Challenges of Student Retention at Mashonaland East Regional Centre of the Zimbabwe Open University between 2009 and 2014

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Abstract: *This research was carried out to find out the challenges of student retention at Mashonaland East Region. Two hundred and sixteen students responded to the questionnaire which was the research instrument utilised over and above the document analysis which was also used. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select the respondents. Student enrolment statistics at the ZOU – Mashonaland East Regional Centre experienced the worst decline (40%) in 2009 between the first and second semester due to socio-economic and political challenges prevailing in the country then. From 2010 the enrolment has maintained a steady decline due to financial challenges faced by students as a result of depressed salaries and institutional – related factors such as of unfriendly management policies that have impacted negatively on accessibility, affordability, flexibility and cost effectiveness of Open and distance learning provision. The rate of decline in enrolment varied according to programmes. Financial challenges caused by low salaries and unfriendly fees policy was cited by almost 92% of the respondents as the major cause of student dropout. Institutional – related factors such as tutoring, communication, library services and fees policy were said to be ineffective, thereby leading students to dropout. Students preferred Block release and the Lecture method to Tutoring which they said was in effective. The study recommended that the university should offer credit for prior learning, offer online classes and discuss cost payment plans as students start their studies with the college.*

Keywords: *Distance education, Student retention*

1. INTRODUCTION

Low student retentionhas given rise to a great deal of speculation, discussion and argument within the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), much of which has, unfortunately been ill informed or dismissive. The few research studies at ZOU have concentrated on other aspects and none have attempted to find out reasons why the intake of new students is on a downward trend and the students are continuing to drop out of various programmes. (Benza, 2001;Izuagie, 2001,Sukati and Chandriaiah, 2005 and Majoni and Chidhakwa, 2005).The study will collected basic information on the causes of the decline in student enrolment at Mashonaland East Regional Centre between 2008 and 2013 from two different perspectives (1) failure by the region to attract new students and (2) factors responsible for the high student dropout rate.

1.1. Background of the Study

ZOU for the past five years (2009-2013) has been experiencing a sharp decline in student enrolment and student retention from approximately16000 students in 2007 the enrolment has plunged down to 7000 students in year 2013, reflecting a **(43.75)** decrease. 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. The Zimbabwe Open University operates through a National Centre based in Harare, the capital city and

has established eleven Regional Centres that act as local administrative centers for the central administration. The Regional Centres are located in each of the ten geo-political provinces of the country in order for the university to reach every potential student throughout the country (Benza, 2001) *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning Vol. 1*.(See Table 1.1).

Table1.1. *Zimbabwe Open University Regional Centres*

S. No.	Regional Centre	Town
1.	Harare/Chitungwiza Regional Centre	Harare
2.	Mashonaland East Regional Centre	Marondera
3.	Mashonaland West Regional Centre	Marondera
4.	Mashonaland Central Regional Centre	Bindura
5.	Manicaland Regional Centre	Mutare
6.	Matebeleland Regional Centre	Gwanda
7.	Matebeleland North Regional Office	Bulawayo
8.	Bulawayo Regional Centre	Bulawayo
9.	Midlands Reginal Centre	Gweru
10.	Masvingo Regional Office	Masvingo
11.	Virtual Region	National Centre (Harare)

ODL is now considered as a reputable method of education as evidenced by the establishment of numerous ODL institutions worldwide and increasing enrolment of students in these institutions. Whilst other ODL institutions are enjoying a phenomenal growth, competing with traditional universities in attracting new students, Zimbabwe Open University is currently facing two serious challenges that threaten its very existence: (1) failure to attract new students and (2) a high student dropout rate. The review of recent studies at the ZOU (Benza, 2001; Izuagie, 2001; Moyo, 2001; Mercer and Peit, 2001; Mugridge 2001; Sukati and Chandriaiah, 2005 and Majoni and Chidhakwa, 2005), reflect that local researches have concentrated on descriptions and evaluations of current distance education delivery systems and none has focused on issues of student enrolment and drop out.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the causes of the decline in student enrolment and students attrition at the ZOU- Mashonaland East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013.

1.3. Problem Statement

Mashonaland East Region of the Zimbabwe Open University is currently faced with two serious challenges that need immediate attention. Student enrolment is declining at an alarming rate from 907 in 2009 to 340 in 2013. Student dropout rate is very high currently standing at more than 50%. The present study is an investigation into causes of the decline in student enrolment at Mashonaland East Regional centre between 2008-2013.

1.4. Research Questions

1. What is the gender dimension of the decline in student enrolment at ZOU Mashonaland East Regional Centre?
2. Which student - related factors have been responsible for the student dropout at Mash East Regional Centre of the ZOU between 2008 and 2013?
3. Which institutional - related factors have been responsible for the student dropout at Mash East Regional centre of the ZOU between 2008 and 2013?
4. What factors that are responsible for the decline in student enrolment between2008 and 2013 at Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region?

1.5. Significance of the Study

If the study establishes the causes of the decline in student enrolment, the data will help Mashonaland East Regional Centre and other Regional Centres to address the problem of low enrolment through attracting new students and student retention. If factors which cause students dropout are established, both institutional and students related , this data will be used to improve on It is felt that this research will enable staff working at the ZOU and in other ODL institutions to identify factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) responsible for low enrolment in distance education programmes and to identify high and at

risk students and student groups (e.g., individual students or entire student groups more likely to dropout than other students/ students groups). It is also felt that this research will enable student support staff at the ZOU, as well as staff at other universities offering open and distance learning, to deal with high-risk groups of students more efficiently and effectively, thereby improving student enrolment.

1.6. Limitations of the Study

The present study focused on only one regional centre of the Zimbabwe Open University-Mashonaland East Region. This might therefore affect the general is ability of results to other regions of the Zimbabwe Open University. Due to this consideration, the number of respondents was made large enough to ensure a representativeness so as to allow results to be generalised. The researchers were constrained by the fact that there was limited time available for the completion of the study and had other commitments. The researchers also made use of evenings and weekends to necessitate the completion of the study as scheduled.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The search for related literature was guided by the objectives of the study.

The literature, organized our literature review under the following subheadings:

- The conceptual Framework
- Theories and models of Student Dropout
- Characteristics of Distance education students
- Previous research studies

2.1. The Conceptual Framework

In an academic discourse, there is need to explicitly operationalise the key concepts. For the present study, the key concepts include the following: **distance education, distance teaching, distance learning, open learning, open and distance learning.**

2.2. Distance Education

Although distance education was known as far back as the early seventies as a form of correspondence education, the concept was formally recognized in 1982, when the then International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) (Holmberg, 1986). Since then several writers and scholars have attempted to define and explain the term 'distance education'. In his explanation, Peters (1976), tends to use the term distance education interchangeably with the broader concept of correspondence education. Peters (1976) argues that distance education is characterized by the use of (1) printed material, radio and TV programmes, (2) computers and (3) study circles.

Holmberg (1977:7) attempted to go deeper into explaining the concept of distance education. He explains:

The term 'distance education' covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization. Distance education includes all 'those teaching methods in which, because of the physical separateness of learners and teachers, the interactive, as well as the pre-active phase of teaching is conducted through print, mechanical or electronic device.

To further clarify his definition, Holmberg (1977:7), identifies the following activities as constituting some of the major characteristics of distance education.

- Non-contiguous communication;
- Based on pre-produced course;
- Organized two-way communication between the learner and a supporting organization;
- Individual study;

- A form of mass communication;
- An industrialized type of teaching and learning

Another scholar, Moore (1983:157) conceives distance education as synonymous with 'independent study'. He defines distance education as "…an education system in which the learner is autonomous and separated from his teacher by space and time, so that communication is by print, electronic, or other non-human medium". According to Moore (1983), Distance Education is a system consisting of three sub-systems; the learner, teacher and a method of communication.

Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of distance education is that first proposed by Keegan in 1980 and subsequently modified in 1986. Keegan's definition incorporates aspects of the definitions proposed by Holmberg (1977), Peters (1973), and Moore (1973). Keegan (1986) identifies seven principal characteristics, which he regards as being essential for any comprehensive definition of distance education. These characteristics, Keegan (1986:49-50) argues, distinguishes distance education from other forms of education systems. These characteristics include;

- The separation of teacher and learner which distinguishes it from face-to-face lecturing;
- The influence on educational organization which distinguishes it from private study;
- The use of technical media, usually print, to unite teacher and learner and carry the educational content;
- The provision of a two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue;
- The possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes;
- The participation in an industrialized form of education which, if accepted, contains the genus of radical separation of distance education from other forms;
- The privatizing of learning so that learning occurs away from the group.

Thus Keegan (1995:7) gives the most thorough definition. He says that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained". The feature of separation of teacher and learner was also coined by Teaster and Blieszner (1999:741) who say, …… "the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separate in space and possibly time". With the history of distance learning encompassing so many different learning environments, we need to find a definition that fits in all situations. There have been many definitions put forward in modern literature. From these definitions we can see that the student and teacher are separated by space, but not necessarily by time.

2.3. Distance Teaching and Distance Learning

Distance teaching indicates the process of course development by which a distance education institution prepares learning materials for students. Distance learning or learning at a distance is the process as seen from the students' perspective. Distance education thus brings together both elements of this field of education. The term distance education refers to teaching and learning situations in which the instructor and the learner or learners are geographically separated, and therefore, rely on electronic devices and print materials for instructional delivery. Distance teaching includes the instructor's role in the process and distance learning - the students' role in the process (Lane 1994:195). This article focuses on four key promises that characterizes distance education and distinguishes it from conventional education.

- Distance education was considered to be a **cost effective** way of providing education to meet the country's increasing demand for tertiary education. A distance education university does not have to set up a campus to house students. The university maintains a lean organizational structure. This is expected to lead to low operational costs.
- Distance education programmes have to be **very flexible** in order to allow students to study at their own time, place and pace.
- Distance education was **affordable** in that its low operational costs could be passed on to students in the form of low fees.
- Through distance teaching, education becomes more **accessible** to many people who could not be accommodated in the conventional educational institutions.

2.4. Open and Distance Learning

The concept "open and distance learning" is relatively new and several writers and scholars have attempted to distinguish between "open learning" and 'distance education'. Saide and Saide (2003) define open learning as "an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these". The same authors define distance education as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted (through some form of technology) by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner".(Saide and Saide, 2003). There is, however, extensive overlap between the use of the term "open learning" and "distance education". The decision of the United Kingdom government in the mid 1960s to rename the University of the Air the "Open University" popularized the term "open" The term is now widely used in distance teaching universities that include; The Open University of Tanzania (1993), The Open University of Bangkladesh (1994), and more recently the Zimbabwe Open University (1999), just to mention a few examples. The establishment of open universities around the world aim to address the educational and re-educational needs of adult learners and workforce by providing a high level of studies (Evans and Lockwood, 1994, Evans and Nation, 1996). Open universities typically develop educational activities underpinned by an educational philosophy fundamentally different from those held by conventional educational systems. The main aspect of this philosophy is to promote "lifelong education" and to provide adults with "a second educational chance" (Keegan, 1993). The educational method used in an Open University system is most typically "distance learning."

Closely allied to the concept open learning is the concept of flexible learning. Van den Brande (1993:2) defines flexible learning as "enabling learners to learn when they want (frequently, timing, duration) how they want to learn (modes of learning) and what they want (that is learners can constitute what is learning to them). These flexible principles may be applied at a distance. In such cases the learners can choose where they want to learn (at home, at a training center, etc.)

The present study investigated how the concept of open and distance learning was applied at the ZOU and its impact on the decline in student enrolment.

2.5. The Organization and Management of Distance Education at the ZOU

The mode of delivery of the DE programme is predominantly print (modules), supplemented with face-to-face tutorials of six hours per module, telephone contacts, emails and one-on-one contact with tutors as and when needed. Most of the programmes take four academic years to complete. Each year is divided into two semesters and four modules are studied per semester. Examinations are set in each module and written at the end of each semester. (ZOU Regulations, 2010)

There is minimal use of ICT systems to enhance interaction among students and tutors. Interactive e-learning platforms, tele-conferencing, and other packages for e-learning are not available. There are no course websites that have courses to be uploaded and downloaded online. Students mainly rely on the printed materials and the scheduled face-to-face tutorials. Final examinations are written at accredited examination centres which are usually located in the host DE institution.

2.6. Distinction between Distance Education and Conventional Education

One key feature that distinguishes distance education from conventional education is that whilst conventional students are formally taught in institutions such as schools, colleges and universities, where students enjoy face- to- face interaction with their teachers, in open and distance learning environments, students have minimum contact with their teachers and are taught through a combination of delivery modes that include the printed materials. In conventional education, students are taught through lectures and they visit the library to study from prescribed text books. In distance education, the learning materials must be compiled, packaged and delivered to students far away from the educational institution. Unlike the traditional student who interacts with the teacher, a distance education student is guided in her or his studies through some form of technology. That includes telephone, limited face- to- face tutorials, and study guides. The idea here is that since in distance education, the lecturer is separated from the students and cannot personally deliver instruction, he /she then prepares the lecture notes in written form and delivers them to the distance education student who will use these notes as study guides. The development of study guides (commonly referred to as

modules) has always been a critical activity for distance education systems because the quality of the learning materials has a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning distance education students receive.

2.7. The Gender Dimension of Open and Distance Learning

The advent of open and distance learning, in Zimbabwe has been a welcome development towards the education of women. The key feature of distance education is that it is endowed with high flexibility and can meet the demands of education for all which the conventional education system is unable to do. Distance education, benefits certain categories of people who for various reasons are unable to access the formal education system. These include persons without formal qualifications, persons belonging to different age groups, disadvantaged groups, and employed persons. There are large percentages of women in all the above categories.Open and distance learning by being more affordable, more accessible, more flexible, and more cost effective promises to address the gender imbalances, inequities and inequalities which the conventional education system is struggling with or is even unable to handle. Distance education has a very important role in women's emancipation and development. Women have constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. Distance education can help them with its outreach to their homes. It enables them to learn at their own pace and take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. It gives them a second chance to step into the main systems of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to earn and learn as well as to fulfilling family responsibilities (Trivedi (1989).

Distance education (DE) has emerged as a tool for widening access to higher education for women. All over the world, gender disaggregated data on education has shown that compared to their male counterparts women have attained low level of formal education. Several reasons have attributed to this low level of formal education among women. The unique characteristics of DE as bringing education to the door step of people makes it critical for bridging the gender gap in education, especially at the tertiary level. The societal perception of women and their productive and reproductive roles affect their participation in formal education. Society perceives women as homemakers and child minders hence any activity that takes them away from such normal schedules are frowned upon (Przymus, 2004).

As a mode of study, DE is particularly suited for women because of their role as housewives and mothers, which is thought to provide flexible time management possibilities while preventing classroom attendance. Women have constraints of time, space, resources and socio-economic disabilities. DE is seen as having a potentially important contribution to make in overcoming barriers to women's participation in higher education. DE can help them with its outreach to their homes. It enables them to learn at their own pace and take up vocations and skills for economic and individual development. It gives them a second chance to step into the main systems of education, including higher education, enabling them at the same time to earn and learn as well as to fulfill family responsibilities DE allows women to learn at any time or any place, while juggling multiple roles given that women are more likely than men to interrupt their education and careers for parenthood and temporary confinement to the home.

Institutional set ups have the potential of helping or hindering the chances of women to combine distance course with their family responsibilities and thereby contribute to more equal opportunities. It is assumed that distance learners are autonomous and independent learners who more or less study on their own and work their way through the course materials provided by the institution. The situation differs for female students. The study by Plummer (2000) has found that women make different demands on the institution than do male students, and they value and utilize the services in a different way. Women also place a higher value on the local support services as a result they have a higher rate of attendance in study centres, even though they have to overcome more obstacles in order to be able to participate. This female oriented approach to learning at a distance need to be taken into account by a DE system which actively wants to provide equal opportunities for men and women.

Just as expressed in literature, women who study at a distance are faced not only with career related challenges but that of reproduction and home management roles as well. Besides that, husbands who may not trust their wives pose a threat to the woman's engagement in meetings with their study partners and colleagues. While men could travel with ease to learning centres and return home at any time of the day, women have the challenge of insecurity in night travels due to experiences of highway robbery which is at times associated with rape (Przymus, 2004). These are issues that

strictly affect women but not men. In the present study enrolment statistics indicated that women students at the ZOU constituted 44%. As compared to the enrolment in 2009 of 33% women. Although there is an upward trend of approximately 11%, the low participation of women in ODL programmes at the ZOU as compared to males (56%) still raises a number of critical questions about issues of gender equity, given that women in Zimbabwe make up 52% of the adult population. In the present study the following questions were considered critical:

- Is the ODL environment at the ZOU conducive to the learning needs of both men and women?

- How many learners are dropping out at the ZOU? How many men? How many women?

- What are the forces leading to the drop out of male learners and that of female learners at the ZOU?

- What are the gender factors relating to the accessibility of the media employed in ODL delivery at the ZOU?

- Where do the male and female graduates go?

- To what extent is ODL empowering women to improve their disadvantaged employability? To what extent is ODL curriculum, teaching and learning materials gender responsive?

- In most cases women do not own property or control family resources. In such cases, how do women afford the cost of ODL?

- It is argued, though with some controversy, that ODL is in most cases more affordable than classroom - based learning. However, for women who normally do not control family resources, how does poverty impact on ODL, especially for women?

- There are millions of people living with HIV /AIDS. How do women already saddled with the responsibility to care for the sick, effectively participate in any ODL programmes?

These are serious issues that call for critical attention and continued analysis and action. Unless all these issues are thoroughly examined and steps taken to institute gender responsive ODL policies and programmes, it will take a long time for the provision of ODL to attain gender equality and pride itself of making significant contribution to development.

2.8. Theories and Models of Student Enrolment in Open and Distance Learning

Different theories and models have been used by these researchers to describe the factors found to influence student enrolment, student dropout rates, and retention rates along with the relationships between variable factors. United States researchers have taken the lead in developing a wide range of models that attempt to explain key factors that contribute towards student withdrawal from higher education (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Bean, 1980, 1983; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Astin, 1977, 1985; Braxton, 2000). One British researcher, Woodley (2004), has also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of some important models such as Tinto's model (Tinto, 1975), Sweet's model (Sweet, 1983), and Kember's model (Kember, 1995). These models are widely used by ODL researchers to predict which students are more likely to dropout, and identify interventions aimed at decreasing student dropout rates (Bernard & Amundsen, 1989). Such theoretical approaches have limitations, however, especially when applied to different contexts and situations (Woodley, 2004; Woodley, Delange, & Tanewski, 2001; Yorke, 2004). According to Woodley (2004) most dropout research falls into one of two categories: surveys seeking to find out students' reasons for dropping out (Davies & Elias, 2003; Woodley & Parlett, 1983; Yorke, 1999), or studies that look at students' progress in relation to likely predictive variables of dropout (Johnes & Taylor, 1989). This study was a survey to establish the causes of the decline in enrolment at the ZOU.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. The Research Paradigm: Mixed Methods

The present study employed a mixed methodology and collected both quantitative and qualitative data through the use of a questionnaire. Based on Davidson (2000) and Jones (2001), the researchers identified the descriptive survey research design as the best means for this type of study.

3.2. Questionnaire

Since the sample of the study was large (216 respondents) a questionnaire was considered an appropriate way of collecting data. Van Dalen (1976:69) defines a questionnaire as a document

containing questions designed to solicit information appropriate for analysis. According to Oppenheim (1992:102), questionnaires have a number of advantages. They provide data that can be easily quantified. Questionnaires also saved time and costs since our respondents were dispersed over a wide geographical area.

4. RECORDS AND DOCUMENTS

Documents were also used in the collection of data. Guba and Lincoln (1981:225) define a record as "any written statement prepared by an individual or an agency for the purpose of attesting to an event or providing an account," and a document as "any written (or filmed) material other than a record". Documents and records serve as an in-context source of information. Documents provide a rich database for present and past events. Documents and records serve as research techniques for objectivity, systematic, and quantitative description of the phenomenon under study. They also provide a low-cost information base. Documents examined in this study included, students application and admission forms, students files, students attendance registers, ZOU policy documents and regulations.

5. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

In selecting instruments for gathering data, the researcher will have to ensure that the instruments met two important criteria: validity and reliability.

5.1. Validity

Validity refers to how appropriate an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. There are various types of validity. The most common types of validity are content, concurrent, construct, and predictive validity. The present study will be more interested in content validity of the research instruments. In order to ensure validity, the questionnaire items will be derived from the statement of the problem and the research questions.

5.2. Reliability

Reliability refers to the degree of accuracy with which the research instrument measures whatever it is that it measures. A common method of establishing reliability is to carry out a pilot study in which the research instrument is tested in the collection of data on two occasions. The results of the two sets of data are then correlated. This provides us with what is called the test- retest reliability.

The researcher will collected data from four different sources as a form of 'data triangulation' to contrast the data and 'validate' the data if it yielded similar findings (Arksey& Knight, 1999; Bloor, 1997; Holloway, 1997).

6. DATA COLLECTION

Data will be collected from four different sources (ZOU graduates, registered students, prospective students and inactive students), through the use of a questionnaire. The first source of data will come from ZOU's graduates. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques will be used to identify persons who had graduated from the ZOU between 2009 and 2012. A total 55 will responded to the questionnaire. The second source of data will come from ZOU current students enrolled in different degree programmes. Convenience sampling will be used. The questionnaire will be distributed to 55 students who would have visited the Mashonaland East Regional Centre during the year of 2014. Fifty five questionnaires will be completed and returned. The fourth source of data will come from prospective students. These will be persons who can qualify to enroll in at least one programme but are not registered with the ZOU. The researcher will employ convenience sampling and collected data from 55 prospective students. The entire sample will be made up of 220 respondents.

7. DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data will be analysed thematically.

8. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The present study was guided by six objectives in to address equally six research questions.

The first objective of the study was to identify the emerging trends in enrolment statistics of ZOU-Mash East students.

Research Question 1:

What are the emerging trends in enrolment statistics of ZOU- Mash East students by programme between 2008 and 2013? In order to identify the salient features of the student enrolment, the present researchers examined enrolment statistics between 2009 and 2013. These enrolment statistics were tabulated and examined in order to establish any significant trends. The enrolment statistics are presented in Table 4.1.

Table4.1. *Mashonaland East Student Enrolment by Programme (2009 -2013) and Emerging Trends.*

PROGRAMME	11May 2009		23Nov 2009		21May 2010		7Oct2010		4April 2011		INov2011		5May 2012		19Oct 2012		20May 2013	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
BED	46	32	19	18	16	16	14	14	23	14	16	11	13	13	9	12	12	9
BAECS	25	25	10	14	7	11	7	10	18	13	14	8	10	15	5	7	4	8
NURSING	4	17	1	17	2	15	2	16	5	14	4	3	5	12	4	7	6	5
COUNSELLING	42	85	19	36	11	26	15	32	16	22	12	19	11	13	5	7	4	16
SPED	7	34	4	20	2	16	2	21	5	13	5	15	4	12	4	10	4	11
PSYCHOLOGY	71	63	23	25	15	21	18	24	0	0								
PSY HONS	3	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	31	28	24	17	21	16	16	12	13	9
MEDIA	27	13	12	5	11	5	19	5	16	4	10	5	11	3	11	3	11	4
DV STUDY											13	17	13	13	12	11	18	14
REL STUDY											8	4	4	1	4	1	5	0
DISABILITY									1	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	1
AGRIC	31	13	5	4	5	10	16	8	18	12	19	13	17	14	12	9	15	14
GEO	20	8	2	5	2	4	3	3	11	6	10	7	7	8	6	4	5	8
MED	12	3	6	3	6	2	8	2	13	3	5	1	2	2	5	4	4	3
PES	19	11	5	3	11	11	13	7	18	10	18	9	14	7	13	10	16	10
PES HONS											0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
ACCOUNTS	53	14	21	4	21	7	23	5	27	4	20	6	25	8	18	7	20	6
BANKING	11	7	1	0	2	3	2	3	2	5	1	1	1	4	0	1	1	1
FINANCE	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MAKERTIN	49	16	14	2	10	3	15	4	19	7	8	4	11	5	8	2	4	4
HR	54	19	14	8	17	3	16	7	24	5	14	3	18	10	12	6	16	9
EDBL	13	6	3	0	4	0	1	1	4	0	1	0	4	1	2	0	2	1
MBAZ	57	6	16	3	25	6	21	9	16	7	16	4	16	4	8	7	12	7
PGDE	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	3	0
RAM	4	6	1	0	0	0	2	0	3	0	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	1
BED SEC	2	1	3	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
BED ECD									2	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
DIP ED PR	3	1	2	1	2	3	7	1	7	2	1	0	2	0	2	0	1	0
DIPED SEC									2	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
BED YOUTH									1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MATH&ST									2	1	2	3	1	2	1	2	1	1
LIS	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
MSC COUNSELING	8	6	5	4	4	6	5	7	5	3	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
MSC SPED	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	11	1	6	1	4	1	4	1	5
MSC PEACE							7	2	9	5	9	6	5	3	3	3	4	3
MPHIL			2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
DPHIL			2	1	2	2	6	2	6	1	3	2	4	1	3	1	3	0
ENROLMENT BY GENDER	567	340	197	175	184	174	241	191	331	211	245	175	229	178	168	133	189	151
SEMESTER ENROLMENT	907		372		358		432		344		420		407		301		340	

The examination of enrolment statistics between 2009 and 2013 revealed some trends related to the decline in enrolment. These trends are presented in Table 4.2

Table 4.2 shows that in 2009, most programmes had fairly high enrolment, and most programmes had at least twenty students, except for programmes such as honours in psychology and bachelor of commerce in Finance, Bed Secondary and bachelor of science in library and information science which had an average of three students .These programmes which registered a rather low enrolment, were not very popular, and some of them were introduced at this time .In 2010 May, semester ,all programmes had less than forty students registered .This low enrolment ,might have been caused by the introduction of multiple currency ,and at the same time, students who were in stream were

requested to pay US$80,to cover up for the Zimbabwean dollars. The low remuneration (US100) paid mostly to civil servants who form the bulky of Zimbabwe Open University students, had also a negative effect on the enrolment. The students enrolled in ODL are typically adults, attend part-time, and may be full-time jobholders who are also shouldering family responsibilities (McGivney, 2004).The other responsibilities which the distant learner has may also have contributed to the decline in enrolment since these adults prioritise sending their children to school before enrolling for their studies.

Table4. 2. *Student Enrolment Statistics: Emerging Trends*

Programme	2009	2009	2010	2010	2011	2011	2012	2012	2013
Bed	79	37	32	28	37	27	26	21	21
Counselling	127	55	37	47	38	31	24	12	20
Psychology	134	48	36	42	59	41	37	28	22
BAECS	50	24	18	17	31	22	25	12	12
Media Studies	40	17	16	24	20	15	14	14	15
Agriculture	44	9	15	24	30	32	31	21	29
Accounts	67	25	28	28	31	26	33	25	26
Marketing	65	16	13	19	26	12	16	10	8
Human Resource	73	22	20	23	29	17	28	18	25
MBAZ	63	19	31	30	23	20	20	15	19
Sped	41	24	18	23	18	20	16	14	15

In October 2010 semester 1, Psychology and Counselling registered an increment in enrolment, of above forty students, but all other programmes' enrolment remained depressed, and had less than forty students. Diploma in Education primary, Msc Sped, Med, B.Com Marketing, PES, B.Com HR and HPSY, all registered a slight increase in enrolment during the April 2011 Semester .This increase in enrolment could be attributed to the introduction of staggered fee payment which allowed the students to do part payment, and were allowed to write their examinations even before finishing paying their fees. It is important to note that, BSc Counselling experienced a drastic drop in enrolment, and this could be a result of negative publicity about its accreditation by ZIMCHIE. The staggered payment plan method could also be an explanation which saw the slight rise in most programmes in November 2011 and May 2012.However, in October 2012 Semester, all programmes experienced a decrease in enrolment, and this could be a result of the fees payment policy which stipulated that all the fees was supposed to be paid in full before registration. This possibly scared away many students, and caused the decreased enrolment. The full payment fees policy is possibly still affecting the enrolment as 2013 May semester had a depressed enrolment of less than thirty – eighty in all programmes.

The second objective of the study was to identify programmes that have been experiencing the worst decline in student enrolment between 2009 and 2013. The analysis of enrolment statistics identified programmes with the highest dropout rate and the total percentage wastage for each programme (See Table 4.3).

Table4.3. *Mashonaland East Programmes that have Experienced the Worst Decline in Student Enrolment between 2009 and 2013*

	11-May-09			20-May-13			Difference		Percentage Wastage Based on Gender		Total Wastage	
PROGRAMME	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	M	F	No.	%
BED	46	32	78	12	9	21	-34	-23	74	72	57	73
BAECS	25	25	50	4	8	12	-21	-17	84	68	38	76
NURSING	4	17	21	6	5	11	2	-12	50	70	10	48
COUNSELLING	42	85	127	4	16	20	-38	-69	90	81	107	84
SPED	7	34	41	4	11	15	-3	-23	43	68	30	73
PSY HONS	74	63	137	13	9	22	-61	-54	82	86	115	84
MEDIA	27	13	40	11	4	15	-16	-9	59	69	25	63
DV STUDY (NOV 2011)	**13**	**17**	**30**	**18**	**14**	**32**	**5**	**-3**	**38**	**18**	**2**	**7**
REL STUDY (NOV 2011)	**8**	**4**	**12**	**5**	**0**	**5**	**-3**	**-4**	**38**	**100**	**7**	**58**
DISABILITY (4 APRIL 2011)	1	1	2	0	1	1	-1	0	100	0	1	50
AGRIC	31	13	44	15	14	29	-16	1	52	-8	15	34
GEO	20	8	28	5	8	13	-15	0	75	0	15	54

MED	12	3	15	4	3	7	-8	0	67	0	8	53
PES	19	11	30	16	10	26	-3	-1	16	9	4	13
ACCOUNTS	53	14	67	20	6	26	-33	-8	62	29	41	61
BANKING	11	7	18	1	1	2	-10	-6	91	86	16	89
FINANCE	2	1	3	0	0	0	-2	-1	100	100	3	100
MAKERTIN	49	16	65	4	4	8	-45	-12	92	75	57	88
HR	54	19	73	16	9	25	-38	-10	70	53	48	66
EDBL	13	6	19	2	1	3	-11	-5	85	83	16	84
MBAZ	57	6	63	12	7	19	-45	-1	79	-17	44	70
PGDE				3	0	3						0
RAM	4	6	10	2	1	3	-2	-5	50	83	7	70
BED SEC	2	1	3	1	1	2	-1	0	50	100	1	33
BED ECD				0	0							0
DIP ED PR	3	1	4	1	0	1	-2	-1	67	100	3	75
MATH&ST				1	1	2						0
LIS	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	100	0	0	0
MSC COUNSELING	8	6	14	0	0	0	-8	-6	100	100	14	100
MSC SPED	3	3	6	1	5	6	-2	2	67	67	0	0
Msc PEACE				4	3	7						0
MPHIL				0	0							0
DPHIL				3	0	3						0
ENROLMENT BY GENDER	**567**	**340**	**907**	**189**	**151**	**340**	**-411**	**-267**				

All programmes experienced a steep drop (40%) in student enrolment between the first and second semester in 2009. The total wastage ration between 2009 and 2013 was 62. 51%. The degree in counselling suffered the worst decline in student enrolment after it was suspended by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). It is most likely that the suspension of some programmes by ZIMCHE has had a negative impact on the reputation of ZOU. From 2010 all programmes have been experiencing a steady decline in student enrolment. The present findings show that women are concentrated in the following programmes: education, counselling, psychology, geography, agric, BAECS and nursing science. Men dominate in commercial courses. eg accounts, marketing, human resource MBA. MPHIL and DPHIL. Women are underrepresented in science, technology, technical and mathematics oriented courses. Compared to their male counterparts, these places them at a disadvantage.Enrolment has remained depressed in the following programmes: PGDE, BED SEC, BED ECD, MSC SPED, MSC COUNSELLING, MSC PEACE, LIS, RAM, BED YOUTH, DISABILITY STUDIES, and RELIGIOUS STUDIES.

The third objective of the study was to determine the decline in student enrolment based on gender (See Table 4.4).

Table4.4. *Mash East Student Enrolment by Gender between (2009 and 2013)*

Year	Semester	Total	%	Male	%	Female	%
2008	1	1412	100				
2008	2	No registration – No Examinations. Enrolment statistics not available					
2009	1	907	100	567	62.51%	340	37.49%
2009	2	372	100	197	52.96%	175	47.04%
2010	1	358	100	184	51.40%	174	48.60%
2010	2	432	100	241	55.79%	191	44.21%
2011	1	344	100	133	38.66%	211	61.34%
2011	2	420	100	245	58.33%	175	41.67%
2012	1	407	100	229	56.27%	178	43.73%
2012	2	301	100	168	55.81%	133	44.19%
2013	1	340	100	189	55.56%	151	44.44%

9. GENDER

Analysis of data presented in Table 4.4 shows that more male students than female students at Mashonaland East Regional Centre dropped out between 2009 and 2013 (Mashonaland East Regional Centre, students records: 2009 - 2013). In 2009 the enrolment at Mash East Regional Centre was made up of 567 (62.51%) males and 340 (37.49%) females. In 2013 the enrolment dropped to 340 (55.56%) males and 151(44.44%) females. The decrease in male enrolment and increase in female

enrolment could be attributed to higher female admission and higher female retention rate. From this data the present researchers concluded that at the Mashonaland East Regional Centre, gender is a factor in the decline in student enrolment with more men than women dropping out.

Several other studies have given statistical evidence to confirm women's high participation in DE programmes. Most of the women who access DE have been described to be in their adult stage, married, having dependants and are workers. In a study by Qureshi (2002) it was found that the DE format attracted more married participants than the on-campus format: 30.4% versus 12.6%, respectively. Gender studies on the participation of female students in Open and Distance Education programmes in developing countries such as Turky, India, Australia, German and the USA show that more women than men enrol in distance education programmes. However, Studies by Cameron et al, (2001) show that participation rates for women in higher education are alarmingly low.

The gender imbalance at the ZOU should be understood in its socio-cultural context. Historically and traditionally, Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society in which men were considered as majors whilst women were treated as minors. However, attitudes towards the education of women are changing. There is no doubt that considering the socio-cultural characteristics of women, DE, by its unique nature creates an opportunity for women to pursue higher education. Studies elsewhere have shown that more women than men are motivated to enrol in distance education programmes. Research has provided statistical data to prove this point (Przymus, 2004); Plummer, 2002); Canevale, 2002; Evans, 1995). Plummer (2002) a Senior Researcher at the German Fern Universität, a Distance Teaching University, carried out cross-national comparative research on the situation of women and men in DE that examined the often neglected area of gender issues throughout the DE world. Her study identifies that a wide variety of evidence from different countries supports the conclusion that open and distance learning has the potential to provide equal opportunities in higher and continuing education. She emphasize that DE per se is women-friendly since it does not require attendance in class at set times. However, the percentage of ZOU female students (44%) as compared to men (56%) in a country where women constitute 52% of the adult population is still a course for concern

The fourth objective of the study was to determine student - related factors that have been responsible for the decline in **student enrolment at Mash East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013?**

In order to examine student – related factors responsible for the decline in enrolment at Mashonaland East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013, the present researchers examined registry records and collected relevant student bio-data. Student bio data was also obtained from research participants.

The researchers began by unpacking the question "who is a ZOU student" according to a number of dimensions which are: age, gender, educational background, marital status, number of own children and dependants, geographical distance, income, access to communication and technology. (See Table 4.5).

Table4.5. *Profile of a ZOU Student*

Age	30 – 45 years
Gender	Male (56%) female (44%)
Educational level	minimum ordinary level
Marital status	Married
Average number of own children	3 children
Average number of dependants	3 people
Employment status	Employed
Monthly Income – salary	less than USD500
Mean distance travelled to local regional centre	100km
Means of transport	public transport
Means of communication	Notice board/cell phone
Type of residence	rural (80%) urban (20%)

10. AGE

The composition of ZOU students varies from program to program. In most undergraduate programs, the students are middle aged between 30 – 45 years old, but for post graduate programmes (Masters and PhD programmes), the students are much older (40 – 60 years old). The age of ZOU students is not very much different from other ODL students in the developed countries. In America, ODL students' ages range from 20 – 50 (Tucker 2003), at Anadolu University in Turky, the age of students

range from 17 – 80 years (Tucker, 2003).The present findings show that age was not a factor responsible for student dropout. Both the young and the older student were at the risk of dropping out. Whilst Coggins (1988) argues that students who are younger are more likely to complete a distance education course, Holmberg (1989), on the other hand, argues that older mature, better-qualified students are self directed and are more likely to have the strong motivation that is necessary to succeed at a distance. In the present study, the age of the ZOU student was not a significant factor in the decline of student enrolment.

11. MARITAL STATUS, FAMILY AND DEPENDANTS

In the present study 76% of the ZOU student dropouts indicated that family commitments had caused them to suspend their studies. Most of the ZOU dropouts (90%) were married with an average of three children and three dependants. This means most student dropouts have family commitments that may negatively affect their studies. Students with families often experience difficulties in balancing their academic demands with their family and social commitments. The stress of multiple roles has been mentioned by researchers as one of the major constraints that hinder students from persisting in a distance education program (Moore, 1975; and Thompson, 1984; as cited in Ojo and Olakulehin (2006). Adult learners assume multiple responsibilities at home, in society and in their workplaces. They spend a great deal of time and energy on fulfilling their family, social, and occupational responsibilities. This may drastically reduce the time and energy which could otherwise have been used for learning activities.

12. DISTANCE FROM THE LOCAL REGIONAL CENTRE

In the present study 52% of the inactive students indicated distance from the local regional centre as a factor influencing the decline in student enrolment. The central administration of the ZOU is based at the National Centre in Harare, the capital city. The ZOU operates through ten Regional Centres and district centres located in each of the ten geo-political provinces of the country. The main objective of these Regional Centres and district learning centres is to mitigate distance between the learner and the institution by taking the university out into the community (Benza, 2001).Despites efforts by the university to bring education to every doorstep; the existing District Centres have not been very effective in the provision of student support services. The majority of ZOU students (80%) who live in the rural areas still have to travel a mean distance of 100Km to come to their local Regional Centre for student support services such as guidance and counselling, registering, library services submission and collection of assignments, and writing examinations.

In the present study, inactive students were asked to state when they had dropped out or suspended their studies. Data collected from students dropout is presented in Table 4.6

Table4.10. *Respondents' Academic Year of Suspension of Studies*

Academic Year	Percentage
1st year, 1st semester	25%
1st year, 2nd semester	16%
2nd year, 1semester	13%
2nd year, 2nd semester	13%
3rd year, 1st semester	13%
3rd year, 2nd semester	0%
4th year, 1st semester	8%
4th year, 2semester	8%
No response	4%
Total	**100**

Most students (41%) dropped out in the first year, 26% dropped in the second year and 13% dropped in the third year. According to Tinto (1975), withdrawal process depends on how students interact with the social and academic (internal) environment of the institution. In an ODL context, researchers tend to place more emphasis on the influence of external environment, such as student's occupation and support from their family, while the concept of social integration into an ODL institution's cultural fabric, is given less weight (Kember, 1995). Students enrolled in ODL are typically adults, attend part-time, and may be full-time jobholders who are also shouldering family responsibilities (McGivney, 2004). For such students, factors such as 'lack of time,' 'poor guidance,' 'lack of

feedback on assignments,' 'time management,' 'unrealistic expectations,' and so on often lead to withdrawal.

The Pennsylvania College of Technology has also had retention increases due to new programs. Studies have shown that students from their feelings about an institution within the first week of enrollment. Therefore, Pennsylvania College of Technology attempts to retain students and aid in their transition to college within this first week of enrollment. Testing, advising, and scheduling all occur on the first day of school. In addition, ID cards, campus tours, fee payments, and other services are explained on the first day. College administrators also call students who do not attend orientation and ask if they wish to reschedule (Ignash 2).

Tinto (1988) has argued that factors that affect distance education students can be divided into intrinsic (institutional – related) and extrinsic (student – related). Tinto goes on to say withdrawal process depends on how students interact with the social and academic (internal) environment of the institution. In an ODL context, researchers tend to place more emphasis on the influence of external environment, such as student's occupation and support from their family, while the concept of social integration into an ODL institution's cultural fabric, is given less weight (Kember, 1995).

The fifth objective of the present study was to determine institutional – related factors that have been responsible for the decline in student enrolment at Mash East Regional centre between 2009 and 2013. (See Table 4.6)

Table4.6. *Institutional –Related factors responsible for the decline in student enrolment at the Mashonaland East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013.*

N = 216 Respondents

Student Support Service	Effective	%	Not Effective	%
Tutoring		**44**		**56**
Study packs (modules)		75		25
Examination Administration		94		6
Registration Process		**60**		**40**
Student Induction		80		20
Assignment Handling		**68**		**32**
Publication of Results		**65**		**35**
Communication with students		**58**		**42**
Library services		**48**		**52**
Guidance and counselling		72		28
Fees Policy		**20**		**80**

13. THE ROLE OF MASHONALAND REGIONAL CENTRE IN THE PROVISION OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

The ZOU Strategic Plan 2010 outlines the functions of the Regional Centre as follows:

- Recruitment and supervision of part-time tutors

- Recruiting, enrolling and registering students.

- Allocation of student groups to tutors

- Local arrangements for study centers

- Organizing weekend schools for tutorial discussions.

- Planning the tutorial programmes along guidelines provided by the National Centre

- Managing students' assignments and Compiling coursework marks for continuous assessment,

- Keeping student and tutor records

- Counselling students

- Administering examinations.

In the present study students indicated that tutoring, library services and fees policy were ineffective whilst, assignment management, the registration process, publication of results, and communication with students needed improvement.

In a number of distance – learning systems, student support services are built on the concept of local centres (examples include UNA in Venezuela; UNED in Costa Rica; and UKOU in Britain (Robinson in Kaye A. & Rumble, G. (Eds). 1981). At the ZOU, the provision of Regional Centres is part of a strategy to decentralize a highly centralized and impersonal system. Regional Centres carry out a number of functions (SEE Table 4.6). Regional Centres act like university campuses. A Regional Centre recruits and admits students into programmes and provides them with a host of other support services that include tutoring and counselling. They enable students to have access to study materials. They also act as distribution centres for course materials and the collection and return of students' written assignments.

14. TUTORING AS A STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICE

The main aim of tutoring is to provide the learner with effective academic support. In distance education tutoring complements the printed correspondence text. A tutor serves as the primary and sometimes the only instructional contact for the isolated distance learner. The tutor guides, advises and sometimes coaches the leaner. The tutor also assists the learner in removing obstacles to learning (Ndeya-Ndereya, Mhlanga and Chikuya , 2003).

In the Present study about half of the students (56%) said tutoring was effective and 44% said it was not effective. As a result 60% of the respondents said they preferred Block release and the Lecture delivery method. Majoni and Chidhaka, (2005), in a study of students' views on tutorials reports that 60% of the students at the ZOU were facing transport problems when coming for weekend tutorials and as a result they were always late. In another study (unpublished) by (Kangai and Zikhali, 2007) attendance registers kept at Mashonaland East Regional Centre indicated that some tutorials were taking place where only 20 per cent of the students are able or want to attend. This has serious academic and financial implications. A lot of effort goes into the organization of these tutorials, learning materials in the form of handouts are prepared but only a few students make use of them. Part-time tutors are hired to conduct tutorials but only a few students attend. This renders the system ineffective and inefficient. Students' dissatisfaction with tutorials is likely to lead students to withdrawal.

15. MANAGEMENT OF ASSIGNMENTS

In distance education, assignments are a very critical component of the delivery mode. Assignments are used as a teaching and learning instrument. They are used by both the tutor and the student to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning that is taking place. At the ZOU, assignments are considered very important as they contribute 20% to the final grade the student will obtain. The management of assignments is, therefore, an important activity.

At the ZOU each course is assessed by coursework that consists of two or four tutor marked assignments (TMA) and an examination. Assignments are set by departmental course teams and distributed to all the Regions at the beginning of each semester in a study pack that includes

- A tutorial letter
- Assignment questions
- A time-table showing dates for the submission of assignments by students to the Regional Centre.

Students are expected to submit their assignments to either the Regional Centre or District Learning Centre on or before the due dates. The Regional Centre or District Learning Centre) plays a very critical role in supporting students in the writing and submission of assignments. At the District Learning Centre, assignments are collected and sent to the Regional Centre. At the Regional Centre, assignments are recorded on submission, sorted according to courses and then distributed to the course tutors for marking. The tutors are allowed two weeks to mark and return assignments to the Regional Centre. Students collect their marked assignments from the assignment office. Tutors are expected to give students feedback on their first assignment before they submit the second assignment. Assignment data is used for:

- General institutional and course evaluation.
- Assessing students' academic progress
- Students' feedback

- Monitoring tutor marked assignments so as to determine if standards of consistency and fairness are being maintained.
- Final assessment**.**

Poor management of assignments and study packs is likely to lead to withdrawal.

16. COMMUNICATION

The quality and effectiveness of distance education in general depends on appropriate information and communication technology (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010). The present study found out that poor communication between the Regional Centre and the students led to a significant number (20%) of student dropouts. ZOU faces communication challenges due to low levels of technological development. Although the majority of ZOU students (98%) own cell phones and only 10% have computers (Kangai and Bukalia, 2010) access to information and communication technology is still very limited. The majority of students working and living in rural areas (80%) have no access to a computer. Poor Network for cell phones and poor postal services also negatively affect communication. As a result ZOU heavily relies on the traditional way of communication – use of the notice board. Although the local press is also used, many students who live in the rural areas have no access to newspapers. Thus serious communication challenges have negatively affected student retention. Several researchers have reported 'lack of guidance and information prior to registering and enrolment,' 'lack of support from faculty,' and difficulty 'contacting faculty' as factors contributing to withdrawal (Garland, 1993; Ostman& Wagner, 1987 (Brown, 1996; Cookson, 1989; Pierrkeas, Xenos, Panagiiotakopoulos, &Vergidis, 2004; Tresman, 2002).

17. LIBRARY SUPPORT SERVICES

In the present study, 52% of the students rated the ZOU Mashonaland East Regional library has been ineffective. According to Helena Rodrigues (1996) the current library trends in supporting the distant student are faced with many challenges. It has been the primary challenge of distance education programs and units to provide current, relevant information for the distant students. As educational institutions embrace distance education, libraries find themselves playing a pivotal but ever changing role of providing relevant information to a population that may never set foot into the library building. The challenge facing distance education libraries in developing countries is that whilst the demand for the introduction of new technologies is on the increase, libraries lack the capacity to keep pace with the demand for new technology. Ever since the advent of automation, libraries have been faced with what Hickey (1992) calls "technostress". This stress is not caused by technological ignorance but by the rate of change. With the emergence of new technologies, distance education libraries will see no relief from this dilemma (Hickey, 1992). The present study helped to establish the potential, challenges and opportunities faced by the ZOU library in the provision of learner support services to distance education students.

The challenge for the ZOU library is to remain relevant to the needs of distance education students in today's digital world. In distance education, libraries are expected to respond to the need of anytime, anywhere by providing materials at the student's individual location.

Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992) discovered in an evaluation of learner support that; "Library services are very important to distance education students as the majority of them (57.3 percent) indicated that success in the course required access to library materials." The implication is that poor library support services at the Mashonaland East Regional Centre have a negative effect on student enrolment. The following questions need further research

- What are the current library needs of faculty and students at the ZOU?
- How is the ZOU meeting the library needs of its students
- What are the challenges the ZOU library is currently facing in the collection, storing and provision of knowledge to distant students and what is the impact of these challenges on students' academic work.
- How can ZOU library remain relevant in the provision of effective and efficient student support services in today's digital age?

18. FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

In the present study 80% of the respondents said they faced financial challenges in paying for their studies. Data collected on students' employment and income, show that the majority of inactive

students (86%) from the faculties of Arts and Education, Sciences & Technology and Applied social sciences are civil servants and the remaining 14% are registered in Commerce and Law is coming from industry and commerce. Their monthly incomes are less than USD500. On average ZOU students pay fees amounting to USD520 per semester for undergraduate programmes and USD760 for post graduate programmes. Besides their college fees, ZOU students have other financial commitments to meet (food, clothes, children's school fees and the cost of travelling to attend tutorials). This means that the majority of ZOU students struggle to pay their college fees. In the present study, financial constraints were indicated by almost all the respondents (80%) as the major cause of student dropout.

Knapper, (1988) argues that distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning more than traditional students. These insecurities are founded in personal - related issues such as financing of study. Although distance education is driven by the philosophy of affordability and flexibilty, findings of the present study show that 80% of ZOU students considered the fees structure unaffordable, and the fees policy inflexible.

19. SUMMARY MAJOR FINDINGS

The purpose of the present studywas (1) to determine the causes of the decline in student enrolment at the ZOU- Mashonaland East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013, and (2) to suggest some effective interventions that we feel might improve student enrolment.

The study was guided by six research questions. The main objectives of the study were to identify the emerging trends in enrolment statistics at the Mashonaland East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013, identify programmes that have experienced the worst decline in student enrolment, analyse the gender dimension of the decline in student enrolment, identify and explain student- related and institutional – related factors responsible for the decline in student enrolment between 2009 – 2013.

19.1. Major Findings of the Study Are That

- Student enrolment statistics at the ZOU - Mashonaland East Regional Centre experienced the worst decline (40%) in 2009 between the first and second semester due to socio-economic and political challenges prevailing in the country then. From 2010 the enrolment has maintained a steady decline due to (1) financial challenges faced by students as a result of depressed salaries and (2) institutional – related factors such as of unfriendly management policies that have impacted negatively on accessibility, affordability, flexibility and cost effectiveness of Open and distance learning provision. The rate of decline in enrolment varies according to programmes.

- The gender dimension of ODL shows that women are concentrated in the following programmes: education, counselling, psychology, geography, agric, BAECS and nursing science. Men dominate in commercial courses. eg accounts, marketing, human resource MBA. MPHIL and DPHIL. Although gender inequity and inequality exist in student enrolment, there is a marked improvement from 37.49% in 2009 to 44% in 2013 in the participation of women in distance education. However, the participant of women in distance education as compared to men (56%) at Mashonaland East Regional Centre still remains a course for concern.

- Financial challenges caused by low salaries and unfriendly fees policy was cited by almost 92% of the respondents as the major cause of student dropout

- Institutional – related factors such as tutoring, communication, library services and fees policy were said to be ineffective, thereby leading students to dropout.

- Students preferred Block release and the Lecture method to Tutoring which they said was in effective.

19.2. The Sixth and Last Objective of the Study was to Suggest Some Effective Interventions that Might Help Improve Student Enrolment

Based on findings of the present study, ZOU needs to improve the quality and effectiveness of student support services in the following areas: management of assignments, delivery of tutorials, distribution of study materials, publication of examinations, and communication with students.

- Tutorials time per module should be increased (respondents in this study said they required 12 tutorial hours per module. ZOU should consider the advantages of the Block release method of delivery.

- There is need to prepare the study package

  ➢ Course Modules

  ➢ A tutorial letter

  ➢ Assignment questions

  ➢ A time-table showing dates for the submission of assignments by students to the Regional Centre well in advance before the beginning of each semester and distribute the materials promptly so that students can have a reasonably sufficient amount of time to study the materials independently before the actual date of the tutorial session.

- Proper registry functions should be carried out in the maintenance of accurate students records. The university needs to maintain and manage normal student academic records, student bio-data, continuous assessment records and examination results.

- Regular communication with the learners should be maintained through the use of modern communication technology.

- The publication of examination results must be error free.

- Student queries, of whatever nature, must be addressed promptly and effectively.

19.3. Interventions ZOU can take to Attract Students and Improve Student Retention

- **Discuss Cost Payment Plans at the Beginning:** ODL students vary in their methods of tuition payment. For example, some may pay out of pocket, some may use financial aid, and some may be grant and scholarship recipients. There are also many ODL students who participate in employer tuition reimbursement programs. Given these different types of students, it is important for ZOU to create a billing system that will allow for some flexibility. An example would be allowing students to set up a payment plan. Establishing more scholarship opportunities geared toward distance education students can also be a great marketing tool. Field (2008)

- **Ease Transfer Credit Process:** Research on dropout rates demonstrate that there is a large population of adults who have some earned postsecondary credit who would want to further their studies through ODL (Field, 2008). Given the concern about cost, transfer credit can provide an incentive to applicants because it will reduce the time and money it takes to complete a degree program; therefore, it is important that ZOU makes this process clear and easy to navigate by having this information available on their Web site and making sure this option is listed in their marketing materials.

- **Offer Credit for Prior Learning.** Many undergraduate completion programs geared towards ODL students also emphasis the different ways that students can earn course credit. ZOU must offer some type of credit for prior learning. This should be emphasized in all marketing materials. This will help students up front as they prepare their program schedules.

- **Offer Evening and Online Courses:** The present study found that the majority of ZOU students are adults, employed and married with an average of e children and three dependents. Given these characteristics, it is important that ZOU recognizes that a large majority of their students have multiple responsibilities outside the classroom, so evening, or Online Courses are a necessity. It is also important to talk with students at the beginning of the program to set clear expectations regarding time management.

- **Connect Faculty and Curriculum to the Workplace:** Kasworm (2003) discussed the idea that the changing perceptions of the workplace and world have increased the desire for people to attain higher education credentials. Kasworm (2003) indicated that having a bachelor's degree is a basic requirement now for many entry level jobs. Scholars such as Malcolm Knowles (1977) and Stephen Brookfield (2005) have indicated that creating environments that allow adult learners to share their experiences and apply what they learn to their work or daily lives will help to drive the learning process. On the admissions end, applicants want to know that the courses they take will be applicable to their work and they want to know how the program they are enrolling in will assist them in meeting their career goals. Given what we know from the research on how adults learn, it is important the faculty understand how to integrate some of their class assignments into projects that students can apply to their area of interest or to their workplace. It is also important that

admissions counselors have some career counseling skills and discuss with applicants how they can apply their classroom assignments to their workplace. ZOU can also help make inroads with the local community by helping to organize job fairs, work with local businesses to develop internship opportunities for students. This can bring visibility of ZOU.

- **Offer Orientation and Community Building:** McGivney (2004) found that many distance education students have some apprehension about going back to school. For many, it may have been years since they have been in academic setting, or they may have had a negative experience the last time they were enrolled. Creating a sense of community is one way to combat the apprehension and let students know they are not alone and that there are other learners with similar backgrounds in the program. Vincent Tinto (1988) has led the research on the importance of social integration for undergraduate students in retention, and scholars like Ashar and Skenes (1993) and Kember (1994) have applied Tinto's concepts to distance education settings and also found that integrating students into the programs at the beginning stages is an important part of retention. This means planning personalized points of contact with advisors, conducting a new student orientation and letting students exchange a dialogue between one another to build relationships and help support one another. While distance education students may not be as focused on the social aspect of higher education as traditional college students, they still want to feel that they belong and that they have a support network through the process.

- **Adopt Flexible Leave Policies:** ZOU must adopt policies and procedures that address the special needs of distance education students. Distance education students represent a broad range of age groups; therefore, ZOU needs to be prepared to work with students who are having children, going through long-term illnesses, getting married, and experiencing other important life events. If students need to take a semester off, this process should be easy to understand and explained to students at the beginning of the program. Allowing students the ability to take time off their studies without penalty is key to student retention, it also important to establish deadlines and regularly check-in with students who are on leave.

- **Schedule Regular Advising Sessions:** Along with following up with students who are on leave, it is important to build in a contact schedule with distance education students. Establishing personal contact will help make students feel secure and welcome back. Many distance education students are isolated from other students or staff. So this personalized contact is important in establishing a sense of belonging. These ideas are all based on the information found by researchers like Vincent Tinto (1988), which emphasizes the importance of social and academic integration on retention.

- **Recruit in Businesses and Community:** While high school visits make up the majority of recruiting efforts for many traditional college admissions, visits with local business leaders and attendance at community events is essential to recruiting distance education students. The key is to create diverse recruiting strategies. Career fairs, professional conferences, county fairs, chamber of commerce events and other community events such as art fairs and festivals are all forums for recruiting. Establishing contact with human resource departments at local businesses, locating those businesses that offer tuition reimbursement, and reaching out to business leaders to serve on program development teams or as speakers at on-campus events, and inviting business leaders to ZOU events are all activities that will help to bring visibility to ZOU's programmes.

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