Equitable manpower development in Zimbabwe; the role of ODL in the past, present and the future

Moyo Susan Samukele
Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic (Zimbabwe)
susan.moyo42@gmail.com
Moyo Albert
Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic (Zimbabwe)
Dube Gilbert
Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo Polytechnic (Zimbabwe)
gilbertdube@gmail.com ; +26371307205

Abstract

This paper seeks to outline and examine the education system from colonial times, assess the role of ODL in empowering and developing human capital for socio-economic development and to project into the future of ODL in Zimbabwe. In the past the colonial education encouraged formal education to the detriment of ODL and this impacted negatively on the socio-economic development of the country. This meant that human capital development was constrained and bottlenecked. With the advent of ODL through institutions like Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), opportunities for educational advancement opened up to the general populace. Human capital was empowered, social status of various individuals was enhanced and to a greater extent economic development was realised (though it is still debatable). The projection into the future is that ODL should develop into a system that caters for vocational training and entrepreneurship. A study was carried out in Matabeleland South involving 50 participants from ZOU, Municipalities, institutions of higher learning, head of sections from all Ministries as well as small- medium enterprises. Data were collected through interviews and questionnaires which were administered to respondents selected purposively. Findings from the survey indicated that in the past the majority of people in Matabeleland South lacked access to higher education and therefore lacked the craft literacy, competency and skills befitting the global village. Findings further revealed that lack of empowerment meant minimal participation in socio-economic development leaving the majority outside the mainstream of corporate governance. Furthermore, it was also revealed that with ODL, came massive skills development that has the potential to curb challenges of brain drain. Conclusions drawn were that ODL has the capacity to empower the general populace including women who in the past were marginalised in economic development through cultural stereotypes. It was also concluded that ODL is an intervention that has the capacity to stimulate entrepreneurial skills development with a view to creating the much needed employment opportunities in drought prone areas of Matabeleland South leading to sustainable economic development.

Key Words: Open and distance Learning, manpower development, human capital

Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system is innovative in nature. It is an attempt to bring education to the door step of all and sundry in order to make illiteracy a thing of the past and by extension leads to manpower development. This paper seeks to outline and examine the role of ODL in empowering and developing human capital for socio-economic development in Zimbabwe. In a bid to do so, this research will examine the education system in Zimbabwe from the colonial era, assess the role of ODL vis-avis the economic
and social demands of the country today and project into the future of ODL in Zimbabwe.

The education system in Zimbabwe during the colonial era was highly polarised, very segregatory and discriminatory in nature. It had a bias towards the whites as the ruling class. The majority black people were marginalised and had no access to quality education. UNESCO (2008) refers to quality education as that kind of education which focuses on learning as opposed to educating, which further looks at two dimensions, that is the learner and the system that creates and supports learning. Women were not involved in the mainstream of decision-making mechanisms due to the fact that they were not given the chance to access formal education by the laws of the land, let alone by the traditional beliefs. The education system had bottlenecks and it was skewed in favour of whites who had the privilege to access tertiary education.

The advent of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) opened up awareness for the marginalised blacks and that gave them a life opportunity to scale the academic ladder of tertiary education which had hitherto been a preserve of the well to do. It however stands to be seen whether ODL is relevant and sufficient for equitable manpower development.

**Background to study**

Matabeleland South region is a drought prone area. Livestock production is the main economic activity. It is mostly at subsistence level although there are some commercial farms. The region is replete with gold panning activities which have brought about a lot of environmental degradation. Furthermore, Mat South shares boundary with three countries namely, Mozambique, South Africa and Botswana. It is the only region with three border posts. Migration to these neighbouring countries is very high. School dropout rate is very high. As a result of these factors, the pass rate in Mathematics and science at ‘O’ Level is very low. Most children in this region find it difficult to access tertiary education because of not having Mathematics at ‘O’ Level. It is against this backdrop that ODL has an important role to play in bridging the gap and contributing towards human capital development.

Before independence, most Primary school heads in Zimbabwe were holders of PTL after completing standard 6 or Junior Certificate. Most of those teaching at secondary schools were holders of T1 which was a post ‘O’ Level qualification. During that time, teachers with degrees were very few because of lack of access to institutions of higher learning. In the then Rhodesia there was only one university, that is, The University of Rhodesia. The education system was highly segregatory and racist. Feeding into this bottlenecked education system was the fact that there were very few secondary schools that could offer ‘A’ Level which was and is still the entry qualification for degree courses in Zimbabwe today. The demerits of such a scenario were seen to be hitting hard on the blacks who eventually dropped out of school or were to make do with low qualifications so that they could not offer any stiff competition against their white counterparts in the job market.

At independence the new government increased access to education from primary school to university level. More schools were built and enrolments in schools increased. Hitherto tertiary education was limited to correspondence colleges such as the Central African Correspondence College, University of South Africa (UNISA) and University of London, awarding general certificates of education (GCE) and degrees. The bottleneck system changed drastically after independence owing to the policy of mass education. The situation further improved with the opening of universities in almost all the ten provinces of the country. It should be noted however, that women in particular, were still disadvantaged along gender and cultural
stereotypes compared to their male counterparts. The introduction of open and distance learning which came through the College of Distance Education at the University of Zimbabwe, later led to the birth of Zimbabwe Open University in 1999. This opened flood gates for all and sundry, including women who were hitherto deprived of accessing university education. The advent of ZOU was a blessing to the majority of Zimbabweans who had no access to university education. More and more people could enrol with the University including those in rural areas. Pritchett (1996) remarks that expanding access to education and training has been a tenet of growth and development strategies of most countries. This paper seeks to find out if the above assertion is proving true for the Zimbabwean economy.

**Methodology**

The study used the qualitative research paradigm. Thick descriptions were used to give a holistic picture of the respondents’ perceptions about ODL. The qualitative paradigm was chosen because it aims to understand the social world from the viewpoint of respondents, through detailed descriptions of their cognitive and symbolic actions, and through the richness of meaning associated with observable behaviour (Myers 2000). Kemmis (1980) asserts that the true value of non-experimental research lies in its connection to the real world, its ability to describe actions in their social and historical contexts, and its ability to rationally critique these descriptions. Interviews and questionnaires were used to generate data on the perceptions of respondents regarding ODL as a mode of learning. Qualitative research has its roots mainly in three types of theoretical frameworks which are namely: phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnography. This study is based on phenomenological theoretical framework, which requires the researcher to describe vividly or thickly the lived experiences of the respondents by using their own words.

**Participants**

The study used a judgemental purposive sample which largely relies on the researcher’s experience or ingenuity to deliberately obtain units of analysis in such a manner that the sample obtained may be regarded as being representative of the relevant population (Welmount 2012). This sampling method enabled the researcher to identify information rich participants who were knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study. A purposive judgemental sample of 50 participants was used in this study. All the participants were drawn from the seven districts found in Matabeleland south, and these are Gwanda, Mangwe, Bulilima, Umzingwane, Insiza, Matobo, and Beitbridge. Mat South Province was selected because that is where the three researchers reside hence convenient in collecting data. From each district, 7 participants were chosen except for Gwanda which had 8 due to its proximity and size in terms of population. The choice of participants was gender sensitive and this was done in order to avoid collecting data biased towards men or women.

All the participants were drawn from various organisations which included ZOU, Rural District councils, Gwanda municipality, institutions of higher learning such as Esigodini Agricultural institute, Joshua Mqabuko Polytechnic, heads of sections from various ministries, banks, schools as well as small – medium enterprises. Ethical considerations were done as permission was sought from the Provincial education director and heads of sections before collecting data. Thomas and Nelson (2001:281) observe that “Convenience sampling is used in some case studies because the purpose of the study is not to estimate some population value, but to select case from which one can learn most”.
In this study, the researchers identified information rich participants because they were knowledgeable about the phenomenon that was being investigated.

**Instruments**

Interviews and questionnaires were used to generate and collect data in this study. All participants were given questionnaires and they were hand delivered in order to avoid delays since some respondents were based in the rural areas. Due to the fact that questionnaires were hand delivered and personally collected, there was 100% response from all the respondents. All participants were interviewed and interviews were held in the interviewee’s offices during working hours except for 5 teachers who were interviewed during the weekend at their homes. Each interview session was roughly 30 minutes long. Thomas and Nelson (2001) point out that “spending an equal amount of interview time with each interviewee ensures consistency which leads to trustworthiness of the study”. The researchers actually spent 30 minutes with each interviewee in order to be uniform. Deem (2002) points out that in interviews it is of paramount importance that the researcher records as much detail as possible. In order to capture much detail, researchers, in this study, recorded all responses in notebook. Three researchers shared respondents and interviews in all the seven districts in order to maximise on triangulation for purposes of validity and reliability of data gathered. Elaine (2009) says the

“Triangulation of methods involves the use of different data collecting instruments with the same subjects. This has the merit of counterbalancing the threats inherent to any one method”.

It is evident from the above discussion that different instruments, methods and investigations were used to generate and collect data. This allowed for triangulation of sources, methods and investigators. The converging perspectives from triangulation make findings of the research more valid.

**Findings and Discussions**

**Findings**

The research had the following findings:

- ODL students were mostly adults and mature.
- Most respondents preferred ODL mode of learning because it gave them the opportunity of studying whilst working.
- Respondents perceived education as a way of advancing their careers and capacity building.
- ODL was highly dependent on the performance of the economy.
- 75% of the women in leadership positions were graduates of ODL.
- Future of ODL was very much dependent on the performance of the economy.

**Discussion**

In an effort to establish the role of ODL in the past, present and future, regarding equitable manpower development in Matabeleland South Province, the following themes emerged from the study, namely, access to education, maturity of students, manpower development and social mobility. The ensuing discussion details the above mentioned themes.

**Access to education**

A thorough analysis of data obtained from questionnaires and interviews showed that statistically, there is a significant number of people who have indeed pursued their academic and professional studies through distance and open learning. These range from diploma to masters degrees. The study tried to balance the number of male and female respondents in a bid to get a balanced picture about issues relating to distance learn-
ODL has, beyond doubt, sought to address gender parity as the hitherto marginalised women now have equal access to tertiary education. Such access further determined the type of institutions of learning one studied with as the data analysis indicates that 80% of the respondents studied through with the ZOU and the other 20% studied with UNISA. One of the respondents had this to say:

“I chose to study with ZOU because I am an adult who has a family to look after. I could not afford to be detached from my family in pursuit of education. ZOU was the nearest institution that I could study with using the little financial resources I had as a civil servant”.

The above response indicates that ZOU was a preferred institution when considering access in terms of vicinity and location of the institution and fees charged. For a married person such factors are critical if one has to pursue further education. Another the respondents had this to say:

“I had no ‘A’ Levels but had good passes at ‘O’ Level, and a Diploma in teaching qualification. That is the reason why I enrolled with ZOU because other universities wanted students with ‘A’ Level passes”.

The above response suggests that ZOU created an opportunity where an ‘A’ Level entry requirement for university education presented a bottleneck. The advent of distance learning opened access and allowed enrolment based on mature entry, hence making tertiary education accessible to everyone. About 65% of the respondents, when asked to explain why they studied through distance learning indicated that they wanted to study whilst working. They revealed that when someone enrols to study on a full-time basis, one is supposed to go on study leave and get a quarter salary. Respondents indicated that because they had families to fend for, as well school fees for children they needed to pay, studying through ODL was the only option. The study also revealed that women preferred using this approach to learning in place of conventional education, showing that women were also being accorded access to education which was a preserve for men in the past. Most respondents felt that ODL was a worthwhile mode of learning as it allowed them to study while working. It also afforded them access to tertiary education at nominal rates which were negotiable.

One male respondent had this to say:

“I chose to study with UNISA because it is a reputable institution. The modules are of good quality and quite easy to understand. In fact, when I was studying with UNISA, it was as if I was dealing directly with university lecturers”.

The above response implies that the institution’s reputation has a bearing on one’s choice. This suggests that those institutions that are held in low esteem are not favoured by the prospective students. In addition to that, the quality of modules used on ODL also has a bearing on the reputation of a given university. Such learning material needs to be informative so that the students can easily understand on their own.

Maturity of students

Information gathered indicated that 60% of the respondents were in the age group between 41 and 60 years, while 40% were in the 30-39 years range. Such findings indicate that ODL is conducive for mature people who are mostly in the nation’s working class. Maturity is an important factor in open and distance learning. There is need for self-discipline and hard work which are important tenets of ODL.

Manpower development

This is another theme that emerged from the investigations carried out, as most respondents revealed that ODL has helped them by broadening their scope in terms of knowledge and skills required in their various job tasks. About 90% of the respondents in the study advanced arguments that engaging in further studies was a way of capacity building. They
believed that they were enhancing their knowledge and skills development so that they could be more effective at work and produce better products than before. Respondents revealed that their interactions with fellow students from various organisations when studying made them understand life in its totality from a kaleidoscopic view. Their application of knowledge and experience gained has helped them become capacitated in management skills. This has seen some graduates becoming Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) consultants, facilitators in workshops, counsellors as well managers in various sectors of the economy. One respondent, who holds a Masters of Science in Agricultural Management with ZOU, revealed that he has initiated projects for youths in Mat south such as landscaping, pen-fattening, nutrition gardens as well other livelihood projects funded by Ubuntu Foundation. The above thinking is in line with the aspirations of ZIMASSET (October 2013- December 2018), which is an economic blue-print espoused by ZANU PF party in its five year plan. The main thrust of this economic tool is to empower indigenous people to be self-reliant so as to eradicate all forms of poverty. Hence, programmes or courses offered through ODL should try to perpetuate this cause.

Ojo (2010) says human capital represents the knowledge, skills and attitudes that make it possible to do their jobs. He further argues that human capital is an avenue for the development of career paths because the training received allows for skills acquisition for better performance and ‘ipso facto’ position advancement and education. Today’s workplace environment, where human capital is actually required, emphasises management skills and technological automation, it also places the demand for higher qualifications on the labour force of developing nations such as Zimbabwe. One may further argue that an educated population leaves an enduring positive effect economically with a larger tax base. Thus through ODL, there is a lot of investment in human capital, which, in the long run, results in socio-economic development. It is therefore, this access to education that helps to develop and sharpen the workers who would not be able to leave their place of work for a full time education and training for capacity building.

Social mobility

In addition to the above, social mobility is another theme that emerged through this investigation. From the respondents, it came out clearly that ODL brings about upward social mobility in terms of social status, job-related promotions and remuneration. Most of the interviewees indicated that they have, one way or the other, been promoted in their various work environments. Teachers highlighted that they have been promoted from being ordinary classroom teachers to positions of senior teachers and deputy heads, whilst others have moved from being deputy heads to heads and Education Inspectors. As an example, 2% of female nurses in the health sector indicated that they have been promoted from being nurses to nursing tutors at Gwanda Provincial Multi-disciplinary school. This is in line with the National Gender Policy which aims to mainstream gender issues into all sectors in order to eliminate all negative economic, social and cultural practices that impede equality and equity of the sexes. This upward social mobility has indeed, triggered a lot of enthuse among members of the community because of clear and enviable benefits.

Future of ODL

The study revealed that the future of ODL is bleak for as long as the economy is performing badly. About 20% of the respondents argued that some prospective students will end up unemployed and fail to pay tuition fees as one respondent was heard saying: “ODL is highly dependent on the performance of the economy. If the economy performs poorly, we will fail to enrol. However, if there
is a boom in the economy enrolments will increase making ODL viable.”

The above assertion casts a grim on the bleak future of ODL, since as an economic good, education is inelastic. It was further revealed that since economic trends are downwards globally, the impact on ODL as a mode of learning would be negative, particularly in Zimbabwe. In addition to that, 80% of the respondents when asked to comment on what they see as the future of ODL indicated that even though it is much depended on the performance of the economy, there has been a deliberate paradigm shift by the Zimbabwean government to invest a lot towards ODL. This is evident in the fact that besides ZOU, most tertiary institutions such as Midlands State University, NUST, Great Zimbabwe University to mention just a few, are now extending their mode of learning from formal to ODL by allowing students to study through block release programmes. This policy was crafted by the government as a way of reducing costs on education. This, in a way was seen by respondents as a way of opening up access to education to the working population which is actually the major mandate of ODL. Furthermore, primary teachers’ colleges in Zimbabwe have all taken the element of Distance education on board by enrolling students teachers in a 2-5-2 programme, which give them five terms of open and distance learning.

Conclusions

Our findings in the study have shown that ODL has the capacity to empower the labour force including women who were marginalised as it gives equal opportunity to education. About 75% of women in positions of authority in institutions researched are ZOU graduates. This is a direct benefit from ODL. It is an avenue for learning through which the social induced boundaries of education are removed. It is also a means for the development of career paths because the training received allows for skills acquisition for better performance at the work place. Conclusively, ODL is a powerful channel for personal individual self-development, renewal and improvement of employees’ skills abilities and competencies wherever it is provided as a mode of learning. The study also concluded that ODL is an intervention that has the capacity to stimulate entrepreneurial skills development with a view to creating the much needed self-sufficiency among the people of Matabeleland South which is endowed with a lot of natural resources and raw materials. There is however a gap in as far as development of such skills is concerned as most courses currently offered are more academic rather than practical.

Recommendations

Basing on the findings from the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Institutions that offer ODL should align their curricula to the demands of the economy and seek to train job creators and not job seekers to avoid flooding the job market with jobless people holding academic qualifications. Courses offered through ODL mode of learning should empower graduates to be self-sufficient and this in the long run assists them to be able to create employment and help in poverty eradication.
- Learning materials like modules should be detailed so that students can easily learn on their own.
- There is need to revise modules regularly so that they are commensurate with the dynamics of both technology and economy.
- Courses offered should meet the needs of people in the region, such as those that deal with small-scale mining, fattening, animal production and ranching. This will help in trying to keep youths gainfully employed and curbing challenges of migration and unemployment in the Province.
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