Student’s Self-sustainability in Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT
This study sought to establish the sources of student self-sustainability in Open and Distance Learning. Literature review indicated that employees with higher academic qualifications were highly remunerated and had higher prospects for promotion at their work place. (Thompson 1989 and Combs et al 1987). The descriptive survey method was used as it was considered appropriate design where student's perceptions were sought (Neuman 2000). Questionnaires were used to collect data from a sample of eighty (80) students who were attending tutorials at Mutare Teachers’ College on 10-11 March 2007. The data presentation, analysis and interpretation were done in tabular form. The overwhelming majority of the students indicated that they were sustained by such factors as enhancement of social status, self-actualization, nurturing of self-discipline, opportunity for on-the-job skills training and increasing life-long earning capacity, flexibility of the programs, among others. Consequent upon the study, student self-sustainability were career orientation, self-actualization, desire for life-long learning, delivery mode and the modular system. Among other recommendations were need for establishment of district centers, re-introduction of radio broadcasts and full package at registration.

Introduction
Since the attainment of independence, and even before, there has been tremendous social demand for tertiary and higher education in Zimbabwe. The Government of Zimbabwe has positively responded to this demand by establishing many polytechnics, colleges of education and universities. This ever-increasing demand for higher education has resulted in the establishment of a ‘university without walls’, the Zimbabwe Open University that offers a wide spectrum of open and distance learning programmes which respond to the needs of both the private and public sector and society as a whole. As of the present, (2007) the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has the largest number of students. The student enrolment are ever increasing by each subsequent new intake. These students on open and distance learning programmes are not subsidized directly nor do they receive any grants or vocational training loans (V.T.L) from the government. The students at conventional universities receive government loans for their tuition. The students at colleges and conventional universities who receive study loans find it difficult to sustain themselves in this hyper-inflationary environment to the extent that some of them drop out of the programmes. Many prospective students find it difficult to pursue educational programmes offered at exorbitant tuition and accommodation fees. Study materials, stationery and other educational requirements are too expensive for many a prospective student.

In spite of the hyper-inflationary environment, students for open and distance learning are increasing by each new intake. One would have thought that the economic meltdown would be inhibitive to pursue further education through unfunded open and distance learning programmes. It is these fascinations that have motivated the researcher to carry out this study. The objectives of the study being:

• To establish the sources and forms of students self-sustainability in open and distance learning programmes
• To formulate additional strategies for student self-sustainability in open and distance learning
• Open and distance learning (ODL) students fund their own education as they receive no government loans as in the case with conventional college student who receive vocational training loans
In order to establish the sources of students’ self-sustainability in ODL the following research questions were formulated:

**Why do students of Open and Distance Learning programmes make sacrifices so much to acquire higher academic qualifications?**

**What are the forms of students’ self-sustainability?**

**What are the ODL students’ sources of their self-sustainability?**

The findings of this study may help policy makers and institutional management to tailor their open and distance learning programmes in such a way that they encourage increased enrollments. The educational planners may be assisted to formulate strategies that motivate prospective students to embark on open and distance learning programmes. The university may also benefit from this study as it could provide an opportunity for marketing itself in order to be more effectively responsive to the needs of students and society as a whole.

**Concept of Open and Distance Education**

According to Keegan (1980), Jenkins (1981), Peters (1982) and Lemmerner (1994) open and distance learning refers to the education system that covers various forms of study whereby students are separated from the tutor, in terms of space and time. It is characterized by face-to-face tutoring (not lecturing) and students learn on their own most of the time. There is little supervision, if any, by the tutor whose central role is facilitation of learning. Notwithstanding definitional problems, as different researchers understand open and distance education differently, this definition forms important components of distance education.

**Forms of ODL Students Support Systems**

**Desire for life-long education**

Some form of self-sustainability for open and distance learning students is derived from the mere desire for life-long education. Bishop (1995:49) states that life-long education is much more than the practice of adult education, usually acquired in the form of evening classes. The concept of life-long education is in this context conceived as an existential continuum, as long as life. Education is life, and life is education. People who share or are endowed with this view of education sacrifice all what they possess in order to widen their education. Students of open and distance learning who hold such views are self-sustained by the burning desire to learn at all cost.

Peters (1982) shares the same view with Bishop (1995:49), that active learning involves students by being interactive, experiential and self-directed. Students in open and distance learning are encouraged to discover new ideas, new patterns of learning and new ways of divergent, critical reflective thinking.

According to Coombs (1968:139), life-long education is essential in a rapidly progressing and changing society for three major reasons as follows: i) to ensure the employment mobility of individuals, and employability of the less skilled persons. ii) to retain already well trained people abreast of new knowledge and technology essential to their continued high productivity in their respective occupations and iii) to improve the quality and increase satisfaction of individual lives through culturally enriching their expanding leisure time. Combs (1968) argues that life-long education is for national development.

In this context, the continuing education by, for example teachers and other professionals at all academic levels, is of strategic significance. If the teachers do not keep abreast of the frontiers of knowledge and skills, they will be teaching yesterday’s education to tomorrow’s citizens.

**Employment and Employability**

Students of open and distance learning programmes sustain themselves by denying themselves whatever luxury goods and recreation in order to raise their educational qualifications to enable them complete favourably and effectively for the few jobs which are available on the market (Thompson 1983:102). Dore (1976) cited in Thompson (1983:102) points out that this process of acquiring higher qualifications is associated with qualificationism or the Diploma disease. Effective and efficient education and training may be corrupted into mere certificate winning because of the importance ascribed by employers in both appointing and thereafter promoting employees.
to the posts commensurate with the qualifications
they hold. Combs and Hallak (1987:26) concur
with Dore (1976) when they say that teacher
salary structures generally provide for different
salary scales based on official teacher qualification.
They argue that fully qualified teachers with some
years of service usually get a substantially higher
salary than those with lesser qualifications. The
net effect, in any given circumstances where the
qualification profile of the workforce improves,
there is a corresponding increase in salary scale.
Students for open and distance learning sacrifice
whatever little resources they may have in order
to sustain themselves to achieve their educational
objectives (Maslow in Fulmer 1983:122).

Agrusso (1978) and Knowles (1983) agree that
the motivation to learn through open and distance
programmes might emanate from sheer desire or
leisure in order to enhance one's position at the
workplace. From the foregoing, the job market
demands that employees and prospective employ-
ees have to raise their educational qualifications.
The already employed cannot join the conventional
institutions of higher learning but have to
find ways and means to sustain themselves in the
open and distance learning programmes.

Motivation For Self-Sustainability
Positive and motivated attitude inspire success in
school in any endeavour and in one's job more
than any other factor. One has to be motivated
to achieve success in school, in work and in life.
Motivation is the inner drive or urge that moves
one to action. (Ferret 2000:2-2). One may have
skills, experience, intelligence and talent but will
accomplish little if one is not motivated to direct
one's energies towards specific goals. People with
positive attitude demonstrate enthusiasm, vitality,
optimism and perseverance to accomplish set
goals. It thus follows that students in open and
distance learning programmes are self-sustained
by extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. According to
Herzberg's Two Factor Motivation theory cited in
Fulmer (1983:124) aspirants to a higher employ-
ment position, work harder and are motivated by
a sense of achievement recognition, advancement,
the challenging work itself, the possibility of
personal growth and responsibility.
Self-actualized people are happy and secure in
their opinion of who and what they are. They are
able to effectively and efficiently work towards
achievements of goals they really want in life.

Heiman and Slomianko (1992) state that studying
at university level, marks the beginning of a
significant and existing transition is one's life, giving
access to new worlds, new ways of thinking
and new friends. Everything looks bright with an
aura of intellectual excitement, promise and
opportunity.

Students Support Services
Modules
Tait, (1996:59) views student support services as
activities that are individualized or delivered in
electronics, or some other print media or tutoring
as well as counselling.

According to Benza (1999) the ZOU instruction-
al system is on the basis of the simple traditional
print media complemented by occasional face-to-
face scheduled tutorials to provide both the cogni-
tive and an effective aspects of learning. The
print media are well designed, structured self-in-
structional modules whose content is reviewed
by experts. These modules are usually available to
students as part of the registration package.

Adult students have a variety of characteristics
that, more often than not, affect their learning
processes positively or negatively. Some students
demonstrate readiness to learn varying degrees
of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and many
competing interests in life (Knowles 1983).

Knowles (1984) states that open and distance
learning mode of delivery is based on the
andragogical approach based on five assumptions.
These emphasize the need for self-direction,
effect of experience, readiness to learn, immediate
application of knowledge skills and orientation
with a view of solving problems. Koll (1985)
identifies four stages of learning as concrete
experience, reflective observation, abstract
conceptualization and active experimentation.
In essence, both authorities recognize the critical
role of these stages as they sustain students who
learn on their own.

Bishop (1995:142) states that modules rather than
prescribed textbooks as basic learning materials
in open and distance learning are not expensive
and are written in the simplest possible language
for the level.
Modules contain built-in tests and activities to ensure that open and distance learning students master the particular topics and achieve set objectives. Modules are designed and prepared on the technique of programmed learning that takes the following into account:

1. **Step-by-step:** the subject matter/content is divided into small manageable units of information and reinforcement is provided.
2. **Active participation:** students act on the units of information through activities to acquire knowledge. Students learn by doing.
3. **Success:** students are afforded the opportunity to succeed. Success leads to further success. Failure should never be an option as it is inhibitive to learning.
4. **Immediate verification:** students have the chance to verify their responses and forge ahead.
5. **Logical, graded progress:** modules or programmed learning obviates elements likely to distract learning.
6. **Individual pace:** students proceed at their own pace, that is, flexible individualized instruction.

Lockwood (1995) and Bishop (1995) agree that interactive learning includes guiding learners, deriving meanings from the learning activities, stimulating enquiry, analytical and creative approaches as students apply the new knowledge to solve problems.

**Assignments**

Assignments in open and distance learning programmes encourage students to explore topics more deeply and purposefully, help them to organize their thoughts on the topics in order to come up with their own viewpoints, give them practice in written communication, enable the tutor to assess students' performance and give feedback and prepare them for final examination (Rowntree 1995: 148-149).

Tutor’s comments on assignments have a flavour of dialogue as they seek clarification, evidence of research or amplification or draw students’ attention to errors so as to encourage discoveries of more information or stretch imagination. Rekkedal (1983:231-52) says that there is a positive relationship between the turnaround period of marked assignments and the dropout rate of open and distance learning students. He further states that research has shown that shorter turnaround period of marked assignments equals lower drop-out rate and vice versa. It therefore follows that tutors who provide timely feedback sustain students on open and distance learning programmes. Dhanaraj (1995) says timely assignment feedback helps students to improve their future performance.

Rukuni et al (2002) advise tutors that tutoring is not about bragging but all about facilitating and stimulating the students to learn, removing academic obstacles and filling the knowledge gaps that may exist in the students' learning process. They say tutoring should be viewed as an effective and facilitative students support system that motivates open and distance learning students. Supportive tutoring enhances the learner’s positive self-image (Jegede:1999). Jerkins (1981) concurs with Jegede (1999) that some form of face-to-face teaching or something close to it is a significant component of open and distance learning and so should be upheld. Heiman and Slomianko (1992) state that studying at university level, marks the beginning of a significant and existing transition in one’s life, giving access to new worlds, new ways of thinking and new friends. Everything looks bright with an aura of intellectual excitement, promise and opportunity.

**Research Methodology**

This study sought to determine students’ views on self-sustainability in open and distance learning. The study used the qualitative research design which is quite flexible and facilitative in presenting students’ responses in a descriptive fashion. The descriptive survey design is one of the most appropriate and effective modes of undertaking research. It is most effective in collecting information, describing it and explicating perceptions, values and viewpoints (Leedy 1997).

The qualitative approach was used to a lesser extent to cross-validate the information.

The population of this study was one hundred and eighty (180) past and current students from the Master of Education - Management, Social Sciences and Bachelor of Commerce programmes.
A convenience sample of eighty (80) respondents was made from current and former students of ZOU. These were sixty-three (63) male and seventeen (17) female respondents. Sixty (60) respondents were selected as they attended tutorials and questionnaires were handed to 20 past students.

Questionnaires were administered to students attending tutorials and were collected soon after completion. Both structured and unstructured questionnaires were used to enlist students’ viewpoints on their self-sustainability in ODL. Twenty (20) questions were structured and five (5) were open-ended. The use of questionnaires was preferred to any other data collection instrument because of their economical nature in terms of financial resources and time.

The qualitative data resultant from the semi-structured questionnaires followed a thematic approach in its description and interpretation of the findings. The structured questionnaires elicited data on a variety of student perceptions on student self-sustainability in open and distance learning programmes. It is of academic interest to note that there was positive correlation between the students’ perceptions and literature review.

**Findings**

Sixty-five (65) of the respondents were married and they all had dependents. Thirty-five (35) respondents had dependents ranging from 1-3 and the other thirty-five (35) had between 4 and 6 dependents. The remaining ten (10) respondents had more than seven (7) dependents. Although there were fifteen (15) single respondents, all respondents had dependents who needed sustenance.

This study sought to establish the sources of student self-sustainability in the Open and Distance Learning, ascertain why students sacrifice so much in order to acquire higher educational certification and resuitantly formulate expedient strategies for student self-sustainability. The findings are discussed under the following thematic subheadings: employability, the delivery mode, the modular system, self-actualization, life-long education and student services.

**Employability**

The majority, sixty-six (66) 82% respondents confirmed that they are sustained in the open and distance learning programme by the desire to acquire higher academic certification which increases one’s life earning capacity. Almost all the respondents, seventy-six (76) 95%, said that enhancing earning capacity sustains them in the programmes. It is common knowledge that highly qualified employees are well remunerated at their work place. The majority respondents commended the open and distance learning mode as it provides opportunity for hands-on skills training. Sixty-seven (67) 84% of the respondents pointed out that university graduates get promoted sooner rather than at their work places. One can attribute students’ self-sustainability to the desire to promote their professional growth. Thompson (1983:102) states that prospective employees with higher academic qualifications compete favourably and effectively for the few jobs available on the market. Combs and Hallak (1987:26) emphasize that people with higher educational certification earn higher salaries.

Almost all the respondents seventy-five (75) 94% indicated that the Open and Distance Learning mode develops student’s self-discipline, sixty-seven (67) 84% indicated that it is flexible and responsive to individual learning styles.

**Delivery Mode**

Almost all the respondents, seventy-five (75) 94% indicated that the Open and Distance Learning mode develops student’s self-discipline, sixty-seven (67) 84% indicated that it is flexible and responsive to individual learning styles, that means one is not pushed but one learns at one’s place, eighty-eight (88%) 88% indicated that syllabus coverage by student seminar presentations or discussions motivates and sustain students on the chosen programmes. In other words, students actively participate on the tutorials. It is noteworthy that sixty-six (66) 82% respondents commend tutors for being approachable and sensitive to student’s needs. This attitude, no doubt encourages students to forge ahead. The Open and Distance Learning mode actually sustains the students in the programmes almost all seventy-one (71%), 89% indicated that it is cheaper than the conventional
learning for breadwinners who have family, work and other social commitments. The cost-effectiveness is an important aspect or factor that brings about student self-sustainability. Tait, (1996:59) views student support services as attitudes that are individualized or delivered in electronics or tutoring as well as counselling. Knowles (1984) states that Open and Distance Learning students are sustained by such assumption as the need for self-direction, immediate application of the knowledge, skills and orientation with a view to solving problems.

The Modular System
The modular system which is the main study material seems to motivate students in the open and distance learning. Sixty (60) 75% respondents indicated that the use of modules sustain them as they contain adequate, relevant and well researched content. Sixty –one (61) 76% respondents indicated that modules are comprehensive and easily internalized. In other words, modules facilitate learning in small manageable units easy to assimilate and remember. One can safely conclude that the credits gained per each module per semester motivate students. Benza (1999) states that the print media (modules) used by students are well designed, prepared self-instructional modules whose content is reviewed by experts. Bishop (1995 :141-142) argues that the modules are neither bulky nor expensive, written in the simplest possible language, contain built-in tests and activities and prepared on the technique of programmed learning that takes into account learning step by step, ensuring success, immediate verification, logical graded progress and flexibility for individual pace.

Self–actualization
On the basis of the biographical data, the researcher notes that the majority of respondents are aged between 31 and sixty-five (65) were married with between three (3) and seven (7) dependants. All these respondents are in full employment but have desire to further their education. Almost all seventy-six (76) 95% respondents indicated that their self-sustainability comes from the desire to enhance their social status. On the basis of this empirical evidence, one can safely conclude that almost all respondents value enhanced social standing, hence they find ways and means to complete their open and distance learning programmes. Forrett (2000:2-2) says motivation is the inner drive or urge that moves one to action and aspirants to higher positions work harder. Fulmer (1983:124) argues that aspirants to higher positions are driven by a desire for achievements, recognition, advancement, the challenging work itself, the possibility of personal growth and responsibility.

Life–long Education
An overwhelming response of seventy-six (76) 95% indicated that the desire to improve one’s life-long earning capacity keeps the momentum of students in open and distance learning. Students optimize learning in order to enhance their earnings commensurate with acquired higher educational qualifications. Seventy-two (72) 90% respondents indicated that they are sustained in the ODL programme by the desire for life-long education. These are the students who never stop learning. Seventy-six (76) 95% respondents are sustained in the programmes by the desire to keep abreast of modern educational trends. This is done for professional and / or occupational growth. Seventy-two (72) 90% respondents continue in the ODL programmes to foster national development. Those sustained by desire to keep abreast with modern educational trends were seventy-six (76) 95%.

Student Support Services
Sixty–six (66) 82% respondents indicated that tutors were approachable and helpful. This view tallies with Rukuni et al (2002) who advises that tutoring is not about bragging but all about facilitating and stimulating the students to learn, removing academic obstacles and filling the knowledge gaps that may exist in the student’s learning process. Legede in concurrence with Rukuni et al (2002) says all key actors in open and distance learning environment must be extremely
facilitative, innovative, creative and flexible. Seventy–six (76) 95% respondents said they enjoyed active participation in discussions in the open and distance learning. Lockwood (1995) and Bishop (1995) share the same viewpoint that interactive learning includes guiding learners, stimulating equity, and creative approaches for students to apply the knowledge and skills to solve problems. Rowntree (1995:148-149) states that student services such as assignment turnaround period, library services and study materials prepare students for seasonal examination. These students’ services as indicated by majority respondents sustain students.

**Conclusions**

The research sought to determine the source of students self–sustainability, why they sacrifice so much to acquire higher educational qualifications, and consequently, come up with recommendations for open and distance learning.

Consequent upon the study, the conclusions are made on the basis of six thematic aspects as follows: career orientation, the delivery mode, the modular system self–sustainability, life–long learning and student services in the open and distance.

On the basis of the overwhelming responses, students’ sustainability comes from the desire to become more employable, to increase life-long earning capacity and enhance their prospects for professional growth and promotion.

From the research it was evident that the delivery mode augured well for self-discipline, learning was flexible and adaptable to individual needs, there was active student participation in tutorials (discussions), the delivery mode was more cost-effective than the conventional, and the tutors were always approachable and helpful.

It emerged from the research findings that the majority indicated that they were sustained by the desire to actualize themselves and enhance their social status. Self-actualization emerged to be the greatest sustainer for students in the open and distance learning.

It was observed from the findings that one other great sustainer is the desire for life-long earning capacity.

Finally, it emerged that student services in the form of counselling, scheduled tutorials, assignments as evaluation tools, library services, seminar presentations and innovative and competent tutors sustain learners.

The study concludes that students are sustained in open and distance learning by the desire for career-orientedness, the participatory delivery mode, the modular system, self–actualization, life-long learning and facilitative student services.

On the basis of findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were suggested:

- ODL institutions should consider putting in place mechanism to enable students to access educational loans to sustain their studies
- Establishment of district resource centres to function as information, assignment depository and collection centres would significantly reduce students travelling costs and improve communication
- In order to provide a very welcome opportunity for consolidation and revision of tutorials ZOU and other ODL institutions should consider re/introducing radio programmes to complement the modules and tutorials


<table>
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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>Open and distance learning provides opportunity for hands on skills training.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Fees payment by instalment increases self-sustainability.</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Salary differentials between degreed and non-degreed employees motivate students.</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Acquisition of higher academic certification is a motivation on its own.</td>
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<td>99</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Open and distance learning mode is cheaper for breadwinners.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open and distance learning mode is responsive to individual learning styles.</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>The modules used contain adequate, relevant, well-researched information.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Modules are easily comprehensible and internalised.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Open and distance learning encourages active students participation in discussion.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Syllabus coverage by student seminar presentations motivates.</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>100</td>
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<td>Open and distance mode develops students self-discipline.</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire for self-actualisation sustains students to enroll and complete chosen programme</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>Tutors are approachable and sensitive to student needs.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open and Distance Learning enhances earning capacity</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>University graduands get promoted at their workplaces sooner rather than later.</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am self-sustained by the desire for life-long learning.</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>I am self-sustained by the desire for promoting national development.</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>I am self-sustained by the need to keep abreast with modern educational trends.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>80</td>
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<td>Being an open and distance learning student enhances social status.</td>
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<td>98</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>80</td>
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