# CHALLENGES FACING TRANSFORMATION INOPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING DELIVERY MODE FOR QUALITY LEARNING.A CASE STUDY OF THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has transformed itself to become virtual with minimal or even no physical tutor student contact as academics create learning platforms, mark assignments and even supervise dissertations and thesis online. The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has undergone a lot of transformation since becoming a fully pledged university in 1999. ZOU started with class contact (face to face with tutor) and use of modules but has made great strides towards full use of Electronic learning (e-learning) in line with contemporary global practices in ODL. The study used a survey design and was largely quantitative. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The study established that the majority of academics' workload had increased as the transition phase was taking longer than expected. A lot of administrative work coupled with inadequate training to effectively use the ZOU My Vista software learning platform, pressure emanating from doctorate degree studies by most academics, the need to undertake research and publish research papers as well as implementing a demanding quality assurance system, were all straining academics. On a positive note, use of e-learning has expedited feedback and communication to students and it is also very convenient to them as they no longer have to travel long distances or queue at regional campuses to see the Regional programme coordinators. The study recommended that more training on e-learning and availability of more accessible infrastructure namely computers and relevant software, would capacitate both academics and students. There is also an urgent need to bring Part time tutors on board who are the majority but currently left out of this e-learning drive, so that there is a strong learning culture at ZOU for improved service delivery.

**Key words:** Delivery mode, electronic learning,open and distance learning, quality learning,transformation, sustainable development

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## 1. Introduction

ODL is the fastest growing mode of adult learning at the moment and has seen phenomenal changes over the last two decades owing to improved technology and globalisation. This paper gives a background of the study, statement of the problem, research objectives and research questions (sub-problems). Related literature covering the theoretical framework and other similar studies have been included to provide better insights on the subject matter of this study. The methodology used to guide the collection of data as well as the actual collection and analysis techniques are given. Interesting results and findings leading to the conclusion constitute the critical component of this study. Suggested ways to improve the transformation of ODL have been done to help policy makers and ODLadministrators and senior management on the way forward.

### 1.1 Backgroundof the study

Open distance learning has a very long history, which stretches back for over 180 years (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009).  For such a long time, the prevalent model of distance learning has been the use of correspondence especially in institutions of higher education (Gregory& Lodge, 2015). There is now growing transformation from the correspondence model to the phenomenon of electronic learning (e-learning) (Panda & Mishra, 2007).Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is increasingly becoming virtual with minimal or even no physical tutor-student contact as academics create platforms, mark assignments and even supervise dissertations and thesis online (Berge, 2008) and also give feedback through use of You-tube, teleconferencing and podcasts etc. This demonstrates how the ODL is changing rapidly according to RuthandSammons (2007). However, this transition phase still seems to be including some aspects traditionally done by non-academic staff which are purely routine and administrative in nature (Mashile, 2014).

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only state university mandated to offer distance learning in Zimbabwe. ZOU has undergone a lot of transformation since becoming a fully-fledged university in 1999. During its early phases, ZOU, used to have between 12-16 contact hours for each course per semester. Each student was issued with a hard copy module which has always been the major learning mode of delivery. After about five years since its formation to date, ZOU has largely been using the hard copy (printed) module as the dominant delivery mode but then reduced classroom tutorialcontact timewith the tutor to six hours for each course in a semester. ZOU is now in the transition stage of slowly moving away from the printed mode of delivery, towards an e-learning delivery mode, in line with international best practices (Hovenga & Bricknell, 2006) and globalisation.

### 1. 2 Statement of the problem

The coming up on board of electronic learning has brought transformation in ODL delivery mode. There is now increasing demand to abandon the traditional modes of delivery such as use of printed (hard copy) module and conducting classroom tutorials to the contemporary virtual learning which hinges on the use of e-learning. The software package, My Vista being now used by ZOU, seems to be bringing a lot of changes to quality of tuition as well as the whole learning spectrum or atmosphere.  Both students and academics are complaining of increased workload and learning has become more complicated, strenuous and time consuming taking cognizance of the other individual commitments suchas family, social, church and work just to mention the major ones.

### 1.3  Study Objectives

(i)      To establish what has been the nature of learning in ODL before e-learning.
(ii)     To find out the adequacy of preparations put in place for the transitional phase to e-learning.
(iii)    To identify the gains emanating from the use of e-learning in ODL.
(iv)     To identify constraints that impede smooth transition to e-learning.

### 1.4  Research questions

(i)      What has been the nature of learning in ODL before e-learning?
(ii)     How adequate are the preparations for putting in place a vibrant e-learning mode of delivery?
(i)      Which are the gains emanating from the use of e-learning in ODL?
(ii)     What are the constraints that are impedingthe smooth transition to e-learning?

### 1.5 Literature review
### 1.5.1 Theoretical framework

The evolution of distance education can also be understood from the metaphor of generations, which represent major changes also known as models of distance education (Bates, 2014) as well as Moore'sTransactional Distance theory (Moore, 1993, 2009)

**1.5.1.1 Generations of ODL**(Bates, 2014)

*Generation 1(Correspondence model)*
The period covered 1451 to 1916. This was dominated by use of the printing presswhich produced printed learning material that was used through correspondence and mail delivery system. The content was in the form of letters, books and latter covered filming. There was hardly any student-tutor contact.

*Generation 2(Multimedia model)*
The period covered 1918 to 1955. The major development was the use of the media which initially involved use of the use of radio but later the televisionand video tapes. These were complimented by use of the printed learning material. Learning was largely student centered with minimal interface between the student and the tutor.

*Generation 3(Tele-learning model)*
This period stretched from 1956 to 1968. A new era emerged with the development of computers. This saw wider use of technology which included the use of audio-graphic communication and video-conferencing and. Students accessedlearning material at their own time and place of convenience.

*Generation 4(Flexible learning model)*
This period was around 1969 to 2005. This witnessedthe use ofchats and forums for online group communication through interactive multimedia dominated by use of electronic resources.

*Generation 5(Intelligent flexible learning model)*
This period is the contemporary phase still the one being used today.  There is extensive use of the internet and the world wide web. There is more flexibility and adaptability to instruction and curriculum demands and its more user friendly than previous ODL delivery modes.

**1.5.1.2Transactional Distance theory by Moore (2009).**
Related to the distance education generations,the Transactional Distance Theoryis another important   and widely accepted theory of ODL. The theory was developed by Moore in 1993 for distance education (teaching). Moore (2009,1993) described ODL as an instructional method in which teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors. In this case, communication must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical or other devices. When autonomy is low, the need for structure becomes high and vice versa. Therefore, programmes with low dialog require a high degree of learner autonomy. The capacity of the learner for autonomous learning is influenced by the learner's conduct, learning styles, learning experience, the scope or context to be learned (Moore, 2009, 1993). This was very useful for providing the framework of how ODL has developed and influenced mode of delivery even at ZOU.

**1.5.1.3 Other related studies**
The use of printed modules with face-to-face contact teaching (tutoring) hours with students per course, is becoming increasingly redundant (Hovenga&Bricknell, 2006). Technology and globalisation have made access to learning material feasible to all corners of the world (Briggs, 2005). The roles of both students and teachers (academics)in ODL universities have taken new dimensions owing to the ever transitional trends in the modes of delivery (Lyons & Ingersoll, 2010). In developing countries, hard copies of learning material like modules are still preferred by students especially those without adequate access to internet facilities, like those who reside in the rural areas (Brown, Lewin & Shikongo, 2014). A combination of the use of modules and e-learning is still prevalent even in some developed countries(Ganster& Perrewe, 2011). This ranges from the use of hard printed copies like modules to contemporary approaches such as the use of electronic-learning (E-learning). E-learning reduces physical contact between the academic (tutor) and learner (student) (Chimedza, 2009; Bennet, Doherty, Margey, & Stephens, 2014).
Unless the human resource departments and university authorities work hand in hand with academic staff to rationalise academics new roles in the wake of e-learning, they were likely to suffer from stress, burnout and fatigue, as a result of heavy workloads (Courtney, 2013; Di Biase, 2000). This could compromise the quality of tuition which may affect service delivery, such as an inability to efficiently assess student's work (Mashile, 2014; Stedman & Coaldrake, 1999). ODL students may not get enough attention and guidance owing to academics' heavy job demands (Brown, Lewin& Shikongo, 2014). This lack of attention to students by academics due to heavy workloads emanating from more interphase with students including a lot of administrative work, is often experienced in developing countries such as Zimbabwe were resources are inadequate (Kamuka, 2006; Vutete & Uzhenyu, 2016; Zulu, 2015).

## 2. Research method

*2.1 Approach*

The research used the mixed methodology comprising both the Qualitative and Quantitative paradigms (Abawi, 2008).

*2.2 Research design*

A survey design was used since data was sought from those experienced in the area of ODL particularly students,academics and administrators (Kennedy, 2009).

*2.3 Target population*

This was made up of ODL students, academics and administrators at ZOU drawn from the National Centre (head office) and Harare regional campus. These had experience with ODL

*2.4  Sample size and sampling technique*

Sample size was 52 based on Stratified sampling) to accommodate all the key stakeholders   mentioned on *2.3* above (Khothari, 2014.

*2.5  Research instruments*

A semi-structured questionnaire was used. Respondents indicated their preferred choices on structured questions. There was also provision for respondents to explain and justify themselves where open ended questions were asked (Kennedy, 2009).

*2.6 Research Ethics*

These were observed throughout the study and included the need to first seek informed consent from respondents, confidentiality, honesty and integrity (Porter, 2014).

*2.7 Data presentation and analysis*

Findings were analyzed using content analysis for qualitative data (Abawi, 2008) and Descriptive and inferential statistics for quantitative data (Leedy & Omrod, 2016) which arose from responses to structured questions.

## 3. Results and Findings and Discussion

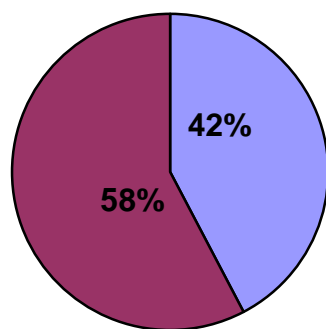### 3.1 Gender composition of respondents and participants'



*Figure 1:*Gender composition of respondents and participants'

Majority of the respondents were males (58%).  It is common that generally universities have more males for both academics and students than females (Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Hovenga & Bricknell, 2006).

### 3.2 Nature of learning before e-learning

**Table 1**: showing comments by each respondent pertaining to how ODL used to be before e-learning

| Mode of learning | Strongly agree % | Agree % | Not sure % | Disagree % | Strongly disagree % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Largely combination of modules and classroom contact(tutorials) | 74 | 24 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Largely involving tutorials, practicals and modules | 25 | 12 | 5 | 39 | 19 |
| Few contact hours (tutorials) and readers/modules | 36 | 28 | 3 | 25 | 8 |
| Few tutorials and a number of modules not | 54 | 37 | 0 | 3 | 6 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| available | | | | | |
| Tutorials which were poorly attended and modules | 58 | 36 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Access to the Region particularly the Programme coordinator for assistance and even other tutors | 57 | 31 | 2 | 6 | 4 |

The dominant means of learning was largely a combination of modules and tutorials. These results were also supported by interviews which showed that the tutorials were few and at times modules were not available at registration despite students having paid their fees accordingly. This was also raised by Nyenya and Bukaliya(2015).

**3.3Adequacy of preparations put in place for the transitional phase to e-learning**
**Table 2**: showing comments by respondents pertaining to how ODL used to be, before e-learning

| Planning for e-learning | Strongly agree % | Agree % | Not sure % | Disagree % | Strongly disagree % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Enough time was given to fully adopt e-learning | 4 | 6 | 3 | 41 | 46 |
| There was a lot of awareness on the need to move towards e-learning for smooth change | 8 | 18 | 0 | 31 | 43 |
| A lot of training programs and workshops were conducted first on how to use e-learning | 15 | 19 | 7 | 29 | 30 |
| A lot of computers were procured to prepare for e-learning | 27 | 25 | 8 | 23 | 17 |
| There was an increase in the number of computers in laboratories and library | 18 | 18 | 17 | 28 | 19 |
| More access to e-learning was enhanced by availing Wi-Fi to access internet | 51 | 36 | 7 | 3 | 3 |

Not adequate preparation for the launching of e-learning was done. Not much training was done especially for students and part time tutors. In terms of infrastructural development, it appears that not much had been done. Inadequate planning has affected the smooth progress of ODL generation phases.

**3.4Gains arising from the use of e-learning in ODL**
**Table 3**: gains arising from the use of e-learning in ODL

| Advantages/Strengths of e-learning | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|
| Convenience as there is no need to travel to the region by students | 65 |
| Improves research due to use of library facilities and internet online | 56 |
| Quicker feedback to students e.g. on assignments and even examination results | 78 |
| Marking is consistent for all 10 regional campuses and that enhances quality assurance | 65 |
| Learning material can be downloaded on ZOU website especially using My Vista | 63 |
| Improved communication between different stakeholders even after working hours | 80 |
| Improved work engagement for tutors | 53 |

Some of the gains (positives) arising from the ODL transformation were that; students could access their work (assignment questions and marked assignments) and other relevant literature online anywhere using My Vista platform, there was no need for students to queue at regional offices anymore, there was quicker feedback to students after marking of their assignments and academics were inspired by more challenging duties or work which enhances their work engagement (Demerouti, Bakker & Gevers, 2015).

**3.5 Challenges/Problems being experienced in the transformation phase to e-learning**
**Table 4**: Problems during the transformation phase to e-learning

| Challenges/Problems | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|
| Inadequate training especially for students and part time tutors | 85 |
| Slow computers to upload, download or use internet facility | 67 |
| Congested Wi-Fi area and laboratory at the region | 48 |
| Small laboratory | 53 |
| Few computers which can not suffice the demand | 65 |
| My Vista at times down | 76 |
| Comments by markers on assignments difficult to retrieve | 57 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Delays in marking which culminates in students submitting second assignment or even writing exams without feedback for some courses | 75 |
| Some do not have access to internet e.g. those staying in remote or some rural areas | 72 |
| Some lectures and even students are accustomed traditionally to hard copies e.g. modules and even assignments rather than use of soft copies | 58 |
| Inadequate financial resources to use consultancy services to address inefficiencies | 56 |

A plethora of problems raised above, affected the transition phase from traditional ODL delivery mode to the contemporary e-learning. This has been the problem in most developing countries as alluded to by Mashile (2014).

### 3.6 Other findings from interviews were;

*3.6.1 Increased workload*
Academics workload has been increasing owing to the introduction of the e-learning delivery mode. This enhanced work stress and work engagement challenges.

*3.6.2 Resistance to change*
Some academics were not happy with marking of assignments on line as that was time consuming especially where one tutor was allocated 250 assignments to mark in two weeks. Also some students especially felt that they had not been consulted and it was an imposition.

*3.6.3 Drastic change instead of gradual*
The participants' felt that a lot of time and consultation should have been done to allow smooth change rather than implementing across all programs without adequate preparations and an effective logistical framework in place

## 4. Conclusion

In light of the findings and results, the study concludedthat the transformation phase involving the adoption of contemporary delivery modes, still pose a lot of operational and logistical challenges compounded by lack of resources. Although e-learning was user friendly and convenient generally, itsimplementation had a plethora of problems with a lot of student queries over the use of ZOU's My Vista because the transition period has largely been characterized by lack of training to capacitate students and even academics especially part time tutors.

## 5. Recommendations

5.3.1    Intensive training was needed in all regions particularly those outside Harare, to cover both students and academics particularly those employed on a part time basis.

5.3.2    There is need to procure morecomputers for use especially by students in the computer laboratory and library to enhance the use of My Vistasince there are technicians who can assist.

5.3.3    'Speedy' computers for efficiencywere needed to improveaccess to My Vista and internet facilities as majority seemed to be out dated and some obsolete.

5.3.4    There was need to curb widespread plagiarism that could be difficult to notice taking cognizance of the online marking, by using an anti-plagiarism software, which has not been the case so far.

5.3.5    There was need to improve or upgrade My Vista software especially on the capturing of marks for coursework and reconciling with the exam marks so that this is done by the system and not manually which can cause some delays in processing results.

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