

An assessment of the factors influencing the retention of students with disabilities studying through ODL at the Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Region

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Abstract: *This study evaluated the factors influencing the retention of students with disabilities studying through open and distance learning in Zimbabwe. The study examined the issues related to the provision of services and explored the implementation of inclusive education towards students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have participated sparingly through the open and distance education mode of delivery in Zimbabwe at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study employed the qualitative research methodology and used the case study research design. Primary data were generated through in-depth interviews. Respondents to the study were selected using the purposive sampling technique from the ZOU Bulawayo and Matabeleland Regional Centres. The study revealed that retention of students with disabilities was influenced by several factors; more significantly was the perceived unaffordability of fees considering the economic environment facing the students. Respondents also indicated that materials and facilities utilised at the institution were not deliberately designed with specific consideration of the needs of students with disabilities. The study concluded that distance education has the potential to improve the lives of disabled persons when adequately funded. The study recommended that the University should re-design its physical facilities in a manner that suits students with special needs. The use of information technologies was also forwarded as a more cost effective alternative to educate students with disabilities under the harsh economic environment faced by Zimbabwean institutions.*

Key words: *Retention, students with disabilities, disabilities, Open Distance Learning, inclusive education.*

I. Introduction and Background to the Study

The Zimbabwe Open University is the only State University mandated to provide university education through the Open and Distance learning mode of education in Zimbabwe. One of the main goals of the University is maximisation of stakeholder satisfaction. The University targets to increase student retention, increase throughput and higher pass rates as some of the indicators of effectiveness and stakeholder satisfaction. Student success and retention rates are, therefore, some of the important performance indicators of the University's results based management model of performance management.

During the first years after the Zimbabwe Open University's inception, a significant number of students with disabilities were leaving the institution without completing their degree programmes. This trend was against the community development goals of the University, which also centred on the empowerment of disadvantaged groups such as the disabled.

The influx of students with disabilities enhances the diversity of the University population and challenges practitioners and faculties to re-examine teaching and learning strategies and techniques in distance education. The presence of students with disabilities provides an opportunity for practitioners and faculties to become more universal in the design of programs and the curriculum in order to engage all types of learners more actively in the process. As is true with all students, retention is more complex and extends far beyond the simplistic notion of academic achievement. This complexity includes not only successfully negotiating the academic arena but also engaging in a comprehensive educational experience that creates an undeniable sense of connection, belonging, and inclusion.

The ease with which students with disabilities become socially integrated with their peers and the degree to which faculty members accommodate their needs are critical to their overall integration into a campus environment (Enright, Conyers, & Szymanski, 1996).

Despite the benefits associated with institutional involvement, research has shown that few students with disabilities are involved with co-curricular activities. In part, the lack of involvement is due to attitudinal barriers (Kroeger & Schuck, 1993). Essentially the individual may have a disability, but the environment itself produces the handicap (Yuker, 1988). Environments that promote and encourage involvement offer meaningful roles and responsibilities to participants, present subgroups where individuals with common interests can identify and interact, provide students with an opportunity to form an attachment to others, and have a sufficient ratio of experiences to individuals (Strange & Banning, 2001). Inclusive education and involvement offer students with disabilities the opportunity to experience a true sense of connection to the institution and to individuals; essentially the student is a part of a community. With a firm sense of belonging and active engagement in the community, a student intentionally and unintentionally begins to develop goals and a sense of purpose.

1.2 Statement of the problem

There has been a notable low level of degree programme completion among students with disabilities in the ODL sector in Zimbabwe. This trend was against government and community goals of poverty eradication especially among disadvantaged groups like the disabled. No comprehensive study has been carried out to evaluate the causes of the low level of degree completion among the disabled in Zimbabwe's ODL sector.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The study sought to analyse the factors influencing student retention among students with disabilities in ODL with an endeavour to increase student satisfaction and hence retention.

1.4 Research Objective

- To analyse the factors influencing student retention among students with disabilities in ODL

1.5 Research question

The main research question was as follows;

- What are the factors influencing student retention among students with disabilities in the ODL sector in Zimbabwe?

1.6 Justification of the study

An increased enrolment and retention of students with disabilities is the intended outcome of this study, with increased programme completion as the notable key result area. The community of disabled persons is set to be more empowered through ODL education qualifications. This intended empowerment had been compromised by high student turnover among the disabled.

The low level of degree completion by students with disabilities at the Zimbabwe Open University suggests a far more urgent need for understanding and responding to this phenomenon.

The University endeavours to increase enrolment overall, this study through exploring the needs of students with disabilities shall propose resources and facilities that would attract more of these students.

II. Literature review

2.1 Conceptual Framework of Retention

Tinto (1975) proposed a conceptual model that looked at the interactions between the institution and the student and how these interactions will determine whether an individual will persist to graduation. Tinto derives his view of retention from Durkheim's (1951) views on suicide which argue that an individual is more likely to take their own life if they are not sufficiently integrated into society. The first connection between the work of Durkheim (1951) and retention was proposed by Spady (1970) which was subsequently taken up and further developed by Tinto (1975). Tinto (1975) sought to expand the concept of integration from a descriptive

theory to a predictive theory of dropout. The principle is that individuals who are more integrated into the institution they are attending will be more likely to persist to the completion of a degree. The attributes of family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling influence the commitment an individual has to an institution, along with a commitment to obtain a degree (goal commitment). Academic and social integration are two components of integration into the University environment. While distinct, both are needed for integration into the institution and increase the chances of a student obtaining a degree.

Academic integration is measured by not only grades but by intellectual development while at the University. The latter is defined by the norms of the academic system and the former being an individualistic measure. This leads back to the same commitments, which will help determine the dropout decision. This is referred to as the interactionist theory, which relies heavily on the interaction between a student and the institution (Tinto, 1975). Academic integration has proved to have a powerful influence on whether an individual stays or drops out of a higher education institution (Tinto, 1975; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Students with disabilities need assistance to be able to perform equally to their peers in an educational environment. Their disabilities may limit their ability to do tasks and other activities of education which will mask their true capacity to learn the material being studied. This barrier may increase the chances of stress forcing the student with a disability out of the university by lowering the goal commitment to succeed, as discussed in Tinto (1975).

Research by Amsel and Fichten (1990) demonstrates that students with disabilities may be hesitant to ask for additional services, even when those are absolutely necessary, reasonable and allowed under the institution's regulations. Social integration strategies have been proposed by several scholars as essential to ensure the retention of students with disabilities in institutions of higher learning (Tinto, 1975; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009).

Research has also shown that social exclusion and negative attitudes towards those with disabilities) will add further barriers to individuals with disabilities obtaining a degree (Fichten & Amsel, 1986; Royal & Roberts, 1987).

Barriers to completing a higher education exist for all students, yet there are added challenges for people with disabilities. It is important to understand how a disability may interact with existing barriers all students face to completing a college degree. For example, most students face issues surrounding funding for college, but since individuals with disabilities have less income than those without disabilities, there may be a greater struggle for individuals with disabilities than most students. If there is a good understanding of these issues then programs directed at mitigating these challenges can be developed and implemented.

III. Methodology

The study employed the qualitative research methodology. The researchers opted for a qualitative approach because of the nature of data required and the interactive requirements of the data collection process. A single case study research design was used to obtain a better understanding of the setting phenomena (Creswell, 2006). Sixteen students with disabilities participated in this study. The students were disabled in different areas such as hearing impairment, physically challenged and visually impaired. A sample of 16 respondents to the study was purposefully selected. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling because of the specific nature of the target population. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Out of 16 interviews, 6 were done through telephone and the rest were conducted as face to face interviews. Most of the interviews were recorded with a voice recorder. In other cases, especially during the phone interviews, the researcher took extensive notes to capture as much information as possible.

IV. Findings

Of the participating students with disabilities, 9 were male and 7 were female. Their ages ranged from 25 to 35 years. Most of the students with disabilities were assisted by parents and spouses while others were self sponsoring. Ten of the respondents were active students enrolled with the Zimbabwe Open University at the time of the study while the other six were inactive and wishing to withdraw from their various degree programmes.

4.1 Problems being experienced by students with disabilities during their studies with the Zimbabwe Open University

The responses from all the participants indicated that students with disabilities were not satisfied with the service delivery provided by the institution. The issues they raised included inadequate and delays in the supply of suitable study materials. When asked, students with disabilities indicated a desire for instruction in a challenging and relevant curriculum to prepare them for life after University. Lack of a relevant curriculum appears repeatedly as a main reason given by students with disabilities for wishing to withdraw from their degree programmes. In addition, student comments from individual interviews suggest factors that might facilitate continuation with studies. These include changes in personal attitudes toward students from lecturers and administrators and improvements in curriculum and instruction (e.g., additional assistance, more interesting tutorials, and better textbooks).

The responses have shown that the faculty's attitudes toward students with disabilities were a problem. These attitudes influenced the success or failure of students with disabilities, and affect their inclusion in higher education (Rao, 2004). Negative attitudes of faculty and administrative staff prevented students with disabilities, especially students with invisible disabilities, from disclosing their disabilities and from requesting services that they are entitled to. The participants reported a subjective feeling that they were not succeeding like other students, as well as difficulty in coping with the required investment during the study period and had a sense of social isolation. Some of the students with disabilities complained that they could not afford the fees that were charged by the university. They also highlighted that the study material were not put on Braille and this created problems for them to read. The feedback from their assignments was usually delayed and sometimes went for examinations without having seen the feedback.

4.2 Reasons why students with disabilities withdraw from their enrolled degree programmes

4.2.1 Lack of a comprehensive reward system

The study revealed that there was a general lack of a deliberate reward system which keeps students with disabilities enrolled and committed to programmes. The respondents indicated that students with disabilities had been pushed hard by their parents, former teachers and employers who used to provide extrinsic rewards for success. The study revealed that the students had trouble in motivating themselves intrinsically when immediate extrinsic rewards (parental approval, reward money, extra praise) were no longer readily available in the open and distance learning institutions. This created an environment of isolation which pushes them to withdraw.

4.2.2 Lack of mental resilience after encountering negative results

The study revealed that some of the students joined open and distance learning uncertain as to whether they had the ability to succeed in their degree programmes because of their disabilities. Confidence emerged as a major issue on the retention of students with disabilities. Respondents indicated that students with disabilities enrolled expecting to succeed. After receiving one or more low marks on their assignments or in-class tests, respondents indicated that students' confidence took a knock and recovery required mental resilience and support. The study revealed that as the self-efficacy of students with disabilities failed, their drive to succeed in open distance learning at university level was consequently affected.

4.2.3 Anomie

Merton (2002) defined anomie as a condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals. It is the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community resulting in fragmentation of social identity and rejection of self-regulatory values.

The respondents indicated that their experience of anomie within the university environment presented significant challenges for students with disabilities. The study revealed that anomie was a challenge for students with disabilities, whose socio-cultural backgrounds were distant from that of other students in the University. The students revealed that when anomie developed students became more and more withdrawn from the social and academic environment until they withdrew from the University. The participating students with disabilities

in this study revealed that they were inactive because they had financial difficulties and were unable to pay their fees.

4.2.4 Service delivery

The study revealed that service delivery issues were at the core of factors affecting the retention of students with disabilities. Respondents identified the unavailability of suitable modules, erratic quality of tutorials and the lack of disability sensitive equipment and facilities at Regional Centres. It emerged in the study that students often registered but failed to get learning materials to do assignments on time. The delays in delivery of learning materials also affected learner preparations for examinations. These inconveniences demoralized students with disabilities and increased the likelihood of discontinuation with programmes.

The quality of tutorials was also identified by respondents as a major factor in determining student retention. The respondents indicated that tutorials were essential in preparing students for examinations as they were helpful in troubleshooting difficult courses. It emerged, however, in the study that in some cases tutors were not meeting the expectations of learners and thus led to de-motivation of students.

4.2.5 Financial challenges

The study revealed that students with disabilities in Zimbabwe were extensively affected by the adverse economic conditions that prevailed in the country from 2013. Respondents indicated that the parents and guardians of the students were not spared from retrenchments and salary reductions. It emerged in the interviews that most of the students with disabilities were not guaranteed of continued financial support. The students, unlike most of the ODL learners at the Zimbabwe Open University were mostly unemployed and had no other sustainable economic activities they were carrying out to fund their education.

The University, however, had responded to the challenges faced by the gloomy economic outlook through a raft of strategies. These included organizing a student loan facility and adopting a flexible fees payment plan for students. The study revealed that the flexible fees payment plan was effective and well received by students who were employed in the public sector. Most students with disabilities were however unemployed hence the flexible fees payment plan was not of much help. The student loan facility on the other hand required students who were employed and could repay the loan. Students indicated that they were already saddled with debt and had no appetite to continue borrowing.

V. Conclusions

The study concludes that the retention of students with disabilities in an open and distance learning environment is a function of several factors. These include the economic outlook in the country, service delivery issues, anomie, reward systems, student support and the state of mental resilience of the students. The study concludes that the ODL University had provided conditions and strategies in principle for the retention of students with disabilities. The practical effectiveness of the strategies, however, was hampered by resource constraints. The University was unable to build structures which effectively accommodated students with disabilities because of the unavailability of funds. Reading materials which ideally should be provided in Braille, video and audio formats for students with special needs were not readily available in the University.

Securing the commitment of students with disabilities requires effective support and reward systems. The University provides student support services through a dedicated department but the services have not met the specific requirements of students with special needs.

The level of student engagement among the disabled community is low in the open and distance education community. Students have low levels of interaction in the ODL sector because they do not visit campus on a day to day basis. There is also no effective use of social networks to encourage socialization among students. The use of study groups could be an effective tool in encouraging a high level of student engagement among students with disabilities and also in the general student community.

VI. Recommendations

The study proffers the following recommendations for the ODL institution to improve the retention of students with disabilities;

6.1 Lobby for financial assistance

Students with disabilities have a higher chance of getting accepted by the government for the cadetship scheme which supports students from disadvantaged communities. The University could also retain more students through mobilising financial support from NGOs and other donor constituencies.

6.2 Enhanced student support services for students with special needs

The constituency of students with special needs required specialised support from the centre for student management department. This implies that there is need for trained employees who are able to handle the needs of students with disabilities. The University should invest more in modifying its premises so that it accommodates students with special needs across all Regional Centres. More importantly, the support from the university should be coordinated with social support from the family and community. Families and the community should train learners with special needs to be responsible adults who are prepared to take responsibility and are mentally resilient.

6.3 Enhance service delivery

The availability of modules on time and delivery of tutorials according to the tutorial time table distributed by the University is the most important issue the institution should prioritise. ODL learning is centred on modules and tutorials hence retention of students depends on the extent to which the University reliably performs and delivers on these key issues.

6.4 Enhance student engagement

The retention of students with disabilities could be enhanced through increasing their level of engagement, either engagement with their academic activities or socialising and developing close relationships with other students. The University should introduce study groups which meet at places and times convenient for students with disabilities. Social networks could also provide space where students can meet on virtual platforms, share experiences and encourage each other to achieve their academic objectives.

Student Advisors need to ensure not only that students with disabilities have the knowledge and skills to succeed, but also a mindset whereby they believe in their own potential to succeed. The students need further to understand that many of their peers who have an initial failure end up successful in their fields. In other words they need to be motivated. As a result, students with disabilities therefore need to understand that abilities are modifiable, and that people learn through their mistakes, and that difficult but manageable challenges are good because they enable one to move ahead in one's learning.

Students with disabilities enrolled with open and distance learning should be strongly urged to actively engage in at least one extracurricular activity in their studies in order to enhance engagement with the university at large. Student Advisors also need to try to make sure that students with disabilities stay "connected" and do not start to withdraw from the life of the University.

6.5 Use of information technologies

The use of information technology and multimedia communications equipment and facilities could be used increase the effectiveness of teaching students with special needs. The study recommends that the University should develop partnerships with government departments, the private sector and nongovernmental organizations which are active in supporting learners with special needs.

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