Integrated marketing approach to ODL student recruitment at ZOU’s Manicaland Region

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Abstract

Student recruitment in Open and Distance Learning ODL is becoming complex as globalisation effects are shaping the way prospective students think, placing challenges on ODL systems that predominantly rely on traditional recruiting methods. The ODL context in Zimbabwe is very competitive due to budding ODL systems competing for learners previously viewed as exclusively for Zimbabwe Open and Distance Learning ZOU. This paper therefore sought to evaluate ZOU Manicaland region’s marketing and recruiting initiatives using views of students and staff. The study was a case study that largely used interviews supported by questionnaires to generate and analyse data qualitatively from a sample of students and staff. The study found out that recruitment strategies in use were focusing on communicating ODL benefits and retaining students for life long learning. Unjustified competition from replica ODL systems, most of which are abusing ZOU study materials, are constraining forces. The way forward is continued use of differentiation, branding and relationship marketing supported by e-resources to attract the young generation of students into mass online and virtual learning.

Key words: Student recruitment; Open and Distance Learning

Background to the problem

Student recruitment in Open and Distance Learning ODL is becoming complex as globalisation effects like ICTs and internationalisation are shaping the way prospective students think, communicate and share ideas when seeking universities to study with (Finnegan, Regan, Fenton, Lanigan and Healy, 2014). This changing ODL ‘student market’ is placing challenges on ODL systems that predominantly rely on traditional recruiting methods (Johnson, 2010). The ODL context in Zimbabwe for example, is now very competitive due to budding, online and virtual systems competing for potential learners previously viewed as exclusively for conventional open and distance learning at Zimbabwe Open University ZOU. It may therefore sound critical for ZOU as a conventional ODL system, to maintain its competitive edge by continuously refining its student recruitment strategies in the midst of proliferation of local and transnational ODL systems entering the ODL market.

The economic meltdown that affected Zimbabwe before dollarisation in 2010 resulted in the majority of ZOU students, majority of who were adult working class, suspending their studies. However, these developments triggered a proliferation of ODL systems mainly online and virtual, which were cheap and quick to complete. Locally, blended modes such as ‘parallel and block release’ emerged from campus based universities and now seem to have fascinated...
many adult learners previously viewed as destined for conventional ODL offered by ZOU. This scenario seems to have created competition for ZOU. Other challenges for ZOU seem to have been compounded by campus schooled academics, practitioners and administrators who still view ODL as academically suspect and pedagogically less effective than campus based learning (Nichols, 2012).

At ZOU Manicaland Regional Centre, student recruitment has for quite some time relied on awareness strategies such as communicating the institution’s profile, programmes and courses through the media and complementing these with visits to potential student catchment areas, telephone calls by recruiting teams, university fairs, brochures, websites and targeted community events. However, recruitment dynamics in the ‘student market’ now appear to be influenced by developments in (ICTs) that seem to be creating a competitive recruitment environment characterised by several regional ODL universities and local campus based universities now recruiting students directly from the region previously viewed as an exclusive niche for ZOU Manicaland.

Issues that can be raised are that while ZOU’s ODL products and services have evolved and refined over the years in terms of meeting learner needs, the way in which ODL benefits are sold to prospective students has generally remained unchanged (Sukati, 2009). This is despite the fact that there are a lot of ODL benefits already being enjoyed in Zimbabwe through ZOU.

**Statement of the problem**

The ODL market in Zimbabwe previously dominated by ZOU is now very competitive due to budding ODL modes, online and virtual systems competing for learners previously viewed as exclusively for ZOU. Student recruitment in ODL in Zimbabwe is also increasingly becoming complex as effects of globalisation like ICTs and internationalisation are influencing students’ decision making cycles when seeking universities to study with. This changing ODL ‘student market’ is increasingly becoming multifaceted making reliance on traditional recruiting methods at ZOU less effective. It is therefore imperative for empirical studies to identify more aggressive and refined student recruitment strategies that places ZOU on a competitive advantage midst the proliferation of local and transnational ODL systems entering the ODL student market. This paper therefore sought to evaluate ZOU Manicaland region’s marketing and recruiting strategies using views of new and returning students and recruitment staff.

**Purpose of the study**

This paper sought to evaluate ZOU Manicaland region’s marketing and recruiting strategies using views of new and returning students, marketing staff and Regional Programme Coordinators.

**Research question**

How effective are marketing and recruitment strategies at ZOU Manicaland Region?

**Research questions**

The research questions were:
1. What factors are pulling new students to ZOU Manicaland region?
2. How are external forces constraining ZOU Manicaland region’s recruitment initiatives?
3. What incorporated initiatives are affecting yielding rates at ZOU Manicaland region?
4. To what extent are students utilising (ICTs) in application, admission and enrolment at ZOU Manicaland region?

Limitations of the study

The study was restricted to ZOU Manicaland region and fell short in generalising findings to other regional centres of the university. The study also generated data from students who were conveniently sampled during registration periods and therefore the sample might have been exposed to researcher bias.

Delimitations of the study

The study focused on evaluating student recruitment strategies at ZOU Manicaland region. Data was generated only from new and returning students registering during the semester under study and Programme Coordinators and administrative staff involved in recruitment activities at the region during the period of study.

Review of related literature

Theoretical framework

The study was driven by the philosophy that the changing ODL ‘student market’ requires re-examination of traditional recruitment practices that originated from the traditional recruitment theory (Shaik, 2013; SHE, 2013). Student recruitment theory and practice have roots in the traditional recruitment funnel model (Johnson, 2000). The model assumes that student recruitment follows a process where a large number of prospective students from different entry points are captured into a funnel. In the funnel, the numbers narrow down through processes of application, admission, fees payment and ultimately smaller numbers get registered (Sevier, 2013). The traditional model depicts a funnel where, prospective students are initiated into the funnel by means of mass communication. The number of students entering the funnel is also determined by their degree of awareness (Tresman, 2012; Sevier, 2013). However, this theory, though still relevant and dominantly in use in conventional universities, appear to encompass some shortfalls when applied in ODL student recruitment.

Review of empirical studies

Studies in developed countries point to innovative ODL systems that have benefited through shaping prospective learner perceptions (Shaik, 2013; Heaton-Shrestha, May and Burke, 2014). However, non-innovative ODL systems, majority of whom are in developing countries, appear to rely on imitating initiatives and struggle to project themselves beyond changing learner expectations (Shaik 2013). Research evidence show that some campus based institutions have successfully shaped prospective adult learners to opt for ODL modes blended with campus based traditional teaching (Glen, 2012). Studies also show that some ODL institutions have successfully influenced perceptions of prospective young learners coming into ODL to crave for online student support services (Heilbronner, Connell and Reiss, 2010; Shaik, 2013). These conditions appear to be placing a lot of demands on less developed ODL systems as they compete to promote their programmes and recruit from a diversified spectrum of prospective students (Haskins and Kirk-Sanchez, 2014). This backdrop is also echoed by Shaik (2013) who claims that ODL systems that are less developed in terms of support services are suspect to stakeholders as they are perceived as focused on profit instead of quality and learner support.

However, global trends in USA, Europe and Asia show that ODL systems facing competition from campus based universities...
are responding by utilising (ICT) opportunities to shift to massive recruitment for open online and virtual learning thereby increasing market visibility to both national and international students (Shaik, 2013; Finnegan, 2014).

Research in developed countries also signify that programmes that are advertised for online open learning can also act as a recruitment foundation for other non online ODL programmes (Shaik, 2012).

In addition, many ODL systems worldwide appear to be focusing on promoting benefits of ODL programmes, products and services as a way of maintaining institutional competitive advantages. Indeed, global trends appear to indicate that benefits of ODL are becoming more and more significant (Haskins and Kirk-Sanchez, 2014; ICDE, 2014). As posted as by Shaik (2013), ODL products and services are becoming more popular among university learners. However, research acknowledges that there are some ODL systems particularly in developing countries that restrict themselves by relying on less innovative ways of communicating ODL benefits to potential learners (Heaton-Shrestha et al., 2014).

A survey of the global recruitment context indicate situations where ODL institutions are gaining market share by differentiating their offerings from those of competitors (Shaik, 2013; ICDE, 2014).

However, the majority of ODL systems in Africa still appear to be grappling with challenges of designing marketing strategies that are more effectual than universal advertising tools such as prospectus, calendars, websites and social media (Shaik, 2013). Global trends also seem to show that ODL recruitment strategies that are relationship oriented yield positive results (SHE, 2013; ICDE, 2014). Relationship marketing consists of all actions taken by the institution to built long term relationships with potential students and stakeholders based on trust and loyalty (SHE, 2013).

Research in developed countries’ ODL systems also show that strong ‘institution-potential student’ relationships serve to differentiate ODL institutions from their competitors in the minds of its stakeholders. As pointed out by SHE (2013), relationship building makes prospective and current students become the institution’s active evangelist (Lutes, 2014).

Global trends also show that some ODL systems are concentrating on branding (Glen, 2012; Ibrahim, 2012).

Common branding methods are those that influence the student’s decision making cycle to choose the institution and its programmes (Glen, 2012). Examples of branding strategies appear to be those that frame images to shape prospective students’ opinions about ODL (Shaik, 2013). One form of branding strategy is social proof. This is a phenomenon where prospective students are influenced to associate themselves with the actions of existing students (Ibrahim, 2012). This form of branding is important because new students get turned in by the behaviour of their peers already at university doing something new or better (Shaik, 2013). However, Glen (2012) is of the view that branding should appropriately target prospective students at their various stages of their decision making cycles. Success of these branding programmes also seem to depend on costs, informed prospects, frequency and quality of information passed on to the prospective students.

Studies in developed countries also show that some ODL systems register success by research on potential students’ data and building data bases. As pointed out by ICDE (2014), marketing strategies that appeal to prospective students utilise data that explains how students make choices and decisions to choose universities to study with (Nichols, 2012; ICDE, 2014; Haskins - Kirk -Sanchez, 2014). Shaik (2013) also claims that strategies of this nature acknowledge that students have become sophisticated as they consume massive information, browse
through massive data on the internet and access websites of all universities on the internet. Research also shows that product development as a form of marketing in ODL increases prospective students’ attention to ODL programmes. ODL systems that have successfully used this approach have developed specific student markets and market driven courses, programmes and services that competitively differentiate the institutions from their competitors (Shaik, 2013; ICDE, 2014).

Another approach widely seen as effective in ODL student recruitment is staff courtesy. Staff courtesy in ODL is a critical element in boosting student enrolments (Tresman, 2012).

In some ODL systems staff courtesy is seen as an important variable in marketing and branding during the first contact between a prospective student and the university’s functionaries. As claimed by Shaik (2013), staff engaged in student recruitment is expected to demonstrate values that delight stakeholders during admission and registration periods. In addition Tresman (2012) claim that the ever changing world of enrolment management now requires that staff including tutors be involved in recruitment activities. Prospective students want to hear from academics and also like to experience original interaction with the tutors during the recruitment exercise (Tresman, 2012). It is therefore in the light of these reflections that this study sought to evaluate ZOU Manicaland region’s marketing and recruiting strategies using views of new and returning students and staff involved in marketing and recruitment.

Gaps in knowledge
Increasing competitiveness in student recruitment raises a number of issues regarding what recruitment and marketing strategies can make ODL institutions pull more students amidst this increasingly competitive environment. While traditional methods of recruitment already alluded to are still effective, there seem to be doubts whether the methods can still hold as the means to an end as few ODL students are attracted to universities by the mass communication alone (Nichols, 2012; Lutes, 2014).

Research in developed countries also seem to indicate that prospective students get emotionally attached to an institution long before the university’s advert reaches them (Nichols, 2012).

Mass communication methods alone appear to be less effective as empirical evidence show that by the time students come to inquire about the institution they will have gathered information about the institution either from peers, work mates, family members, social networks and websites (Nichols, 2012; SHE, 2013). While these traditional recruitment methods may still be effective to campus based universities where flow of potential students is guaranteed from high schools, their effectiveness in the ODL context appear uncertain.

There are a number of constraints facing ODL systems during student recruitment. For example, it is difficult to project student’s numbers likely to apply to an institution due to sophisticated potential students’ sources located in varied dynamic environments and their varied decision making cycles (Tresman, 2012). As pointed out by Lutes (2014), potential ODL students’ decision cycles make them also want to enter the university at different stages of the university calendar making traditional methods of recruitment less effective (Shaik, 2013). As claimed by Shaik (2013), some adult learners destined for ODL are constrained by their decision making cycles which may not be in tandem with university calendars.

Another constrain seem to be that of the ability of ODL systems to project returning students likely to register for the coming semester. Numbers of returning ODL learners are also difficult to project because
of the varied nature of their circumstances as compared to campus based returning students (Tresman, 2012). Research has also shown that there are weaknesses in methods of marketing used by many ODL universities that only focus on recruiting new students than retaining existing ones. Such methods are not sufficient in today’s crowded ODL market place as it is not always the case that many if not all ODL returning students enrol for the following semester (Tresman, 2012).

While ODL seem to be the emerging convenient and cost effective mode of university education, research seem to show absence of recruitment and marketing initiatives that yield results by exclusively branding ODL as the new trend in providing all encompassing university education. As pointed out by ICEF Monitor (2012) there appear to be gaps on the kind of marketing and recruitment processes that effectively differentiate ODL offerings in a way that appeal to local, regional and international student markets (ICEF Monitor 2012).

Studies also seem to show that merely increasing advertising tools and ‘drip marketing’ is no longer enough as the ODL mode of delivery is now multi faceted requiring integrated recruitment strategies as compared to campus based recruiting (IECF Monitor, 2012).

It is in the light of these gaps in student recruitment in ODL that this study sought to evaluate ZOU’s Manicaland region’s student recruitment strategies.

Research methodology

Research methods

The study was qualitative and used the case study method. The case study used semi structured interviews on Regional Programme Co-ordinators and recruitment staff supported by questionnaires that enabled reaching out a wider audience of students. According to Creswell (2002), a case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real life context especially when the boundaries between the phenomena are not clearly defined. The case study method allowed multiplicity of perspectives from the variety of participants’ perspectives by employing multiple sources of data generation techniques. The case study also provided a systematic way of generating and analysing in-depth data (Turner, 2006).

Target population

The population consisted of new and returning students who were enrolling during the registration periods covered by the study. The population also included Regional Programme Co-ordinators and administrative staff that took part in marketing teams engaged in recruitment during the period of the study. New and returning students were rich sources of customer feedback data while Programme Co-ordinators and recruiting staff generated data from recruitment processes at the regional centre and at district centres.

Sampling procedures

The sample

The sample consisted of 20 new students, 20 returning students, five Regional Programme Co-ordinators and five administrative and marketing staff involved in recruitment and marketing.

Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling was used to sample Regional Programme Co-ordinators and marketing team members involved in marketing and student recruitment. According to Turner (2006), purposive sampling is a deliberate choice of respondents due to the quality of information they possess. It is a
non random technique that does not emphasise on the number of informants (Creswell, 2002).

Purposive sampling allowed researchers to identify programme coordinators and marketing staff members who could provide information by virtue of knowledge or experience.

**Convenience sampling**

Convenience sampling was used to select students as they came for registration. Through convenient sampling the researcher only selects subjects that are easily stumbled upon (Creswell, 2002). This sampling technique was appropriate because both new and returning students came at irregular times to the regional centre and district centers to seek for different types of services such as programme inquiries, applications, admissions, registration and collection of study material. While this method could have been prone to bias, researchers had to minimise bias by ensuring that the sample was built of equal numbers of new and returning students from all faculties.

**Semi structured interviews**

Semi structured interviews were used to generate data from Regional Programme Co-ordinators and administrative staff involved in recruitment. These interviews had features of both structured and unstructured interviews. Semi structured questions were pre-planned core questions that ensured that the same areas were covered with each interviewee. As the interview progressed the researcher explored complex issues through open ended questions that gave interviewees opportunities to elaborate and provide more relevant information they opted to give (Leedy Ormrod, 2005).

**Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were used to generate data from students. Questionnaires had both open and closed questions. Closed questions allowed generation of data from similar areas while open ended questions enabled students to express their own views and contribute on areas that might have been overlooked by the researcher. Questionnaires also enabled researchers to reach out to a larger audience of students in a short space of time (Creswell, 2002).

**Data generation procedures**

Researchers personally interviewed Regional Programme Co-ordinators and marketing staff at various stages during the registration period. Researchers also administered questionnaires to students at registry points of service delivery during the admission and registration period.

**Data presentation, interpretation and analysis techniques**

Data from questionnaires were presented and analysed using descriptions supported by percentages (Turner, 2006).

These measures were suitable in describing and analysing attitudes and opinions of large number of students (Turner, 2006). Open ended questions enabled description and explanation of complex realities. Subjective interpretation and analysis was done to qualitative data collected during interviews (Creswell, 2012). Data from interviews was presented in textual and thematic descriptions (Turner, 2006). Qualitative analysis and interpretations had an advantage of producing thick and rich descriptions of findings (Turner, 2006).
Research findings

Factors pulling new and returning students to ZOU Manicaland Region

Students’ perceptions on factors attracting new students to study with ZOU

The most cited factor pulling students to ZOU was convenience of not leaving families and work places during the period of study. Other ODL modes were seen as requiring students to stay at the campus for blocks of weeks. Another most cited reason was that ZOU provided modules that made learning while at home more interactive and instructional. Other local ODL modes did not provide modules. This differentiation of products and services appear to put ZOU on a competitive edge (Shaik, 2013).

Another cited pulling factor was flexibility of tutorial and assignment management services. These services were viewed as tailor made for working students especially those working and staying in remote areas. These findings show that services delivery at ZOU was a key factor in student recruitment and was having an effect in shaping the minds of prospective students as suggested by Shaik (2013); Heaton-Shrestha et al., (2004). ZOU mode of delivery was seen by students as affordable and heavily supported by attractive student services.

Returning students’ views on positives that make students persist in their studies with ZOU

The most outstanding motivating factor cited by returning students was that of increasing numbers of ZOU graduates excelling in their respective endeavours and many occupying senior work positions. Persistence in studying with ZOU was also seen as emanating from convenience and user friendliness of (ZOU’s functioneries that made students want to pursue life long learning with ZOU. The most cited examples were tutorial services that were seen as individualised and responsive to individual needs. ZOU Manicaland appears to have succeeded in making students see ODL as a life long learning process making ZOU able to naturally retain its students (ICDE, 2014). ZOU Manicaland Programme Coordinators were seen as offering important moral and academic support services needed by students. Their availability at the regional centre and their responsiveness through telephone and internet was viewed as a very significant service less experienced in other local ODL systems. This concurs with Tresman’s idea (2012) of using staff curtesy as a recruitment strategy for returning students (Tresman, 2012).

Effects of external forces on recruitment at ZOU Manicaland region

Programme Co-ordinators and marketing staff interviewed were of the view that campus based universities that are offering ‘replica’ ODL programmes had attracted a large section of prospective adult learners predestined for ODL. This conforms to Lutes’s (2014) claims that reliance on traditional methods alone for ODL student recruitment was no longer viable. Some Programme Co-ordinators expressed that widespread use of ZOU modules by students in campus based universities had in some cases impacted negatively to the ZOU brand as the modules were being used in ways that they were not designed for. These findings are in line with Shaik’s (2013) idea that student recruitment in ODL requires aggressive marketing of products and services other than general advertising (Shaik, 2013).

Programme Co-ordinators and recruiting staff largely agreed that proliferation of ‘fly by night’ and ‘quick to complete’ transnational and local online degree programmes had
created unjustified competition in the ODL market. The marketing staff also observed that uninformed perceptions on ODL benefits by some educationists in high schools resulted in the younger generation segment of prospective students in high schools viewing ODL as solely for adults. These findings reflect the value for branding images targeting not only adult learners but also that shape potential young students’ decision making cycles to crave for the ZOU mode of university education as suggested by Glen (2012). These findings are also echoed by Glen (2012) who claims that ODL systems need to shift to relationship oriented student recruitment that build long lasting relationships with potential students long before they start their studies.

**ZOU staff’s appraisal of the region’s recruitment and marketing initiatives**

ZOU staff interviewed said ZOU was using content marketing to support recruitment activities at the regional and district centres. The marketing staff promoted content marketing by continuously distributing ZOU paraphernalia and media to district centers to reach out to new and returning students. The media consisted among other items, brochures and fliers. Continuous distribution of content was very effective in line with Shaik’s (2013) idea of building relationships with potential students in new markets and also differentiating ZOU products from competitors.

The marketing staff was also of the view that distributing information through e-mail, on line ZOU adds, e-brochures and other electronic platforms media targeting students who had applied, inquired but not yet registered was effective. The staff saw on line ZOU adds as very effective in creating pathways for prospective students who had applied but yet to register. This was the form of branding suggested by Glen (2012) that shapes potential students’ decision making cycles long before they decide to apply. The staff was also noted that incentives such as scholarships, fees reduction, flexible payment systems, additional study materials and support services were most wanted by students.

Marketing staff were aggressively engaged in promoting the ZOU brand to prospective students in the regional centre, at main events and city fairs. Staff saw regular promotions as necessary in building awareness and in making students get attached to ZOU long before they see adverts as suggested by (Lutes, 2014). However, the staff felt that these promotions needed backups of web based campaigns, creative e-mails send to prospective students captured in a data base as follow ups. Building of data bases of potential students is also emphasised by Nichols (2012).

**Programme Co-ordinators’ appraisal of the regional’s recruitment initiatives**

Programme co-ordinators were in support of tutor involvement in recruitment in line with Tresman’s (2012) views that academic staff should be involved in recruitment as students want to experience interacting with the tutors. Programme Co-ordinators agreed that marketing and recruitment activities at the region were yielding incremental enrolment trends. Programme coordinators suggested that marketing initiatives continue to focus more on converting prospecting and accepted students into registration. As suggested by (Haskins and Kirk-Sanchez, 2014), creating and utilising data bases of prospective students not only build relationships with them but also helped them navigate their decision making cycles up to registration. However, Programme Co-ordinators suggested that recruitment net be widened to encompass more actors such as prospective students’ friends, relatives, spouses and guardians who have influence on prospective students’ decision making cycle and have potential to also become students. These observations are in line with SHE’s (2013) claims that
students gather information from peers, work, family members and social network long before they decide to apply.

**Students’ responses on ZOU’s (ICT) tools utilised during admission and registration**

The ZOU website was cited by both returning and new students as the most preferred platform for accessing application and registration information. A large majority of new students went on to use the ZOU recruitment website to download application forms.

Majority of new students also used e-mail in accessing information on application and registration procedures. Many new and returning students used social networks and mobile browsers to read and talk about ZOU before they decided to inquire with ZOU itself. While these findings show that ZOU’s e-admission services were active in interacting with prospective students, there were still many opportunities for venturing into massive virtual and online recruitment suggested by Haskins and Kirk-Sanchez (2014) and ICDE (2014).

**Conclusion**

Students compare benefits of programmes, products and of its services offered and ZOU seems to be succeeding in differentiating benefits such as convenience, flexibility and affordability.

ZOU graduates are also playing an active role in attracting new students. ZOU is also succeeding in retaining students by life long learning approach that make students prefer to continue studying with ZOU for further degrees. ZOU is facing constraining factors of proliferation of fly by night ODL systems, replica ODL modes and abuse of ZOU study materials by students and tutors in other universities.

ZOU staff are of the view that use of databases is necessary for relationships to be built long before students register so as to convert all potential students to register. Students prefer accessing information on e-platforms and many utilised ZOU’s available e-resources. However, there was less utilisation of online and virtual platforms that ZOU offered.

**Recommendations**

ZOU should continue with aggressive strategies of communicating benefits of products and services, by differentiation and branding. Focus must be on creating images that attract the young generation of students into ODL.

ZOU must continue relationship oriented marketing by creating data bases of potential students and then build relationships casting the net wider to prospective students, peers, family members and workmates long before they decide to apply and convert them to register.

ZOU also need to continue developing web based recruitment platforms to achieve mass intakes of online and virtual programmes.

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