The role of technology in student empowerment through ODL: The challenges experienced by ODL students in Zimbabwe’s remote rural corners of Matabeleland North Province.

Moffat Chitapa Tarusikirwa
Zimbabwe Open University
e-mail: mctarusikirwa@gmail.com

Abstract

There are a number of advantages for student empowerment through ODL. These include flexibility of time, ability to empower large numbers of students at the same time, no space limitations, distance between the tutor and tutee is zero due to ICT, reading material has become abundant among others (see Brown and Brown, 1994). On the other hand, student empowerment through ODL can be challenging. This research paper discusses the experiences of ODL students in Zimbabwe’s remote rural corners of Matabeleland North Province. A qualitative research methodology was used. The aim of the study was to find out the challenges experienced by ODL students in accessing the ODL service in remote rural areas of Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe. The purpose of the study was to improve the delivery of the ODL mode of instruction to students in remote rural corners of the country by eliminating the challenges involved. The study set out to answer two questions, that is: What are the challenges experienced by students in accessing ODL in Zimbabwe’s remote rural corners? And what can be done to eliminate these challenges? A purposive sample of 20 students was used. Semi structured open ended interview technique was used to gather the data and interpretive content analysis was employed for data analysis. Some of the challenges surfaced by the study include the following: ICT development in some remote rural corners is poor, hence the ODL mode of delivery is imbedded with a number of challenges, and for example where e-learning was the envisaged mode of lesson delivery, access to computers and internet facilities becomes a must for every student. Access to ICT and internet facilities is a pipe dream for those people in the peripheries of the country. Furthermore, there are challenges of poor financial support from the fiscus, poor infrastructure such as electricity, telephone, printing and typing facilities among others making learning material access difficult. The paper will discuss these and other challenges and ends by making conclusions and recommendations on the way forward.

Key words: Student empowerment, Open and Distance Learning, Role of Technology, Rural Zimbabwe

Introduction

This paper unfolds as follows: Firstly a brief background is given. This is followed by the methodology used in the study, then the results and discussion. Finally, the conclusions and recommendations will be given. There are a number of advantages for Student empowerment through Open and Distance Education. Some of the advantages include those of flexibility as students are able to study in their own time while at the same time working and going on with their daily lives, large numbers can be developed at the same time as there are no space limitations, ICT such as the internet among others has reduced distance between the tutor and tutee.
to zero and made reading material abundant. On the other hand, student empowerment through ODL can be problematic. Some of the disadvantages of student empowerment through ODL are as follows: Depending with the level of ICT development of a particular country, the mode of delivery can be imbued with a number of challenges, for example where e-learning was the envisaged mode of lesson delivery, access to computers and internet facilities becomes a must for every student (see Ertmer, et. al, (1999). In some lowly developed African countries, access to ICT and internet facilities is a pipe dream for those people in the peripheries of the countries. Furthermore, there are challenges of poor financial support from the fiscus, infrastructure such as electricity, telephone, printing and typing facilities among others making learning material production difficult.

Methodology

The major aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of ODL students in Zimbabwe with respect to challenges/disadvantages of learning through ODL. A qualitative research methodology was used. A purposive sample of 20 ODL students was used. Semi structured open ended interview technique was used to gather the data and interpretive content analysis was employed for data analysis. As such the researcher was more interested in what it is that the students said as subjects rather than statistical analysis. I was therefore interested in unpacking the experiences of students with regard to challenges of learning through ODL from their on voices.

There were more male respondents than females. This is because there were more males than females among the students at the institution and they were readily available for the study.

As shown by the above table the majority of respondents were in the age range 25 to 29 years of age. These are fairly young adults who are working and keen to get a qualification.

As shown by the above table, the majority of respondents were studying for the Diploma in Primary Education. These students easily made themselves available for the study.

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<thead>
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<th>Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by gender</th>
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<td>25- 29</td>
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<th>Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Course studied</th>
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<td>Diploma Primary Education</td>
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<td>Postgraduate Diploma in Education</td>
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Results and discussion

Challenges of student empowerment through ODL

In response to the question: What are the challenges experienced by students in accessing ODL in Zimbabwe’s remote rural corners? Informants raised a number of disadvantages associated with learning through ODL as follows: One of the challenges as given by informants bordered around the mode of lesson delivery. This was particularly so in the case of e-learning as the envisaged mode of lesson delivery. Two challenges were surfaced by the study. Firstly, there was a challenge with access to computers by students in remote rural areas. Secondly, the challenge of access to computers was intertwined with that of unavailability of internet facilities in the far removed rural areas of the country in Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe. In other words, it is a must for a student to have both access to a computer as well as internet facilities.

Access to computers:

With respect to access to computers, informants raised a number of issues, for example, informants mentioned that most students were poor and were not able to purchase and own computers. This was particularly so with students from remote rural areas in the periphery of the country (see Brown and Brown, 1994; Bates and Poole, 2003). Students gave an example of an ODL institution which distributed modules on computer diskettes to students at registration but the innovation soon turned into a nightmare as the majority of students did not have computers. In that regard, students were unable to access any of the modules on the computer diskettes provided by the institution. The students, most of them in the teaching profession mentioned that the situation was exacerbated by the low salaries that teachers earn which are not enough for their family needs let alone study purposes. In that respect, students are not able to access learning materials through e-learning without their computers. They are also unable to access the internet for both communication and learning purposes. Here are some of the statements from students:

- “There is a problem when it comes to accessing learning materials through the internet. I do not have a computer to use for this purpose and there is no internet connection in this area.”
- “I cannot afford to buy a computer as this is expensive for me. My salary is too low and I am unable to make a living from it let alone buy a computer.”
- “There is no internet connection in my area. I cannot research or get learning materials through the use of the internet.”

From the above statements, a number of issues are raised by students. Firstly, there is the challenge of the lack of access to computers which is intertwined with the economic challenge of low salaries; hence students cannot afford to buy a computer on their own. Secondly, there is the challenge of the lack of internet facilities which is discussed in the next section.

Lack of computer skills among students and teachers

Another challenge mentioned by students was that of computer skills. Most of the students from remote rural were not computer literate. They needed to be trained in computer literacy skills before one can introduce e-learning. In the views of Bates and Poole (2003), students need to be literate to use computers effectively. Bates and Poole (2003) further argue that Educational Technology requires a relatively sophisticated organizational support structure. In other words, they argue that Organizational issues...
should address issues of effectiveness in the use of technology; hence there is need for quality programming, design and delivery of quality learning through the use of technology. Moreover, Bates and Poole (2003) argue for the development of skills needed in order to use technology effectively in the teaching and learning process. In this regard, the lack of computers by students is exacerbated by lack of computer skills.

Here are some statements from some of the respondents:

• “I have a challenge in that I am not good at using a computer. I need to join a computer training course so that I can be trained.”
• “Learning to use a computer is difficult. It is better if we get our modules and other materials on time so that studying is made easy.”
• “There is need to train students in computer skills before we are able to access lessons and assignments and modules through the internet.”
• “I have failed to acquire computer skills as it is expensive to be trained. Private trainers charge a lot of money and each time I tried to get training, I didn’t learn much as I did not have enough money.”
• “Even some of the lecturers are not computer literate. I tried to get help from a lecturer and they referred me to the technician as they could not help me themselves. Often the technician has to attend to many people needing help at the same time.”

From the last statement, it would appear that lecturers also need training in computer skills. According to Bates and Poole (2003), “Skills needed to use technology effectively have also increased in complexity and importance.” Hence, teachers need to learn new skills in order to design and deliver technology based teaching. In the views of Bates and Poole (2003), if someone has to survive in the knowledge based society; literacy in a range of different media and technologies is a critical skill.

Belief systems and practices

Another challenge coming out of the above statements is that some students are of the view that learning to use the computer is difficult; hence they prefer to stick to the printed module. Ertmer, et. al. (1999) argues that one of the barriers to the use of technology in learning is one’s belief system and way of doing things. This affects both the learner and the lecturer. People are afraid of change or of learning new things or new ways of doing things hence they want to stick to what they have been practicing. In this case, rather than use computer technology for learning purposes, the student would rather get their usual printed module for learning purposes. In the views of Ertmer, et. al. (1999), These challenges/barriers include people’s beliefs about teaching and in my view, about learning as well, about computers, established classroom practices and I believe it also includes learning practices and unwillingness to change. Hence, some of these students will not make an effort to buy and learn how to use a computer but will prefer to get their hard copy modules as usual.

Internet infrastructure

It is evident from the above statements that some students are disadvantaged by the lack of internet infrastructure in remote rural Matabeleland North Province of Zimbabwe. As such they are not able to get access to learning materials through the use of the internet. This problem often affects people in the remote rural peripheries of the country. As a result offering ODL through the use of ICT becomes a challenge.
Infrastructure such as electricity, telephone, printing and typing facilities

The study surfaced further challenges with respect to infrastructure as follows: Students from rural areas were of the view that they were disadvantaged by lack of infrastructure such as electricity, telephone, printing and typing facilities. Due to the lack of electricity in some rural areas, ODL students are not able to study properly at night due to lack of lighting. They also are unable to print or type their work. Photocopying is also a problem. Where there are no telephone facilities, both fixed and mobile, it is difficult for students to communicate with their tutors and fellow students on tutorial dates, assignments and learning materials. Here are some statements from the informants:

- “It is difficult to study at night after work due to lack of electricity in my area. One can only study during the day and that interferes with work.”
- “Sometimes we don’t know exactly when a weekend tutorial is going to take place, particularly if it has been changed from the original date due to communication problems. There are no telecommunications facilities in my area.”
- “We have no telephone facilities for communication with tutors and fellow students on assignments, tutorials and handouts.”
- “There is no typing or photocopying facilities in my area; hence I have to go into town for all these facilities.”

Financial challenges

Furthermore, informants raised the aspect of challenges due to poor financial support from the fiscus exacerbated by poor salaries which makes learning material production difficult. They point out that sometimes they are unable to get their modules on time due to lack of money. ODL students unlike conventional students do not get a grant or lawn facility from the government and that pauses a challenge for them. These sentiments are evident from the following statements by informants:

- “Getting a loan from the government is not possible as the government does not support ODL students financially. This makes it very difficult to raise fees for the course.”
- “Sometimes I register late for my course due to lack of money. I do not have sponsorship for my studies.”
- “My salary is not enough for both my needs and study purposes. Things are difficult.”

Lack of sponsorship intertwined with a poor salary regime for ODL students is a serious disadvantage for the provision of education through ODL. Sometimes students are unable to register on time. This interferes with assignments, projects and dissertation deadlines making the whole process a management nightmare.

Administrative challenges

Informants also raised challenges of an administrative nature that affect them. Here are some statements from some of them:

- “Sometimes modules are not made available on time and learning becomes difficult without them. In some subjects, there are no modules.”
- “Assignment feedback is sometimes given late. We need time to have this feedback before the examinations are written.”
- “Some lecturers, who are part-timers, do not turn up for weekend school tutorials and yet we would have travelled from far way places and spent money on transport and accommodation. This is not fair.”

The above statements surface a number of administrative related challenges such as the
late delivery of modules, late assignment feedback and absence of part-time lecturers at weekend tutorials. Additionally, there is the issue of loss in terms of money and time lost in travel and accommodation expenses as students would have travelled from faraway places of the province.

Recognition by employers and the public

The study also surfaced a number of challenges that are due to public perceptions of ODL qualifications. Here are some statements from some of the informants:

- “I have been told that I cannot be promoted beyond the position of School Head by Ministry officials because of my qualification.”
- “Ministry officials are refusing to accept my qualification. They are saying that it’s not good enough. What shall I do?”
- “Some people are saying that I need to do another degree with a conventional university in order to be recognized by employers.”
- “I am not being recognized as a trainee teacher like students from other colleges. They are treating me as a temporary teacher.”

With respect to the above sentiments, it is clear that some members of the public and even Ministry of Education officials have a bias towards ODL trained teachers. Therefore ODL students and institutions suffer a disadvantage due to stigmatization from certain members of the public. Hence they have to fight hard against this problem of perception by those who view education as the one got from conventional institutions.

**Way forward: What can be done to eliminate these challenges?**

**Recommendations:**

The following recommendations are advanced:

1. It is a recommendation of this study that ODL students should be afforded loans and grants for study by the government at a National level.
2. That the rural electrification programme be given priority by government so that electricity infrastructure is developed across the whole country.
3. The government should seriously consider looking into the poor salaries of teachers.
4. Affordable computers be sourced by government for ODL students.
5. Providers of internet facilities are encouraged to expand their networks into remote rural areas of the country such as Matabeleland North Region.
6. The government and ODL institutions are encouraged to educate people on the ODL mode of human resource development as a worthy alternative to conventional education to remove negative perception of ODL training programmes.
7. Politicians and administrators are encouraged to deploy resources into the rural peripheries of the country with respect to the development of ICT infrastructure, telephones, electricity and so forth.

8. Service providers are encouraged to deliver learning materials on time as well as giving feedback on time including stamping out lecturer absenteeism at weekend schools.

References


