

Community Knowledge Of, and Views towards Open and Distance Learning and Employment Creation

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Abstract

This study sought to establish the knowledge and views of the parents concerning distance education at tertiary level so as to develop strategies around job-creation based growth and investment policies for the formal sector. Their children represent the potential catchment area for tertiary institutions, including open and distance learning. It is the role of parents to guide their children, search for identity with their prospective career choices in terms of career development and students require information, relevant to suit their capabilities, values and opportunities. Open and Distance Learning is a term that covers various forms of study in which students are not necessarily continuously and immediately supervised or tutored by lecturers. The main question therefore was what are the knowledge levels, and views of parents regarding Open and Distance Learning, and what quality promotion strategies do they recommend towards distance education and employment creation? Parent's contributions would consolidate formal sector employment and minimize the proportion of people in human poverty. The study established that the community view Open and Distance Education as being inferior and meant for students who could not meet requirements of conventional institutions. The significance of the study was that Open and Distance institutions need to improve their marketing strategies in an effort to concertize the community about their mandate. This in turn would improve employment creation.

Keywords: open and distance learning, knowledge, attitudes and employment creation.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a form of teaching and learning where the learner and teacher are separated in terms of time and space. Open learning and distance education refers to approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities. Unlike students in conventional institutions who spend long spells of time with their teachers in teaching/learning situations, distance learners experience little or no time with their teachers. Depending on the theoretical orientation of each distance education institution, several modes of instruction have been developed to help learning of students to take place.

Previously in Zimbabwe students who embarked on distance education were from the disadvantaged families, whose income could not afford conventional tertiary education. They were financially disadvantaged and in some instance their performance could not be accommodated in conventional colleges. The issue of inadequacy of places at conventional colleges also hindered students to embark on programmes of their choices at conventional colleges. Hence society viewed it as inferior education. However with the advent of technological advancement, economic growth, and diverse knowledge, world over there has been a draft shift from conventional tertiary education to distance education (ODL) in order to accommodate

those who are unable to study through the conventional way. With human rights movement and considering that majority of students attend tertiary education after having attained the age of majority, some will be already family members hence attending to conventional colleges would disadvantage their families. It is away of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities.

In Open and distance education much of the learning takes place away from the teacher and the distance learning institution. The student is provided with learner support materials and is expected to grow into an independent learner, with the institution giving a helping hand at the request of the learner. It is also important to mention that distance learners engage in their academic work while at the same time they go about their day-to-day assignments like full time employment.

While it is conceivable and understandable that distance education could generate apprehension, if not downright cynicism, among educational purists, who have continually questioned its credibility as a viable source of education, there is ample evidence today that distance education makes possible the rapid and inexpensive provision of instruction of

consistent quality to large and scattered populations, (Daniel, 1991). Individuals desirous of enhancing their own opportunities and governments seeking greater returns on public investment in education have embraced the methods of distance education with enthusiasm.

High school students represent the potential catchment area for tertiary institutions, including distance education. According to Flippo (2003), the adolescent stage, to which most high students belong, marks the beginning of the search for identity with the prospective work career playing a major role. This is the exploratory stage in terms of career development, and the person requires information, relevant to suit one's capabilities, values and opportunities. Research and information dissemination are critical ingredients for enabling parents to influence their children make effective decisions about the type of tertiary education to enter.

Holmberg(1995) views distance education as the various forms of study at tertiary level 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 from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization.

Meanwhile, attitudes of parents will be determined from their responses to situations about Open and distance education. Likes, dislikes, perceptions, views and opinions expressed by the parents about distance education aspects will be taken as behaviors that contribute the survival of distance education colleges(ODL). High school students represent a pool of potential learners of distance education institutions and systematic analysis of community knowledge needs, and dissemination of relevant information to their children regarding distance education will pay great dividends. Myths and negative attitude which have generally characterized community responses towards learning at a distance can be redressed through massive knowledge building programmes.

Distance education structure, content and operations form the knowledge aspects that this study wished to establish among parents. The emphasis would be placed on the knowledge gaps about distance education that parents exhibit rather than what they already know. This study seeks to establish the knowledge of parents concerning distance education at tertiary level. The study will also analyze the attitudes of these parents towards Open and Distance Education. The importance being to highlight knowledge needs among the community about distance education and its mandate. This will improve the operations and functions of Open and Distance

Learning colleges. The growth of distance education is closely linked to the knowledge the community can access about it. In the presence of accurate and adequate knowledge, career seekers will make positive criticism that are essential for improving distance education structures, content and operations. The main question being raised is how is the community conceiving this form or mode of learning?

OBJECTIVES

- To establish the relationship that exist between community's knowledge levels about distance education and their attitudes towards sending their children to learn at a distance college
- To determine community' reactions towards sending their children to study through distance education.
- To establish community's knowledge needs about distance.
- To establish sources of information do the community rely on for their knowledge about distance education at tertiary level.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to answer the following questions:

- What relationship exist between knowledge levels of the community about distance education and their attitude towards sending their children learn at a distance college?
- What knowledge needs about distance education do the community have?
- What sources of information do the community rely on for their knowledge about distance education at tertiary level?
- How do the community react to situations whereby their children study through distance education?

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The central theme of this study therefore, was to identify knowledge needs about distance education among parents and to determine their attitude towards children studying through distance education.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Findings from a study of this nature should inform planning efforts aimed at improving delivery modes in Open and Distance education, while creating positive attitudes among the community about learning through distance education institutions. The institutions would require accurate, empirical evidence to address whatever misconceptions might exist. Authorities in Open and Distance institutions will make effective decisions about the structure, content and operations of their distance education models. It is hoped too that further researches in this area would benefit from methodological choices adopted in this study.

DELIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This study was conducted to Bindura community parents only targeted population in this study consisted parents with children who are in form six registered government and private urban high schools of Bindura district.

LIMITATIONS

Some of the parents were not able to conceptualize the terms used hence interviews were desirable so as to clarify certain terminologies. This in turn was time consuming. Certain terminologies were expressed in the mother language hence some of the terms were not explicitly explained.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was used so as to ascertain respondents' perspectives pertaining to sending their children to acquire tertiary education through Open and Distance Learning

Population Dample

The population of this study were 181 parents with children who are form six day scholars in the two(2) high schools of Bindura urban district of Zimbabwe. Parents were randomly selected to come up with a sample of (30) parents from each school. The total sample was sixty(60) parents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results obtained through the research questions are presented below:

Research questions sought to find out the community knowledge about open and distance learning and their attitudes towards sending their children to learn at a distance college for vocational training. The majority of parents ninety six (96%) indicated that the learning was of low quality assurance because of the physical distance between the tutors/lecturers and the learners. They highlighted that pure learning takes place with the physical presence of the tutor or lecturer hence any other form from this arrangement is inferior. Although they appreciated new technology, they indicated that learning could not be substituted by technology; hence learning at distance was less vigorous in comparison with the conventional mode of learning since the content of learning could not be adequately covered within short period of face-to-face contact. Eighty five percent (85%) of the parents viewed it as opportunistic form of learning for average or less intelligent students and argued that in-depth knowledge acquisition is not achieved through Open and Distance Learning (ODL).

A few parents forty percent (40%) who were literate showed their concern on progress monitoring and measurement. They said it was very difficult to measure, determine and monitor their pupils performance. They sited on courses like medicine

engineering and agricultural courses and indicated that this mode of learning was not suited for practical subjects. From the educated respondents, they showed concern of this mode of learning paying little or no regard to class attendance during face-to-face contact period. Seventy percent (70%) stated that tutors who were in ODL institutions were less educated than those in conventional institutions. This was due to part-time tutors who were employed somewhere and they indicated that these tutors were trying ends to meet or fundraising for their income.

All the respondents one hundred percent (100%) highlighted that it was adult learner dominated and could not suit school leavers.

It was sad to note that the community valued graduates from ODL institutions as failures who were thriving to be recognized by the community and were of inferior quality. This could have been attributed by historical background of the respondents. All the respondents according to their Biodata passed through the conventional mode of education and, therefore, to them, any alternative educational mode of learning or delivery was unconventional and non-traditional.

Research findings established that the community had not been well informed about the phenomenon and goals of distance education. They were not aware of its mandate of which are; to: provision of access to quality education and equity in educational opportunities. Responses indicated that it was not for those who otherwise would have been denied, meet special needs of employers by mounting special certificate courses for their employees at their workplace, encourage internationalization, especially of tertiary education curricula. The majority 96% of the respondents were of the view that Open and Distance Learning was not meant to ameliorate the effect of internal and external brain drain in tertiary institutions. Neither was it a way of utilizing Zimbabwean experts as tutors regardless of their locations or places of work. They opted to send their children to neighbouring countries and seek greener pastures. if funds were availed by the government. This was an indication that the community held misconceptions about Open and Distance Learning in Zimbabwe.

Sixty percent (60%) of the respondents showed concern of Open and Distance Learning institutions lacking recognizable infrastructure. They believed infrastructure has an impact on their children' education especially on disciplinary issues. Their concern was who would enforce expected behaviour among Open and Distance Learner students since they were geographically spaced and with no one to emulate thus according to them, these students were left to vegetate unlike those in conventional colleges.

This indicated that parents were not fully aware of the age of majority whereby after the age of 18 years students would be considered as adults who are free to make decisions. All respondents (100%) indicated that if ever they were given choice, would not be comfortable to send their children to Open and Distance Learning institutions like Zimbabwe Open University.

CONCLUSION

From the findings it emerged that the community viewed distance education as opportunistic form of learning for average or less intelligent students and is not situated for practical learning. In other words, it is only the theoretical aspect of learning that could only be covered by Open and Distance Learning programmes. The community perceived distance learning students as second class graduates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ In Zimbabwe distance learning institutions need to institute some strategic plans for enhancing the acceptability of Open and Distance Learning as a standard and alternative educational delivery especially among the community through publicity by the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) and the media.
- ❖ Open and Distance Learning institutions need to produce comprehensive handbooks specifying the meaning, features, scope, advantages, role, and technologies of distance learning and be issued to schools, to organizations and community at large.
- ❖ Open and Distance Learning institutions need to embark on marketing strategies so as to acknowledge their mandate in high schools as a means in turn for students to disseminate the mandate of (ODL) to their parents and community at large.

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