty-eight (64%) of the students needed basic computer literacy to access OERs while some 41(82%) needed to be provided with electronic gadgets that enable them to access OERs. In concurrence, Bollag (2004) has argued there is need to lower costs of ICT equipment and bandwidth. With most of the ODL students having other responsibilities elsewhere, asking them to spend more on equipment and accessing digital material is therefore being burdensome. The majority of the respondents, 45(90%) further advocated that Regional centre Internet laboratories should open every day to enable access to OERs. This is understood on the basis that the ODL learner is an employee elsewhere and may not find time during the working work to access the laboratory.

10. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the folowing findings, the study concludes that:

- There is minimum understanding of what OERs are.

- The use of OERs in dissertation writing is very minimal.

- Students are aware of very few forms of OERs and hence very few have been cited in dissertations.

- Wikipedia is the most well known form of OERs; hence it has been the most cited form in the dissertations.

- The majority of students have been unable to access and use OERs due to lack of knowledge, poor or no connectivity and unavailability of electronic gadgets to make them access the digital documents.

- Accessing OERs is also expensive for the majority of the students.

- Students are aware of the benefits of the use of OERs in their dissertations and acknowledge that they can access latest information in the shortest time possible had it not been for the obstacles being faced.

Table 1. *How the use of OERs could be improved so that they could access OERs for effective utilisation in their dissertation writing (N=50)*

Solution/Strategy	Number	%
Train students in the use of OERs	42	84
Train students on how to access OERs	42	84
Students need basic computer literacy to access OERs	38	76
Provide students with electronic gadgets at lower costs	41	82
Regional centre Internet laboratories should open every day to enable access to OERs.	45	90

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above conclusions, this study recommends that:

- The university should train students in the general use of computers leading to the specific training on the use of OERs and other Internet facilities.
- The university should develop enabling technological use in all the teaching processes in the institution.
- ODL institutions should support use of the digital document formats through policies that enable easy access to OERs
- Provide strategies for basic OER literacy to students and have a basic examinable course in OERs.
- With private-public partnerships, ICT equipment and bandwidth should come cheap so as to make the provision for information through OERs affordable and easy.

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