
Transforming Stakeholders` Perceptions of Open and Distance Learning Through Student Community Service Programmes

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ABSTRACT

The current study sought to assess the potency of implementing community service programmes into the university`s curriculum as a means through which the ZOU could be able to alter the negative perceptions and acceptability of Open and Distance Learning programmes among citizens. The study current study was a descriptive survey targeting all students currently registered with the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region. Convenience sampling was used owing to the geographical dispersion of the ODL students. Out of a total population of 560 students, 100 respondents were chosen into the sample. On these, questionnaires will be administered to establish their views on the matter at hand. Results from the study show that most students held positive views about community service activities owing to their propensity to lure student into the ZOU programmes and help in solving community problems. Male students had more positive attitudes with respect to community service than did female students. The younger generation was more eager to engage in community work than the older counterparts. There were a lot of community service programmes that could be able be undertaken by the student included assisting in nursing homes and cleaning parks, offering financial accounting assistance to vendors and SMEs. The study recommended that there was need to instill positive attitudes in both male and female students and engage both younger generation and older generation of ODL students if community service work is to succeed. The ODL institutions should consider taking part in community service programmes that could be able be undertaken by the student included assisting in nursing homes and cleaning parks, offering financial accounting assistance to vendors and SMEs to enhance their appearance in society. Community service programmes could be used to alter the attitudes of communities towards ODL because these programmes were relevant within the community were much needed in attempting to solve the immediate challenges.

INTRODUCTION

With the need to boost enrolment and programme uptake rates, alter public perceptions of Open and Distance Learning and help improve lives for different communities in Zimbabwe, there is need for innovations that will culminate in the creation of programmes and projects that will help address all the three stated problem areas. For faculty, students, both current and former, at the Zimbabwe Open University the opportunity should be grabbed in an attempt to bridge the gap between the university and the community. Through their institution, students and faculty need to understand and appreciate their responsibility in helping to solve community problems in their areas at the same time raising the stakes for distance education amidst threats from competing institutions. The purpose of this investigation was, therefore, to collect data concerning students` attitudes with regard to community service programmes with the belief that such an undertaking would help bringing about positive attitudes towards ODL among all the stakeholders. At the same time such programmes would assist the prospective students, both young and old, through creating awareness in them of the existence of ODL as the first choice mode in obtaining tertiary qualifications.

Background of the Study

Research in ODL has established that stakeholders, among which are prospective students, parents and employers are not enthusiastic about most of the graduates attaining their qualifications through the distance mode (Harvey, 1993; Hinde, 1997). Furthermore, until recently, the quality of instruction

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and hence that of graduates of distance education institutions have been regarded as being inferior to that of traditional institutions (Bates, 1995). Despite all the negative perceptions harboured by the community, the Zimbabwe Open University has continued to survive despite the skepticism about its ability to compete against the traditional institutions in terms of quality.

In Zimbabwe, the only accredited state university to offer degrees through distance education is the Zimbabwe Open University, an institution which was established to cater for people who could not be accommodated in conventional universities. ZOU was established on 1st March 1999 through an Act of parliament (Chapter 25:20). Currently, (in 2013), ZOU has four faculties: the Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. These faculties are offering more than 60 degree programmes and over 3 diploma courses. Starting with an initial enrolment of 624 students registered for the Bachelor of Education degree programme ZOU had a student enrolment of 25000 between 1999 and 2001. In 2004, ZOU became the largest university in the country. However, between 2002 and 2008 there was a drastic downturn in terms of enrolment figures and programme uptake which saw student enrolment plummet to around 13 000. Partly due to the economic crisis that faced the country during the period in question, stakeholder perceptions of ODL also had its toll on the enrolment rates. Thus facing stiff competition from the various colleges and universities in the country, the Zimbabwe Open University must seek measures that competitively place it in a bid to woo clients. One way of luring potential customers is to introduce initiatives that help link with the communities; hence the need for community service based programmes.

Purpose of the Study

The current study aimed at changing community perceptions about studying through distance education through community service programmes as a way to link university work and community programmes. Data collected was concerned with student attitudes with regard to community service programmes with the purpose of informing interventions that could give rise to changes in stakeholders' perceptions of ODL and subsequently increase the enrolment figures and help retain students at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research Questions

The following sub problems stood as research questions:

- What is the nature of community service programmes that ODL students can undertake?
- How can community service programmes be used to alter the attitudes of communities towards ODL?
- To what extent is community service acceptable to the students as part of the university curriculum?
- What benefits do ODL students view as culminating from their involvement in community service programmes?
- What challenges exist from the ODL student's involvement in community service programmes?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Community service programmes can be defined as a service volunteered by individuals or an organization to benefit a community or its institutions. Community service is donated service or activity that is performed by someone or a group of people for the benefit of the public or its institutions. In the case of the present study, ODL students become the service providers in different capacities, under the auspices of the ODL institution.

Some have alluded to community service programmes as compulsory unpaid work including a specified number of hours of activities, such as conservation work, cleaning up graffiti, or working with a charity. Volunteers may provide community service, however, not everyone who provides community service is seen as a volunteer, because some people who provide community service are not doing it of their own free will; they are compelled to do so. For example, their government as a part of citizenship requirements, in lieu of military service, the courts, in lieu of, or in addition to, other criminal justice sanctions; their school, to meet the requirements of a class, such as in the case

of service learning or to meet the requirements of graduation, or, in the case of parents, required to provide a certain number of hours of service in order for their child to be enrolled in a school or sports team.

Some employers involve their staff in some kind of community service programming as part of the corporate social responsibility. Over and above this, some institutions might be in need of sprucing up battered images. However, in some instances, community service programmes may be completely voluntary or a condition of employment, or anything in between. Community service is a term used to describe the act of volunteering one's self in order to provide services and help benefit the community. Community service can be performed through cleaning roadways, helping the homeless, or even organizing charitable donations.

Community service programmes result from Community Based Learning (CBL) which has been defined by Kamai and Nakabo (2002) as a broad set of teaching/learning strategies that enable youth and adults to learn what they want to learn from any segment of the community. The Community Service Act of 1990, which sees CBL as service-learning which it defines as a method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organised service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community under the coordination of an institution of education, so as to enhance the academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled.

Community Based Learning may therefore be seen to be experiential learning where students and faculty collaborate with communities to address problems and issues. Simultaneously both are gaining knowledge and skills and advancing personal development. There is an equal emphasis on helping communities and providing valid learning experience to students.

COMMUNITY SERVICE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Schwartz cited in Bauer et al (2007), deciding whether or not to accept and participate in a humanitarian effort goes through phases. Schwartz came up with what has come to be known as the Altruistic Helping Behaviour Model which consists of four phases. The first phase reflects an individual's acknowledgement or awareness of a need for community service. This is followed by a belief that oneself is morally obligated to act on such awareness—the second phase. The third phase is an individual's evaluation of the costs and the benefits of participating in a community service activity. The fourth and final phase is an overt response, or an action that is taken with respect to community service. Theoretically, an individual passes through each phase in a sequential order before reaching the final phase in which the individual makes the decision to engage in community service. This framework can be adopted to solve community problems in institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University. With faculty initiative the programme can be fused into the university curriculum, however, not only due to its potential to solve societal problems but also to assist in the transformation of community attitudes to ODL.

THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY SERVICE

In some colleges and universities and even high schools, for example, one requirement for graduation is for students to accomplish a specified number of hours in community service. One obvious effect of this program is that students are, in fact, enjoying the programme. As these kids try to explore their interests in the various jobs available, they often come to know themselves better and feel a sense of achievement. In the process, they are able to serve others.

On one hand, community service programmes provide the programmes and projects to serve and improve the immediate area in which the students work and reside. On the other hand, the skills that students learn through community service are a constant presence in the future of their everyday life. They can be used in the workforce and ensures they know what they are doing when their organisation asks them to volunteer on their behalf.

According to Latham (2000), communities enjoy benefits far beyond the financial aspects when youth contribute to service projects. When youth volunteer, adults tend to volunteer also, resulting in a lifelong volunteer. The community will learn to appreciate gains obtained university communities which care about where they live and which are willing to make a commitment to improvement in the lives of the ordinary people.

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While benefits to the communities served can be translated to a monetary figure, the benefits reaped by the university community offering their service have a positive impact on them personally both immediate and into the future. Beyond the personal benefits, the volunteering communities are rewarded in society through appreciation whenever they offer voluntary service to different communities (Latham, 2000).

Some societies hold negative beliefs about some learning institutions in general. They look down upon some of the programmes on offer which they feel are not qualitative enough to be admired. In conventional systems, students are associated with rowdy behaviour. The media portrays negative images of some university students who get into trouble and commit crimes, for example, rioting and looting.

In community service programmes, opportunities provide an environment for people of different generations to work together for a common goal, as well as offering an opportunity for mutual understanding (Latham, 2000). Hence this may assist to a great extent, in removing the negative myths of distance education.

Major reasons cited by student for involvement in community programmes:

- Students feel compassion for people in need; they can do something for a cause in which they believe; they believe that if they help others, others will help them.
- Students think their efforts can have a positive impact on their communities.
- Students feel they gain important job skills and experience.
- Students expand their social circle and enhance their social awareness as well as that of their university.
- Student and the institution build connections.
- The community takes care of all its members because they have been empowered and may result in the reduction of crime courtesy of university involvement (Latham, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

The study is a descriptive survey targeting all students currently registered with the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region. The choice of the design was premised on the view that the study aimed at gathering perceptions. Thus according to Leedy (1995), surveys are excellent vehicles for gathering people's perceptions, views beliefs and attitudes. In order to solicit these views from the respondents, questionnaires were administered. Data were presented both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Population, Sample and sampling techniques

The current study targeted a total population of 560 students enrolled in the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University, in Mashonaland East region. These were chosen as respondents since they would be the ones directly involved in the implementation of the programme should it be given the nod and subsequently be adopted. Out of these, 100 respondents were selected into the sample. In an attempt to establish students' attitudes towards community service programmes, this present research study went about collecting data from a convenience sample of drawn from students. Convenience sampling will be used owing to the geographical dispersion of the ODL students.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The Extent to Which Community Service Is Acceptable To the Students as Part of the University Curriculum

Data collected from the respondents; in general, show that male students had more positive attitudes with respect to community service than did female students. This goes to suggest that students were of the belief that negative perceptions currently held by some members of the public were likely going to change through their direct participation in community service programmes. As for the different age groups, results show that the younger generation were more eager to engage in community work than the elder counterparts. This could be because they did not hold other responsibilities in the households as opposed to the elderly folk who normally have to shoulder all the family responsibilities as well as against a background of scarce time.

The Nature of Community Service Programmes That ODL Students Can Undertake

Respondents were asked what community service programmes they could be able to undertake. Responses are shown in Table 1 below.

Table1. *The nature of community service programmes that ODL students can undertake*

Faculty	Activity	Beneficiary
Arts and Education	Tutoring children with learning disabilities.	Schools and colleges
Applied Social Sciences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cleaning nursing homes and gardens • Helping out at a local library. • Helping the elderly in nursing homes. • Cleaning a park. • Collecting items for charity such as clothes, food, or furniture. 	Patients, municipalities and local authorities, the elderly
Science and Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cleaning nursing homes and gardens • Helping the elderly in nursing homes. • Cleaning parks. • Cleaning roadside verges. • Engaging in environmental awareness campaigns • Sponsored walks for the benefit of various disadvantaged organisations • Reclamation of wasted land through, for example, donga closures 	Patients, municipalities and local authorities, the elderly
Commerce and Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing small scale traders, vendors and flea market stall owners with basic accounting procedures and entrepreneurship skills 	Traders, SMEs, flea market owners

From Table 1, it can be seen that a number of activities that can be undertaken as part of community service were suggested by the students. These activities are faculty and Applied Social Sciences were service based and included provisions of lessons by the students in their areas of specialisation. However, some of the services involved physical work for example at community centres and old people’s homes. Some activities suggested by those in the Applied Social Sciences were also suggested by students in the Faculty of Science and Technology. These included cleaning nursing homes and parks. Nursing students and those doing counselling did provide these activities. In the Commerce and Law faculty, the activities centred on assisting vendors and SMEs with basic accounting skills so that they could improve on their administration of finances in their businesses.

Respondents’ Views on How Community Service Programmes Could Be Used To Alter Community Attitudes towards ODL

Respondents were also asked how community service programmes could be used to alter the attitudes of communities towards ODL. Among the most noticeable and popular were the views that these programmes were relevant within the community under the auspices of ODL. The popularity stemmed from the view that the programmes were much needed in attempting to solve the immediate challenges in the community. As students interacted with communities in service programmes, the community could realise the good work that can be carried out by an ODL institution. This could in turn instigate them to change their attitudes towards ODL.

The community service programmes could also be handy in assisting communities to develop so that they appreciate the role of ODL in community development and in turn get bonded and attracted to the system. Those served through community service could likely be willing to enroll with ODL as a sign that ODL services were being appreciated. Some respondents also felt that a change in the attitudes of the community would lead to implementation of relevant projects addressing the needs of the community.

According to Table 2, 87(87%) of the respondents indicated that communities become supportive and appreciative of ODL programmes as a result of community service programmes implemented by the ODL institution. Another 56(56%) stated that there could be community development through the various community service programmes that were offered for free by the learners and the university. Some 98(98%) of the respondents indicated that students gained firsthand experience in solving community problems. Another 97(97%) of the students indicated that they gained firsthand experience in solving community problems whereas another 97(97%) of the respondents stated that

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students learn to solve problems in the real world as opposed to theoretical learning. Seventy-six percent of the students thought that their efforts could have a positive impact on their communities through the community service programmes.

Table2. Students` views on ODL benefits culminating from their involvement in community service programmes

Benefit	No	%
Communities become supportive and appreciative of ODL programmes	87	87
Community development through the various community service programmes that are offered for free	56	56
Students gain firsthand experience in solving community problems	98	98
Students learn to solve problems in the real world as opposed to theoretical learning.	97	97
Students think their efforts can have a positive impact on their communities.	76	76

Table3. Challenges existing from ODL students` involvement in community service programmes

Challenge	Responses	
	No	%
Inadequate resources for example transport to areas needing assistance in form of community service programmes	87	87
Negative attitudes by some students to get involved in the community service programmes	76	76
Lack of confidence to approach certain stakeholders with their knowledge and skills	56	56
Lack of confidence in the competence of ODL graduates by the communities	88	88
Inadequate time for the programmes	73	73

Table 3 shows that 87(87%) of the respondents stated that inadequate resources for example transport to areas needing assistance in form of community service programmes was a challenge to community service programmes by students. Some 76(76%) indicated negative attitudes by some students to get involved in the community service programmes while 56(56%) stated lack of confidence to approach certain stakeholders with their knowledge and skills as a challenge. Another 88(88%) suggested lack of confidence in the competence of ODL graduates by the communities as a challenge. Some 73(73%) indicated that time could be inadequate. This is understandable given the view that most ODL students are engaged in employment elsewhere and besides those that are not gainfully employed, may find some informal jobs for the upkeep of their families. However, weekends and public holidays could be reserved for these activities when the majority of the employed are off duty.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusion can be drawn for the above findings:

- Most students hold positive views about community service activities owing to their propensity to lure student into the ZOU programmes and help in solving community problems.
- Male students have more positive attitudes with respect to community service than did female students.
- The younger generation is more eager to engage in community work than the older counterparts.
- There are a lot of community service programmes that could be able be undertaken by the student included assisting in nursing homes and cleaning parks, offering financial accounting assistance to vendors and SMEs
- Community service programmes can be used to alter the attitudes of communities towards ODL because these programmes are relevant within the community were much needed in attempting to solve the immediate challenges
- Community service programmes make it possible for communities become supportive and appreciative of ODL programmes and the students` efforts could have a positive impact on their communities through the community service programmes.
- Inadequate resources for community service programmes, negative attitudes by some students to get involved in the community service programmes, lack of confidence to approach certain stakeholders with their knowledge and skills and lack of confidence in the competence of ODL graduates by the communities are some of the challenges that could hinder the success of community service programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions arrived at above, the study recommended that:

- There is need to instill positive attitudes in both male and female students and engage both younger generation and older generation of ODL students if community service work is to succeed.
- The ODL institutions should consider taking part in community service programmes that could be able to be undertaken by the student included assisting in nursing homes and cleaning parks, offering financial accounting assistance to vendors and SMEs to enhance their appearance in society.
- Community service programmes could be used to alter the attitudes of communities towards ODL because these programmes were relevant within the community were much needed in attempting to solve the immediate challenges
- Since community service programmes make it possible for communities become supportive and appreciative of ODL programmes, there is need to seriously consider dedicating resources to the endeavour.
- There is need for change of attitudes so that students get involved in the community service programmes, after which communities can have confidence in the competence of ODL graduates.
- There is also need to make community service compulsory and part of graduation requirements
- Develop rapport between community and ODL institution
- Resource mobilisation by the institution from the corporate world to cater for the community service programmes sustenance
- There is need to establish MOUs and MOAs with the different stakeholders so that the community service programmes are a success.

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