

# Open and Distance Learning in Rural Communities of Zimbabwe: Exploring Challenges Faced by Zimbabwe Open University Students in Kadoma District, Zimbabwe

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### ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore challenges faced by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) students in rural communities using Kadoma District as a case study. The specific objectives of this study were to (i) identify challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities in achieving their educational goals and (ii) establish effects of these challenges in accomplishing/finalizing their programmes. The research employed a mixed research approach to triangulate the results. The study used a case study research design to solicit information. The target population was undergraduate students who were currently pursuing the following programmes; Commerce, Education, Applied Sciences, and Agriculture. A sample of 30 postgraduate students and five key informants were used to collect data. The sampling techniques employed were convenience and purposive samplings respectively. Findings revealed that students in rural communities are facing some challenges during their academic career. These challenges include inadequate access to tutor support and physical resources, inflexible practices and access to ICT, poor or no electricity to operate ICT appliances, financial, cultural, community and employment responsibilities. These challenges have some effects which include but not limited to late submission of assignments, poor quality results and university dropouts. Basing on these conclusions, the study recommends the university to recruit more tutors who should be available for students at district offices. The university should ensure technological development at the district centers, and within the student's locations. The study also recommends the university to provide students in the rural communities with study skills, time management skills, as well as guidance and counseling required to manage their studies. The study finally recommends further studies on strategies to encounter challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities.

**Keywords:** Challenges, Rural Communities, Student, Open and Distance Learning

### INTRODUCTION

Open, and Distance Learning (ODL) is one option known to accommodate people who are employed full time. These people will be trying to upgrade their skills at work, improve

their knowledge, eye for promotions and make a career change among some other things. As they are embarking on their studies, other issues continue to function in their lives, for instance taking care of their families and paying school fees for children. Distance education is also a self-directed means in which most of the academic work is done by students on their own unlike at the traditional university. There is no frequent contact with fellow students or lecturers, and one must have strong time management and organizational skill to keep up with his\her studies.

Das et al. (2009) observe that half of the students enrolled in higher education in the developing world are receiving it through the open and distance learning mode. Dodo (2013) argues that this has been caused by the growing desire of the majority to acquire education from a few institutions that are offering higher education in a flexible manner, particularly those in the rural communities. The Zimbabwe Open University is one such institution that has been involved in distance education for some time now.

While it is true some studies have been carried out on challenges faced by ODL students, there has been scanty research in Zimbabwe on challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities. Distance education is being used in Zimbabwe as a means of expanding higher education opportunities to improve the academic standing of most in-service teachers (Ohene and Essuman, 2014). At Zimbabwe Open University, teachers constitute the majority of these distance education students. These students face numerous challenges ranging from institutional, social to personal. These challenges result when institutions make their plans without considering challenges faced by students in rural communities, for instance the recently introduced myVista e-learning portal for Zimbabwe Open University. For the institution to plan effectively and to sustain the students on ODL programmes and to reduce the burden on students, challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities ought to be explored and addressed.

This paper now explores challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities in their quest to study at Zimbabwe Open University. Specifically, the study focuses on the effects endured by students in remote areas. In Mashonaland West Region, the Zimbabwe Open University created satellite offices in Karoi and Kadoma districts to try and bring university education to students in these remote areas. However, it would appear open and distance learners continue to experience some challenges in spite of this development. One is forced to conclude that distance is not the real problem, but there are some challenges about individuals' situations, for instance, work, time, social, technology and a few other challenges.

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore these challenges using Kadoma District as a case study. It is hoped the findings in this study will be used instrumentally and conceptually in coming up with policy directives by the Zimbabwe Open University and those involved in open distance learning. Open and distance learning has become a fact for most people in the country thus it would be appropriate for policy decisions to be based on the extrinsic and intrinsic problems faced by students in both urban and rural communities. Analysing these challenges will help ODL instructors to improve their skills and styles of teaching as they interact with students in rural communities.

Ohene and Essuman (2014) observe that institutions running distance education face some challenges. In their analysis, these include serving student population which is diverse, demography, location and level of advanced knowledge before enrolment into the programmes. Students who are enrolling for open distance learning are on the increase

and studies have shown that the majority of them have some responsibilities. Galusha (2012) believes they do so for convenience. Open distance learners are mainly adult workers who may be time-bound because of work or maybe location-bound due to geographic or family responsibilities. As such, knowing the characteristics of these students will help decision makers to understand their problems. Understanding ODL students in rural communities and their challenges may also provide insights for policy formulation, planning and course development.

### **Research Objectives**

- To analyze challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities in achieving their educational goals.
- To explore the effects of these challenges in accomplishing/finalizing their programmes.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Open Distance Learning (ODL) in rural communities**

According to OECD (2016) in the context of significant geographical isolation, distance education can be an element in rural communities. Ghosh, Nath, Agarwal, & Nath (2012) argue the concept of open learning and distance education system focuses on access to education and training to make the learners free from constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups learners. Open distance learning (ODL) is an organized educational activity that uses teaching materials. What it shows is that in ODL, constraints on the study regarding access, time, place, pace, a method of learning, or any combination of these factors are minimized, especially for students in remote areas.

Macintyre and Macdonald (2011) argue that distance learning is viewed as the obvious answer for most remote learners. Using the online media overcomes any challenges imposed by the geographical distance. ODL makes use of different modes of media that include the print, broadcasts, the internet and occasional meetings with tutors and other students. It enables students in rural communities to learn without attending an institution, something that has made it attractive for students who, for practical reasons, economic, social, and geographical reasons are unable to get to the college in person. It makes it appropriate for learners that are not only scattered but cannot leave their jobs to attend full-time courses. However, Macintyre and Macdonald (2011) suggest that this belief may be obscuring our understanding of the role that location and individual circumstances have in shaping students experiences. There is a variation in experiences of remote rural students who study using the ODL mode.

### **Challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities**

Distance learning is the obvious choice for many students with access limitations because it can provide higher education without necessarily attending lessons at the campus, and geographically remote students are a case in point. Tripathi (2014) identified seven principal characteristics of distance education; separation of teacher and student, the influence of the educational organization, use of technical media, provision of two-way communication, an absence of group learning, and participation in the most industrialized form of education. Distance learning becomes a challenge for a student in the rural community because of the separation between the teacher and student and

absence of group discussions. Macintyre and Macdonald (2011) suggest that little is recognized about the ways students in these remote areas experience their studies. They argue that the focus on online learning within distance education as the best solution for all ODL students is obscuring our understanding of the real issues affecting students in rural communities in their academic career.

Basye (2014) contend that small districts and communities tend to have little budgets, making current and reliable district-wide technology initiatives a challenge for many of these districts. Rural areas are affected by lack of information in addition to lack of resources. Basye (2014) adds that this could reveal previously unforeseen opportunities such as grants, financial and university admissions rights. Similarly, if there are any changes in policies that the university may want to make, students in the rural communities are affected. Technology also helps to disseminate information, and Basye (2014) argues that in small districts access to social media can facilitate connections between students and institutions of higher learning and like-minded persons who can offer their insights and advice.

Open distance learning and the rural communities have a relationship that goes back to the correspondence instruction (Basye, 2014, OECD, 2017). The broadband technology and instant messaging are the latest manifestations of distance education because they have a potential in providing rural communities with unparalleled access to limitless educational resources (Basye, 2014). As such, the internet is the potential vehicle for eliminating the disadvantage of vast distances. Advances in video conferences, interactive television, and podcasting, teaching tablets, e-learning platforms, modular coursework, flipped classroom strategies and self-directed learning can indeed enrich curriculum opportunities in remote schooling and help to overcome difficulties (OECD, 2017).

Hobbs (2004) agrees distance learning can be as good as the traditional face to face methods for as long as they are delivered well. However, he identifies three elements that make a difference; instructional effectiveness, instructor training conformability with the technology used, and student support that is used either in person or virtually. Abrami et al. (2011) add; distance learning depends on the capacity of distance settings of distance learning that create conditions of student-content, the student-instructor, and peer-to-peer interactions. What it shows is that if the remote areas are equipped with technology, these methods are at least as effective as traditional teaching in the classroom. Unfortunately, most rural communities in developing countries often lack the resources that provide students with academic tools and the professional support needed for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century education.

McQuaide (2009) argues people in the rural communities have lower incomes and compounded by the geographical distance this affects them in accessing education. Lack of funding has got some negative impact on teachers' living and working conditions. ODL students in the rural communities face challenges of heavy workloads, tight budgets, and transportation and as such, they have little opportunity to attend tutorial lessons (McQuaide, 2009). McQuaide (2009) also insist that funding shortfalls mean that income for rural teachers is much lower than their city counterparts (Zhao, 2005).

McQuaide (2009) also observes that lack of funding hinders the spread of education in rural communities. The majority of the rural population lives below the poverty datum line, and there is less economic development to support learning. Chimbololo (2010) also argues that financial problems continue to cripple ODL. He identifies lack of physical

infrastructure to house distance education centers, challenges about distance education materials, curriculum guides, science equipment and face to face supervision hampered by inadequate staffing levels as some of the effects of ODL, particularly in rural communities.

Chimbololo (2012) also identifies insufficient libraries as another factor that has affected the success of ODL. Students in rural communities do not have access to these libraries, or if they sacrifice to visit these libraries, most of them are under-resourced and possess a large quantity of old editions. Unlike their peers in the urban set-up, they have to make use of this staff which affects the quality of their assignments. Rural communities also face a challenge of electricity supply and they cannot use ICT appliances in these circumstances (Chimbololo, 2012). Audio-tapes, radio and television broadcasts, the internet, mobile phones and computers all need electricity one way or the other. Commencement of ODL means the need for urgent rural electrification in rural communities.

### **Effects of these challenges on ODL students.**

Some people are not able to manage course requirements and maintain a personal life, leading some to either drop out or lose motivation to complete the degree (Eisenbach, 2013; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Wendler et al., 2010). It is also easy for ODL students to stall on research projects that do not capture their interest. Wendler et al. (2010) identify the following reasons for the incompleteness rate in ODL programmes; inadequate financial support, a decline in international students enrolled in graduate programmes, lack of career entry points and career progression and attrition rate due to the time of degree completion. Duze (2011) also believes that these students graduate long after the stipulated time, some dropout and their grades are affected. Lasedu and Awetedu (2013) also agree that adjusting to an academic setting can be difficult for all students, especially ODL female students. These students are employed elsewhere, and they are parents. Consequently, it becomes a challenge to adjust to an academic setting.

Abiddin and Ismail (2011) are worried by the attrition of students who study on the part-time basis. The rate of school dropout among ODL students becomes higher because of these challenges. Access to further studies is supported by financial support from their employers, failure of which they can fail to enroll. Abrahams (2013) believes the forever shifting of education and training policy environment generates levels of uncertainty, shifts institutional and re-allocates or limits resources that affect these students directly. Consequently, ODL students decrease or limit their engagement with their studies by skipping class.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In answering the research question, the researcher used a mixed research approach. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie, (2003) this involves mixing qualitative and quantitative research methods or concept characteristic. The two can compensate each other's weakness and complement each other's strength. The target population was a group of mature ODL students at Zimbabwe Open University who are currently registered for the undergraduate programmes and studying from Kadoma District in Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. When this study was carried out, a total of 349 students were studying for ODL programmes at Kadoma ZOU office. Participants were selected from students who were registered for the following courses; Commerce, Education, Applied Sciences, and Agriculture. A total of thirty (30) questionnaires were given to ODL students in Kadoma District who are currently studying undergraduate

programmes at Zimbabwe Open University. The researcher also interviewed five (5) tutors to get their insight on the challenges that are faced by ODL students. The researcher used convenience sampling and purposive sampling to identify the participants.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities

Findings revealed that about 77% of the participants were females whereas the rest were males and this is consistent with the rate of female students as compared to male students obtained at Z.O.U Kadoma District. High enrolment among females as compared to their male counterparts in ODL programmes is because of the gravity of challenges they face. Key informants agreed that female students in rural communities are attending ODL programmes because of various problems. For instance, in a study on challenges faced by married students in Nigeria, Lasode and Awode (2014) indicate that schooling for married females can indeed be very tedious and challenging. The study observed that the challenge that is most common among married female students is managing multiple roles and that the main cause of it is role contagion and this becomes difficult when one stays in the rural community. Lasode and Awode (2014) concluded that combining work commitment, family responsibilities and school obligations lead to stress among the married female students and this has an effect on them.

Findings also revealed that the majority of the students (n=20; 66.7) agreed that they are facing challenges. Key informants agreed that ODL students in rural communities are facing some problems in their academic career. Similarly, Cohen and Greenberg (2014) agreed with this assertion. Igan (2010) and Visser (2011) also agree that ODL students endure a lot of challenges as they are carrying out their study programmes. However, this study was concerned by challenges faced by students in rural communities.

**Inadequate access to tutor support:** ODL students in rural communities reported that they do not have adequate access to tutor support which is a challenge during their studies. Regarding the lack of tutor support, participants indicated they were failing to get access to the tutors because the majority of them stay in Chinhoyi Town. Participants said that they feel lonely and if one has a burning question he/she has to wait until he/she meets the tutor during face to face sessions. In some cases, they have stuck academically and have nowhere to run for assistance. What it shows is that even if there is a Z.O.U satellite office in Kadoma District, it is failing to add value because there are no tutors and fellow students around to ask burning questions. Abrami et al. (2011) argue that distance learning depends on the capacity of distance settings of distance learning that create conditions of student-content, the student-instructor, and peer-to-peer interactions. Tripathi (2014) has also argued that in distance learning there is a separation of teacher and student and absence of group learning.

**Poor access to ICT:** In such a scenario, life would not be difficult for these students if the information, communication, and technology (ICT) were available. Students would be able to communicate with their tutors and peers on the social media. Unfortunately, participants complained about inflexible practices and inadequate access to ICT in their remote areas. This study reflects that not much has been done regarding use of technology for teaching and communication purposes by the university. Responses by students show poor access to technological devices which limit their ability to communicate. Some participants indicated they have to travel for about 80km to have



access to the internet. Basye (2014) argues that in small districts access to social media can facilitate connections between students and institutions of higher learning and like-minded persons who can offer their insights and advice. The broadband technology and instant messaging are the latest manifestations of distance education because they have a potential in providing these remote communities with an unparalleled access educational resources (Basye, 2014). As such, the internet is the potential vehicle for eliminating the disadvantage of vast distances.

**Poor or no electricity to operate ICT appliance:** Advances in video conferences, interactive television, and podcasting, teaching tablets, e-learning platforms, modular coursework, flipped classroom strategies and self-directed learning can indeed enrich curriculum opportunities in remote schooling and help to overcome difficulties (OECD, 2017). These ICT appliances can be operated using electricity, and on the contrary participants reported its unavailability. What it shows is that even if these ICT appliances are available, it would be difficult to use them in these circumstances (Chimbololo, 2012). Audio-tapes, radio and television broadcasts, the internet, mobile phones and computers all need electricity one way or the other. Commencement of ODL means the need for urgent rural electrification in rural communities.

**Inadequate access to physical resources:** Participants indicated there was no adequate access to physical resources. After traveling all the way to visit a library situated in Kadoma, one would expect to get the material he/she wants which is not the case. Similarly, Chimbololo (2012) states that students in rural communities do not have access to these libraries, or if they sacrifice to visit these libraries, most of them are under-resourced and possess a large quantity of old editions. Participants indicated that in some cases they have to travel all the way to Chinhoyi to get the relevant material and this is consistent with Chimbololo (2012) who identifies insufficient libraries as another factor that has affected the success of ODL. Unlike their peers in the urban set-up who can use the internet as an option, they have to make use of this old staff which affects the quality of their assignments.

**Expenses and other hidden costs of education:** Participants also reported financial challenges in education. These include buying reading materials, pay for internet facilities, traveling costs and accommodation when they go for their tutorials and examinations. Similarly, McQuaide (2009) claims ODL students in the rural communities face challenges of heavy workloads, tight budgets, and transportation and as such, they have little opportunity to attend tutorial lessons. Findings revealed poverty and financial problems among the participants. McQuaide (2009) suggests that funding shortfalls mean that the income for rural teachers is much lower than their city counterparts and this affects them in getting learning material. Students associated their financial problems with lack of access to loan support. McQuaide (2009) and Chimbololo (2009) observe that lack of funding hinders the spread of education in rural communities because the majority of the rural population lives below the poverty datum line and there is less economic development to support local learning.

**Cultural, community and employment responsibilities:** Participants reported little time for their studies because of many responsibilities. Students have other cultural, community and employment responsibilities that affect them. There are some community responsibilities which are difficult to avoid, and these activities consume the time that students set aside to study. When one is in a community, he/she is expected to be participative. Similarly, Igan (2010) has argued that ODL students do

not have enough time to rest. Visser (2011) also suggests that time, conflicting commitments, for instance, home/job/studies/social are some of the challenges affecting these students. What it means is that these students are having a challenge of balancing their social life and school. Balancing school and family is indeed a challenge for married students, whether in a rural set-up or the urban set-up. Visser (2011), Chao (2007) and Igan (2011) agreed that indeed balancing family and school is a challenge for many ODL students.

### **An analysis of the effects of these challenges on ODL students in rural communities**

The second objective of this study is now to find out how ODL students are being affected by these challenges. Findings revealed that the majority of students (N=21, 70%) agreed that they are being affected by the challenges identified in this study. Eisenbach (2013), Klenowski, Ehrich, Kapitzke & Trigger (2011), Phillips & Pugh (2010) and Wendler et al. (2010) have all discovered that ODL students are affected with these challenges one way or the other. The effects of these challenges are discussed below.

**Late submission of assignments:** Participants disclosed that they are failing to submit their assignments on time. Key informants also agreed that ODL students are in the habit of submitting their assignments late. Phillips & Pugh (2010) and Wendler et al. (2010) have made similar observations. ODL students have a challenge of failing to submit their work on time as compared to conventional students. Lasedu and Awetedu (2013) also believe that adjusting to an academic setting can be difficult for all students, especially students in rural communities. These students are employed elsewhere, and they are parents. They have to travel to have access to the internet. Consequently, it becomes a challenge for students in rural communities to adjust to an urban academic setting and this affects their academic career, for instance, submission of assignments in time.

**Poor quality results:** Findings also revealed complaints of poor quality results among students in the rural communities. Key informants agreed that results from their students from remote areas are not that pleasing and they attributed this to the pressure that is experienced by students which includes time management because of other responsibilities family, finance, social life and work. However, some participants attributed poor quality results to the internet that is not effective in rural communities. Some attributed poor quality results to interaction between them and their tutors or peers. Similarly, Igan (2010) says poor interaction between students and their lecturers can result in poor quality results. Duze (2011) observes that some students graduate long after the stipulated time and their grades are affected.

**University dropouts:** Participants reported that some of their fellow ODL students in rural communities had dropped out because of these challenges. Participants believe these challenges have affected their motivation to attend tutorials with others indicating that they have no library time. Several studies have reported that some ODL students lose motivation and drop out. For example, Eisenbach (2013), Phillips & Pugh (2010) and Wendler et al. (2010) agree that some people are not able to manage their course requirements and maintain a personal life, leading some to either drop out or lose motivation to complete the degree. Eisenbach (2013) also argues that it is easy for advanced degree students to stall on research projects that do not capture their interest. Wendler et al. (2010) and Abiddin and Ismail (2011) believe inadequate financial is the reason for the incompleteness rate. What it shows is that these challenges are affecting the school dropout among ODL students in rural communities.



## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that students in rural communities are facing some challenges during their academic career. These challenges include inadequate access to tutor support and physical resources, inflexible practices and access to ICT, poor or no electricity to operate ICT appliances, financial, cultural, community and employment responsibilities. These challenges have some effects which include but not limited to late submission of assignments, poor quality results, and university dropouts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the university to recruit more tutors who should be available for students at district offices should the need arise. These tutors should be knowledgeable in the conduct of distance education as it differs from the conventional system of education. The university should ensure technological development at the district centers and within the student's locations. The study also recommends the university to provide students in the rural communities with study skills, time management skills, as well as guidance and counseling required to manage their studies. The study finally recommends further studies on strategies to encounter challenges faced by ODL students in rural communities.

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