



Distance Education an Empowering Discipline or just a Passing Rage: A case of ODL Institutions in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study is on graduates' perceived feelings on how Distance Education (DE) offering institutions in Zimbabwe have empowered them. We asked the question: Is DE an empowering discipline or a passing rage which is being used by most institutions as a *raison d'être*. The development of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in the world has largely been done by conventional Universities. Distance educators agree that distance education includes both distance learning and teaching. With the advent of changes in industry's demand for more qualified personnel that may need to be trained whilst on the job, conventional universities and colleges have failed to cope. The economies of scale of this approach saw many people getting qualifications whilst they were on the job. Governments who are the recipients of most of the graduates get concerned when most of their people are not educated. This has resulted in the development of the single and dual mode institutions of distance education to a large extent with the latter preceding. In this study which was carried out in the beginning of 2013. A qualitative research paradigm was used focusing on the graduates of DE from both conventional and ODL institutions. This was a phenomenological design because it dwelt on a careful description and analysis of the participants' life world and the meaning extracted thereof. Participants who included graduates, employers and lecturers were conveniently selected from the different institutions in Zimbabwe. The sample consisted of ten graduates from eight institutions. We used an on line open ended interview schedule, personal accounts and document analysis to collect data. This provided us with an opportunity to look at different worldviews of the empowerment phenomenon. The findings show mixed reactions from graduates on their empowerment status.—Fierce competition is rife between institutions raising ethical, business and quality issues. We recommend that policy be put in place to fine tune this DE to empower all graduates regardless of their institution.

INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to find out if graduates felt empowered by the education they got from those institutions offering their programmes through Distance Education (DE). Zimbabwean institutions have over the years tried to educationally improve its population formally. However, not everybody has been able to get this opportunity. DE has been used as a way of offering a second chance of empowerment to the youth and adults who may want to improve their potential but have missed that opportunity due to various reasons beyond their control. Empowering people through education has been the cornerstone of African education systems. However, lack of adequate schools resulted in bottlenecks which saw many people failing to access the much needed passport to sustainable development. Women, people with disabilities and those who live in far flung areas have failed to access education programmes being offered by conventional institutions despite this being their human right. The appearance of distance education (DE) is seen as a panacea to this anomaly. DE has now become the focus of many educators the world over, a far cry from its humble beginning in each country's history (Rao, 2001). When institutions created a DE unit, few of its members of staff or workers wanted to be associated with DE and open learning. Peters (2000) points out that the early development started from scratch with nothing from the traditional institutions. These forerunners thus relied on experimentation from the existing education and teaching theories and practices. One of the common practices was to take from the classroom certain methods which then would be used by the student which were in the form of written texts.

In this study which was carried out in 2013, we used the graduates' experiences to ascertain if the different models being offered in Zimbabwe by various institutions managed to empower them at their work places.

Background to the study

Distance Education DE has a long history which begins even prior to the development of printing as a media of instruction. The combination of the printing and postal resulted in the development of the first generation of DE in the form of correspondence learning. Anderson and Simpson (2012) say that DE has undergone three generations over the centuries, namely correspondence, broadcast and computer mediated learning. Taylor (2001) suggests a fourth generation linked to online teaching and the fifth one which uses intelligent digital technologies like virtual reality. DE's empowerment capacity has been well documented in Europe.

Zimbabwe has also followed the same trends as in Europe. Starting with the correspondence learning to the present computer mediated learning. Tichapondwa and Tau (2009) acknowledge that traditional Africans used DE in the form of stories to

teach each other various fighting and hunting skills of far away tribes.

Zimbabwe has a long history of distance education starting from the 1930s which was traditionally delivered in the form of correspondence courses (SAIDE, 1999). As a colony of Britain prior to the 1980 independence, the country experienced a British type of education assessed using their examination boards which fell under such universities as Cambridge and London (Dube, 1980). The colonial era education restricted a number of people from acquiring the education they required despite the sterling effort of such missionaries as the Dutch Reformed, the Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, the Lutheran, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Methodists. These mainly provided primary and secondary schools which all supplied students to one university. This high demand for higher education resulted in an equally high demand for higher education resulting in an equal demand for people with the best qualifications to enter university (Dube, 1980). Hence only those with the highest Advanced level subjects could go to the conventional local university. Correspondence courses offered by the Rapid Results College, Central Africa Correspondence College (CACC) and other affordable colleges did not have high entry qualifications to enter university but did not provide degrees.

The advent of independence resulted in mass education which created a high demand for higher education especially for those whose education was disturbed by the war. UNISA, Zimbabwe Open University and other colleges offering distance education experienced a phenomenal rise in student numbers. But such a rise has a resultant cost in the form of student and stakeholders perceptions towards the distance, the openness, the delivery and the quality of the qualifications.

To a large extent, prospective students, students in session and some stakeholders in the form of employers view distance education offered by ZOU in a positive manner. This is because distance education was started as a department by the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) (Tichapondwa and Tau, 2009). The creation of the Center for Distance Education (CDE), which later became the Zimbabwe Open University, by the UZ, gave the CDE a high class tag. This was because the UZ was already a household university which was renowned for producing world class graduates who were in demand throughout the world, even up to till now. This was not unique to UZ since other traditional universities in the western world were already offering distance education. Peters (2000) gave examples from Germany and Australia with the University of Queensland and New England. Nearer to home, we have such cases in Nigeria and Kenya (Makau 1993). Such departments made use of the parent university's staff and technology. The CDE enjoyed these benefits of being part of a world class university. Materials were developed and taught by its staff and the awarding of certificates was done by the UZ. These

activities helped to create a positive perception which has held on up to date.

There has been a meteoritic rise of Distance Education (DE) programmes in Zimbabwean institutions. Zindoga (2012) in an article on open universities pointed out that all universities in Zimbabwe were offering DE. Even teachers' colleges were offering science and mathematics courses through open and distance e-learning (Zindoga *ibid*). A perusal of the local paper reveals that fierce competition for students is rife between institutions raising ethical, business and quality issues.

Although the economic aspect is the major reason for this new found interest in DE by the conventional universities; the working student benefits from DE programmes as they pursue their studies without leaving their workplace. However, there is need to find out if this mode of education has empowered graduates in the various spheres of their lives.

DE has been successful in reaching the marginal people in certain farming communities. Professor Kanwar quoted by Adebayo (2014) points out that in India, it has helped women to take part in farming activities they were unable to do in the past. Is this also possible in Zimbabwe? Can these mushrooming DE programmes provide opportunities which then lead to empowerment of the graduate from a purely survival strategy to growth and development of the country. This is the parameter of this study.

Statement of the Problem

The offering of DE in conventional institutions in Zimbabwe seems to have been driven by commercial reasons on the part of the institutions. It is clear that students have also flocked to these institutions in search of those programmes. Institutions have not offered DE to students in a systematic manner. This is an issue of concern to all stakeholders. There is need to find out if graduates have been empowered to add value at their work places. How empowering have these programmes been to those who have graduated from them? If so, what has been the nature and effect of the empowerment at their work place?

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which institutions are using the DE in Zimbabwe?
2. How does each define DE?
3. Which DE model is being used by each institution?
4. How successful have been these courses in empowering students?
5. How can DE be improved in Zimbabwe?

Significance of the study

This study is significant in that not much has been documented on the empowerment benefits of DE.

Most Zimbabwean studies have been on the Open University in Zimbabwe; its successes and failures. This study documents information which will fine tune the emerging DE theory in Zimbabwe. This will enable DE policy makers to come up with clear policy guidelines for Zimbabwe which will level the playing fields for all institutions which will embark on offering such programmes without focusing on the commercial benefits only.

Limitations

The study was interested on the participants' opinions on how the DE programmes have empowered them.

Delimitations of the Study

The study's focus was on those who graduated from a DE programme from either a conventional or solely Open University in Zimbabwe. All types of graduates were eligible to participate in the study. Therefore issues of gender and disability were not a prerequisite for participation. The provisions of each institution; their objectives and resources were not the focus of this study.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Collins dictionary and Thesaurus (1990) defines discipline as a branch of learning or instruction. Synonyms of this word are; branch of knowledge, course, curriculum and field of study. Learning is a branch of knowledge to do with what students do in a school situation or any environment which involves the imparting of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Disciplines are guided by a set of philosophies and theories. These help to formulate their development and progress. Let us look at the notion of distance education as a discipline with its own definitions, theories and models.

Definitions, models and Theories of DE

Distance Education has been defined in many ways from informal ways to complex ways. In Zimbabwe numerous definitions have been used generally by the local population and specifically by distance educators themselves. It is common to hear it being referred to as "dzidzo yevakuru" meaning "adult education" despite the fact that some conventional universities have fully fledged departments of adult education.

We need to start by defining Distance Education and Open Learning in order for us to see how it has become a discipline in its own right. Distance educators agree that distance education includes both distance learning and teaching (Keegan 1990). Holmberge (1981) goes further and points that DE covers the various forms of study at all levels but are not supervised in lecture rooms or in the same premises but are planned, guided and taught by an institution.

On the other hand, open learning is the constant review of restrictions placed on students with

the view of removing them or loosening them (Coffey cited in Rowntree, 1992). Jack also cited in Rowntree (1988) posits that open learning is a state of mind rather than a method with particular characteristics. Clearly this brings in issues of independence and autonomy in choosing courses and even how these courses should be structured. Rowntree (1992) believes that there should be an open learning continuum which addresses how easy the endurance is; to what extent they are free to choose the courses and how they pace themselves, and where they do it. The above definitions of Distance Education and Open Learning are synonymous in the sense that distance learning and open learning denote the activity of the students and distance education, the organization particularly of the course teams and the tutors (Tichapondwa and Tau, 2009).

The definitions proffered at the beginning clearly support the notion that it is a discipline which has been around for a while. Even its historical background is full of its evolution in the development of teaching and learning methodologies appropriate to it. Some educators have pointed out that if a DE institution follows conventional methods it is doomed to fail. That is why Holmberge (1990) calls it a special educational discipline which is related to the discipline of education. However, Peters (2000) pleads that the tradition of teaching must not be forgotten in this new found discipline. Peters (ibid) proposes in addition that DE also analyses and take into account students' special learning situations and account of it; students' knowledge and action, instructional design and research in areas like teaching and learning, development and evaluation research and socio-psychological and sociological findings on the distance students' social environment.

Theories of Distance Education have evolved from numerous points but of interest have been the so called lay theories, which have a profound effect on how the ordinary person views DE (Peters 1993). Local people as mentioned before have ways in which they have described DE. Peters (1993) points out the lay theories which have ended up giving us an explanation similar to the ones which are now in everyday use. Peters (2000) gives the following explanations of DE as;

- Teachers and students work apart from each other at a distance
- Teachers and students do not communicate "eyeball to eyeball" with each other
- Letters and other printed material are exchanged with the help of the mailing system
- The learning usually takes place in the homes of the students
- The teaching-learning process assumes the form of self study however guided by the teacher
- The teaching learning process allows a degree of openness with regard to access goals and methods
- The student does not cease to work for a living as it is a study alongside work.

The above explanations provide an insight into where this discipline is currently at. The theoretical grounding of DE is diverse. Holmberge (1981) cites one theory by Peters which views DE as an industrial type of teaching and learning characterized by planning, rationalizing procedures, division of labour, mechanizing automation controlling and checking. He compares DE to the way an industry functions.

Another theory worth our consideration is the one by Holmberge (1981) in which he sees distance education as a method of guided didactic conservation between the learner and the material. The implication is that any material given to a learner must resemble a conversation between the two in the form of a simulated internalized conversation between the learner and the text. The assumption of this theory is that feelings of personal relationship between the two promote student pleasure and motivation thus enhancing student achievement of learning goals.

The use of educational technology has also influenced distance education in the way it structures the teaching and learning situation. Its application occurs in systematic step by step planning and development of educational measures. This has been influenced by to a large extent by behaviourist and cognitive learning theories. The need to address the cognitive domain has been central to distance education. But the psychomotor domain has been problematic to address since the student is at a distance. The use of education technologies or E-learning as it is now popularly called is one step towards including the more practical aspects of certain courses.

The literature shows the structure of distance education as consisting of definite components on the teaching and learning aspects. These allow the students to access their courses in one or more delivery formats such as the internet, CD-ROM print based materials, audio/video cassettes, tele-conferencing and audio conferencing, satellite uplink, computer conferencing and even two way multipoint video conferencing. The use of the above has been a challenge to developing countries due to poor resources on both the institutions and the students.

Distance Education as an empowerment tool

Philosophy

Empowerment is the enabling of a once marginalised person to be gainfully employed so as to improve their quality of life. Distance education is a powerful empowerment tool for marginalised people (Singharoy, 2002). Education in general is meant to prepare people so that they able to be gainfully employed and lead independent and meaningful lives. When this does not happen people become powerless and are prone to various types of abuses from those with the power.

Singharoy (2002) posits that DE empowers people by redistributing power to them. People with knowledge have the power to develop themselves in many areas of their lives especially in the area of wealth creation. The whole debate of DE centres on

social equality. This is only achieved if people acquire knowledge or education. Ultimately DE must enable the person to pursue their quest for a new identity. The burden placed on this study is to find out if real empowerment does occur in the individual who acquires their education through DE offering institutions in Zimbabwe.

An institution using the DE in Zimbabwe

The case study of ZOU given here is meant to highlight lesson that can be drawn by those who have embarked on DE. The selection of ZOU is on the basis that it is the one which has been offering DE as their mandate. They have had successes and failures where lesson can be drawn from.

One area which has received a lot of attention has been the area of the delivery modes being used by the ZOU. The ZOU in its orientation booklet points out that the module is central to the course (Chimedza, undated). That it is the lecturer who dialogues with the students. Other aspects of importance for example are the delivery mode, communication, the technologies involved and these constitute distance education. Stakeholders perceptions towards these should be perceived as directed towards distance education. One such study is the one done by Mudavanhu, et al., (2004) in which they studied the views of students, administrative staff and lecturers towards distance teaching and open learning in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). They further wanted to see how these impacted on teaching and learning. Their assumption was that conflicting views of distance education among stakeholders may cause failure to work cooperatively to produce graduates of high caliber who can compete favourably on the job market.

Their findings showed that stakeholders at ZOU had different perceptions of distance education. It was clear that each of the three groups did not give the same weight to the terms which describe distance education. This may have been due to their varied academic background their need to safeguard their interest within the Zimbabwe Open University. Such views may also be apparent in the entire population since this study covered the whole country.

Stakeholders had a negative perception towards communication efficiency at ZOU. They had mixed perceptions on the use of notice boards, print media and television. The results indicated that ZOU needs to adopt a realistic communication mode across the board. If students are not getting the information they need at the right time then they may fail to meet certain deadlines resulting in them dropping out of the course.

Students felt that the ZOU degrees were not inferior to those offered by conventional universities. This is quite critical because it ensures that students will remain throughout the duration of their programmes. This also indicates that students feel that it will empower them to improve their lives. Contrary to this the lecturers and administrative staff viewed ZOU degrees as inferior to those from conventional universities. This was because many of them had

acquired their own qualifications from conventional universities where according to O'Malley and McGraw (1999) conventional students think that distance education is inferior and Nasser and Abouchdid (2000) observed similar perceptions in school directors. Such graduates do not feel empowered when they complete their degree taken through DE.

The e-learning mode is being introduced in different courses of study and students are being asked to use CD ROMS and DVDs instead of the printed module. In a study done by Kaputa and Mpezeni (2009) on students perceptions towards these CD ROMS they found out that those students, who had computers and were computer literate, had positive perceptions towards the CD ROMS. The majority, who were computer illiterate and had no computers at home, had negative perceptions towards the CD ROMS. It is important that as distance education institutions introduce new technologies Peters (2000) said take into consideration the student's work and social environments. Do these new innovations empower graduates?

Strengthening DE as an empowerment vehicle

The current focus of the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIM ASSET) programme (Zimbabwe Government, 2013) strategically places DE as an important vehicle for educationally empowering Zimbabweans as they turn around their economy. People will be equipped to learn whilst they are on the job enabling them to add value to their outputs.

DE has proved to be a convenient empowerment tool for women in Nigeria (Akamolafe, 2014) in Bangladesh (Yeasmin and Rahman, 2014) and the rest of Africa. This has been evident in the area of agriculture and community based projects which usually target semi skilled persons and those with disabilities.

DE is fundamentally inclusive as it enables marginalized populations like people living with disabilities (PWDs) to have access to all forms of education. DE is inherently barrier free for PWDs as it has no walls and can be offered in many guises. This is possible if DE offering institutions provide enabling environments for marginalised youths and adults. The study also solicited the participants in this area.

Improving DE in Zimbabwe

Distance Education is a well defined discipline which has evolved over the years (Anderson and Simpson, 2012). Definitions of DE indicate that it has roots in traditional and emerging teaching and learning theories. The structure of DE in both western and African countries points to a discipline which has developed from using traditional pedagogies to the use of educational technologies in an endeavour to empower their graduates. Conventional institutions in Zimbabwe should be mindful of this lest they reinvent the wheel. Empowerment should be the king pin of DE if it is to ensure sustainable growth of both the students and their country. Central to this discipline is

the development of appropriate instructional designs which are suitable to the independent and autonomous learner. This will ultimately empower the graduates at their work places and in their communities. Perceptions of these students and other stakeholders need to be considered when formulating distance education courses and also when implementing the teaching.

The above review paints a picture of the ingredients that are needed to empower the graduates who go through DE programmes. Do graduates coming out of DE offering institutions in Zimbabwe feel empowered by their acquired qualifications?

METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm and design

A qualitative research paradigm as enunciated by Creswell (2009) was used focusing on the graduates of DE from both conventional and ODL institutions. This was a snapshot study on the graduates' states without focusing on process (Flick, 2009). It was also phenomenological because it dwelt on a careful description and analysis of the participants' life world and the meaning extracted thereof (Creswell, 2009).

We used also triangulation to answer the various questions we posed. According to Creswell (2009) this provided us with an opportunity to look at different worldviews. By so doing an accurate description of the phenomenon of empowerment was constructed. This rigor used in the qualitative approach resulted in the generation of a rich thick description which culminates in the development of themes. According to Cohen and Manion (1989), this helps to reduce bias and increase confidence in the results.

Population

The population consisted of all graduates who had undergone a programme through DE from all institutions offering DE in Zimbabwe.

Sample and Sampling proceeding

Convenient sampling was used to select the participants who took part in the study. This is a way of locating people who are available for the study (Morse,

2007). The participants were contacted by email and ten (10) responded. These indicated that they graduated from eight (8) institutions. Participants gave their consent on line. These are from across Zimbabwe. As part of ethical and legal considerations their names and locations were hidden to ensure confidentiality. Participants included graduates from the education, commerce and psychology areas.

Research instruments

Data was collected from the participants through an open ended interview schedule which was answered on line by all participants. Personal accounts were received from some of the participants. Key informants verified participants' data through open interviews. Document analysis of reports, researches and newspapers provided the base line information which was used to ascertain the institutions which were offering DE, and the nature of their provision.

Data analysis strategy

The interviews were analysed using data transformation (Creswell, 2009). The data was coded and categorized using Flick's (2009) thematic coding. Patterns were raised from this exercise and these resulted in the generation of five themes. These themes are presented in the next section.

RESULTS

The results which are in five thematic formats are presented below. The data indicates three grouping of institutions where the graduates came from. There were five (5) conventional universities owned by government, two privately owned conventional universities and one Open and distance learning university. The participants who took part were graduates and lecturers from the above three groupings. The employers were mixed as they commented on the graduate they worked with. Their comments indicated their feelings on the programme the graduate possesses.

Institutions using DE in Zimbabwe

The baseline information in Table 1 shows the institutions which are offering DE.

Table 1: Institutions that offer Distance Education

Institution	Type	Mode Of Delivery	Key Resource
1. Local Open University (LOU)	Government	Distance Education	Module & Tutor
2. Conventional University 1 (CU1)	Government	Block Release	Lecturer & notes
3. Conventional University 2 (CU2)	Private	Block Release	Lecturer & notes
4.-Conventional University 3 (CU3)	Government	Block Release, Visiting School	Lecturer & notes
5. Conventional University 4 (CU4)	Government	Block Release	Lecturer & notes
6.-Conventional University 5 (CU5)	Government	Block Release, Visiting School	Lecturer & notes
7.-Conventional University 6 (CU6)	Government	Block Release, Visiting School	Lecturer & notes
8. Conventional University 7 (CU7)	Private	Distance Education, block release	Lecturer & notes

Definitions of DE in Each institution

The results show that all graduates regardless of whether they are from a conventional or an ODL institution could define the type of distance education being offered by their university. The statement below from a conventional university graduate summarises thus:

Education takes place when students and instructor are separated by some distance.

This one from a graduate of the Local Open University (LOU):

It is the provision of education to learners that are separated from the tutor and the institution in space and time. It has an element of face-to-face tuition through tutorials.

DE model being used by each institution

Graduates could also clearly mention the type of model being used, for example here is a statement from a graduate of (LOU). The response show that the module is the teacher and that tutorials and e-learning come in to supplement the module:

Students learn mainly through print and now with the introduction of e-learning, tutors will be able to reach their students through ICT technologies. Tutorials also help to provide the learner with the human element where they interact with their tutors and other learners on a face-to-face basis.

The graduate from a Conventional University 2 (CU2) using the block release shows that the lecturer is the focus at selected times. There is no module but lecture notes and electronic contacts given by the lecturer:

I attend lectures every weekend. I can also consult with supervisors and lecturers on mobile phone, Skype or email.

We can deduce that the student relied solely on the lecturer and had no material to rely on when alone. This goes against the principle of DE which requires that the student should be guided when they are at a distance.

Perceptions on DE as an Empowerment vehicle in Zimbabwe

Graduates

Motivation as an empowerment ingredient

The analysis below indicates that the graduates were knowledgeable on what was going on. Graduates felt motivated to do the programme because of the distance attribute. This seems to have been a major ingredient of the empowerment attribute. Thus those students who displayed high motivation levels tended to feel empowered by the programme at the end.

One Private Conventional graduate said:

It is flexible for me since I'm a full time employee.

One graduate from the LOU said that:

To cater for students who had been denied access in other conventional institutions and to give a second chance to those who had experienced failure in conventional education. It is convenient for full-time employees who do not have the time to attend formal lessons during working hours.

Empowerment as a result of DE

The issue of empowerment was the focus of this study. We found out that they were mixed perceptions on what empowerment meant for each of the graduates and their employers. These mixed feelings resulted in a range of empowerment levels. We observed that graduates to a large extent felt empowered by the programme they had done. Attitude towards DE improved after having gone through the rigor of the programme. For graduates who had done another programme through the conventional mode they found DE to be more rigorous. The statement below from a graduate of a private conventional university says:

My attitude towards distance education changed.

Here are statements of empowerment from conventional university graduates

I am more knowledgeable on world affairs e.g. gender issues and conflicts around the world. UN mandates etc

Some of the graduates' statements are in Table 2.

Table 2: Graduates from Conventional Block release programme: General empowerment statements

- Very successful especially in empowering those who are already employed and the elderly who have been segregated by the bottle neck system in conventional universities'
- Many people have been employed through DE
- Improvement in the Zimbabwe knowledge base
- Improvement in Zimbabwe literacy rate

Those who felt less empowered were those who complained about service delivery. For example the implementation of practical courses determined the graduate's level of empowerment. A well planned course with clear communication lines resulted in graduates who felt empowered to work in their chosen field. The statement below from a graduate of a private conventional university (CU2) is indicative of a feeling of disillusionment:

The contract indicates that the personnel travels to Harare but of late students have to go to Mutare for registration and to defend all dissertation chapters at given intervals. This is inconveniencing since most of the students are based in Harare and employed in Harare and other cities. It has also become an expensive exercise. Internship was not supervised.

Graduates from the LOU a Distance University show sentiments of empowerment with words like 'practicing'; 'knowledgeable' in the following statements:

I benefitted by practicing what I would have learned at my workplace and was earning why learning.

I am now more knowledgeable of what is taking place around me and beyond due to wide reading besides a better work remuneration than before.

The issue of rights to education has taken the centre stage in Zimbabwe especially with marginalized groups like women and those with disabilities.

One of the female participants declares that her rights have been met. She said:

I now know my rights and can stand my ground I can also be an entrepreneur if I so wish.

This agrees with the observation found in the literature that DE has helped to empower women. Graduates from all institutions who realise that the courses they have are what they term 'sub standard

courses' courses tend to feel disempowered rather than empowered. Some institutions offer these programmes to fund raise for different projects in their university without thinking of the consequences to the end graduate. A graduate from a private conventional university (CU7) was exasperated as she said:

I have acquired the qualification I do not know what to do with it. They did not tell us its relevance to our situation.

DE is the new frontier in empowering people the world over. In an environment characterized by economic constraints and a dwindling paying clientele the temptation to provide sub standard programme is very high. One participant said:

Some offer sub standard courses not recognized by employers

Universities need to be guided by sound ethical values and principles. The role of the regulatory authority needs to be tightened so that it ensures that universities operate within their stipulated charters. It is incumbent on each university to ensure that they have a functional quality assurance unit which looks at the various programmes being offered. Strategic plans must clearly show the values of each university.

Universities offering DE through the block release mode should avoid this type of statement which came from a graduate from a private conventional university (CU7) who said:

I have acquired the qualification I do not know what to do with it. They did not tell us its relevance to our situation.

Employers

The study also wanted to find out if employers had noticed signs of empowerment in their employee who were graduates DE. The data from the employers showed that to some extent their attitude determined the university the employee ended up joining. The employers who had gone through a purely open and distance Learning programme tended to observe improvement in the performance of their employees. There was a mixed reaction from those who had not had a DE experience.

University Lecturers

Only the LOU lecturers responded to this and this what they said.

Most people need the privacy ZOU offers because of certain pressures and demands at the workplace.

Improving DE so as to empower graduates adequately in Zimbabwean Institutions

The following themes emerged from the data from the participants. Lecturers and employers confirmed these sentiments.

Policy

One graduate from a conventional government university (CU5) emphasizes the need for 'specific policy' when they said:

[There is]Need for specific policies that govern provision

The DE scenario in Zimbabwe is beginning to look like a battle ground with a mixture of happy and disgruntled graduates in their wake depending on the institution they will have graduated from. Graduates from the so called favoured institutions would be happy. But they is no need for this competition because each institution has a role to play in DE. One lecturer from the LOU gave this scenario of two students from one employer:

One organization has two employers one studying purely through ODL and the other block release with a conventional university. The one on block release has encountered challenges due to personal differences with the immediate supervisors which has resulted in frustrations and lose of time to do the study. The one on the ODL programme has encountered no problems because their study has not disturbed their work schedule. There is no perception from the supervisor and core workers that they are being favoured at all.

It is clear that in that situation the purely ODL mode would be the preferred mode. Policy should enable all institutions offering DE to use what one graduate from a conventional university (CU5) called a 'blended model':

A blended model means mixing the provisions of ODL such as virtual, visiting school, block release with limited contact.

Service provision

Graduates were in agreement that good service delivery resulted in the production of empowered graduates. This would be obvious at the work place. This is critical for internships, practicum, attachments and field studies. A graduate from a private conventional university (CU4) requested the:

Dispatching of internship supervisors [to where ever the student is attached]

The use of modules and other guides should be mandatory for all DE courses to enable students to be helped when the teacher is not there.

Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

The use of ICTs is one of the most powerful ways of empowering learners. One graduate from a LOU felt that the:

Use of the multimedia approach to cater for all students with different learning needs and styles e.g. the blind

All universities whose graduates took part do not target people living with disabilities (PWDs) in their programmes and yet by nature distance education is inclusive. The use of the multimedia approach would afford PWDs their right to meaningful higher education. One graduate says:

Improvement can be achieved through imparting skills in technology to facilitate use of such equipment as computers.

Ultimately the universities 'Need to create virtual classrooms'. Such classes would enable those who are far or for some reason are averse to attending face to face lesson to still attend lessons.

DISCUSSION

In our endeavour to establish if DE was an empowering discipline we posed a number of pertinent questions which we have answered in the previous section. Many institutions are offering DE in Zimbabwe. This confirms Zindoga's (2012) observations. The institutions have realised that many prospective students would rather learn whilst they are in employment

The definitions of DE were similar in all the institutions. All concurred with Peters (2000) as they acknowledged that students and their tutors were apart from each other at a distance.

The finding on the model being used is similar to Peters (2000) model where the learning took place in their homes of the students however guided by the teacher. The difference was that all the institutions except the ZOU did not have modules. The rest had combinations of various aspects of DE. It was clear that there was a policy vacuum to guide the implementation of DE except for the ZOU which had a clear mandate to offer ODL.

We agree with Akomolafe, (2014) that DE has proved to be a convenient empowerment tool for the Zimbabwean population. However the findings are not specific on the sectors which have been empowered. The absence of marginalised groups like people with disabilities in the study shows that they did not benefit from such programmes or that they did not feel empowered enough to come forward. Institutions did not seem to target marginalised groups whom we think

should also be empowered so that they do not depend on handouts from the state and philanthropists.

One finding shows that good service delivery should be the cornerstone in all the institutions. The use of e-learning using various technologies cannot be underestimated. The sentiments in the study are in agreement with Kaputa and Mpezeni's (2009) observations on the perceptions of students who use computers in DE. These are empowered to use ICTs at their work places.

CONCLUSION

The study began by asking the question: Is DE an empowering discipline or a passing rage which is being used by most institutions as a *raison d'être*. The findings in the study create two responses to this statement. First the evidence shows that DE is an empowering discipline which needs refining. Graduates are either empowered or disempowered depending on the institution they graduated from. The better the service provision the more empowered they feel. This is also confirmed by employers.

Secondly DE is increasingly becoming the *raison d'être* for a lot of institutions in Zimbabwe due to its economic benefits. A glance through the local papers reveals many advertisements for courses through block release or visiting school. This has created an illusion of competition between the institutions. Graduates and employers are confused on which programmes are empowering.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made the following recommendations:

- All institutions offering DE should use the module as the lecturer as this provides learners quality uniform material at a distance.
- Needs assessments should be the basis of all programmes to empower all.
- Clear policy on the implementation of DE should be promulgated. All institutions should be allowed to use the DE blended model. A level playing field should be created where all institutions offering DE are treated equally.
- Monitoring and evaluation should also be imbedded into each programme so as to improve service delivery.
- E- Learning should be incorporated into all DE programmes. All universities offering DE should create virtual classrooms for their students.

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