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An Analysis of the Characteristics, Needs and Motivations of Students who study through ODL in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study sought to establish the characteristics, needs and motivations of the Open and Distance Learner in Zimbabwe. The study was premised on the notion that understanding the customer is the foundation of the delivery of quality services. The study employed the case study method which falls within the qualitative research methodology. The study also utilized some quantitative techniques on data presentation and analysis. Data were generated through a questionnaire survey, focus group discussions, observation and document survey. The use of several data generation techniques assisted to enhance rigour, trustworthiness and credibility of the study. The study revealed that learners were motivated to study through ODL because of the need for promotion, upgrading, securing alternative employment, job security and the need to study while at the same time being with the family or at the workplace. Financing education was reported to be a major challenge for the ODL learner due to several dependants and other family responsibilities. The study concluded that ODL practitioners had inadequate information on the key characteristics, needs and motivations of the ODL learner. The study also concluded that the needs, motivations and characteristics of the ODL learners had a major effect on their service expectations. The study recommends that the University should include, in its students' records, vital information on the characteristics, needs and motivations of the ODL learner. The study also recommends that the University should align its service strategy with the service expectations of and environmental constraints confronting the ODL learner.

Key Words: characteristics, needs and motivations of the Open and Distance Learner, Zimbabwe, effective management, service quality

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The effective management of service quality depends upon the extent to which organizations understand the specific needs and expectations of their customers, (Kotler, 2003). Studies by several ODL researchers pointed out that the ODL learner had distinguishing characteristics which were instrumental in determining their service expectations (Qureshi et al, 2002; Harris et al, 2011 & Dursun et al, 2013). In Zimbabwe, studies by Mupa et al, (2013) and Ndudzo (2014) revealed some interesting glimpses of the characteristics of ODL learners in Zimbabwe. The studies were, however, not exhaustive in describing the specific needs and key characteristics of ODL learners, including their motivation to study through ODL.

The study sought to establish the characteristics, needs and motivations of the ODL learner. It is assumed that such information will greatly assist the ODL University to design service offerings that suit the needs and expectations of the learners. There is a general lack of

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understanding of the specific needs and characteristics of the ODL learner in Zimbabwe and how those needs and characteristics influence service expectations of the ODL learner. This study is, therefore, guided by the question: What could be the distinguishing characteristics of the ODL learner in Zimbabwe? It is against this background that the study strives towards characterizing and analysing the needs as well as the motivations of students who study through ODL. The researchers attempted to achieve this through addressing the significant characteristics of the ODL learners as well as the factors contributing towards influencing students to prefer studying through ODL. In this study, the researchers assumed that there is lack of a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of the ODL learner among practitioners. Further, it is assumed that the characteristics of ODL learners influence their service expectations and perceptions.

The study is set to improve on the knowledge currently available on the key characteristics of the open and distance learner in Zimbabwe. The data is essential for the Zimbabwe Open University and other ODL institutions on their endeavors to develop service quality strategies to improve student enrollment and retention. Service quality expectations of customers are influenced by the characteristics, background and expectations of the customers, hence the importance of knowing the customer in an in-depth manner.

Growth is one of the major goals of the Zimbabwe Open University, and the attraction of more students is central to the attainment of this goal. This study elaborates on the factors that influence students to choose open and distance learning over other forms of education. A clear understanding of these factors will assist the University in positioning itself in a manner that would improve enrollment. The study is set to establish the problems faced by ODL learners in Zimbabwe. The findings are set to empower the University and other ODL Universities with strategies to solve the long-standing problem of student dropouts.

Demographic characteristics of the ODL Student

Attempts to describe the ODL student have been made with regards to the general characteristics of the ODL student. Focus has been made on outlining the demographic characteristics and motivations of the ODL learner. Studies to describe the ODL student were undertaken by Worcester Polytechnic institute (2011), Qureshi et al (2002), Harris et al (2011) and several other researchers in the field of distance education.

The study by Harris et al (2011) described the ODL student as, basically, a motivated professional. The demographic characteristics showed that 78% of ODL students were females while 22% were males. The study by Worcester Polytechnic institute (2012), however, produced contrasting results from studies done in North America where at least 74% of ODL students were found to be male and only 26% were female. Dursun et al (2013) estimated that 34% of ODL students were female while 66% were male. From the several studies undertaken in ODL, it cannot be established accurately the reliable gender distribution in the field of distance education. It is essential, however, that ODL institutions know the exact gender distribution of its students and establish the reasons why ODL attracts both sides of the gender divide. Since the expectations of men and women could be different, the findings of the above studies should be considered as inadequate to properly guide institutions on developing gender-specific service strategies.

According to a research carried out by Harris et al (2011), 50% of the ODL students were in the range 21-29 years, 39% were above the age of 40 years, and 11% were between 30 and 39

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years. The study at Wocerster Polytechnic Institute (WPI) (2012) defined the ODL student as much younger; it categorized 57% of ODL students as under the age of 30 years. WPI indicated that 21% of ODL students were between 30 and 39 years. Only 10% of students were said to be over the age of 50 years, while 12% were categorized as between 40 and 49 years. The age range and distribution of ODL learners is essential in assisting institutions to effectively develop services which meet the needs of the relevant age groups.

Most of the literature on the characteristics and factors motivating the behavior of distance education students has established that the ODL student is usually married and had dependents. Dursun et al (2013) indicated in their study that 50.5% of ODL students were married, and 40.5% were single with 9% in the separated and widowed categories. Worcester Polytechnic in their service quality study (2012) claimed that more than half of distance learning students were married with dependents. The implication was that the students were juggling family issues and jobs with their coursework.

Problems faced by distance learners

Having identified the characteristics of the ODL learner, this study also addresses a concern that has been raised in many ODL institutions about the frequency of dropouts and the necessary means to curtail this trend. It is a significantly challenging task to meet the educational needs of the diverse and complex clientele of distance learners.

In studies in the United States, Carr (2000) reported student dropout rates which ranged from 20% to 50%. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2000) also carried out surveys on ODL student dropouts in European countries and reported dropout rates of 20% in the United Kingdom, above 45% in Austria, France, Portugal and Turkey and 35% in Italy. The studies, however, did not delve much into uncovering the underlying service quality related causes of the high student dropouts in distance education.

A study carried out by Daniel (2005) reported dropout rates of above 50% in Africa. Financial challenges were reported as the main drivers of student dropout. In other studies, high student dropout rates were recorded as rife in Africa together with the prolonged time taken to complete studies through ODL (Mbukusa, 2009; Bhalalusesa, 1999 & Tyler-Smith, 2006). Although the above studies uncovered challenges which could be identical to those faced by the ODL students in Zimbabwe, there was, however, no attempt to sufficiently relate the findings to the characteristics of the students.

In a study by Obadiah Dodo (2013), challenges faced by distance education students in Zimbabwe included the lack of financial resources, low personal commitment, and inadequacy of sufficient time to study, negative stereotypes, social and work pressures. Though the study gave an insight into the challenges faced by ODL learners, it could not conclusively point to these challenges as having influenced enrollment and also the extent to which they influenced individuals' decision-making.

Tapfumaneyi (2013), in arguing for the importance of counseling in distance education, observed that distance education students faced numerous challenges because of the nature of the mode of education as the students were separated from the University in terms of time and space. The study concluded that counseling was integral to the attainment of quality in distance education, and should form the basis of support services.

The problem of student isolation was observed by Ravinder (2007) in his analysis of the challenges of distance education in Eritrea. Ravinder (ibid) noted that a major problem area in ODL is the feeling of alienation and isolation reported by distance students. Students of all kinds want to be part of a larger school community and not simply of a correspondence course. The distance aspect of distance learning takes away much of the social interactions that would be present in traditional learning environments.

Senanayake and Dadigamuwa (2005) and Tyler and Smith (2006) suggested that there were several underlying challenges facing the ODL students which the Universities could consider during service delivery. Berge et al. (2002) categorized them into situational, attitudinal, psychological and pedagogical challenges. Zirnkle (2001) highlighted institutional and socio-cultural related challenges. Regardless of the categorization, it is however essential that ODL institutions align these challenges faced by students with the service process.

While answering the question; "Why Students don't learn?" which could partly explain the challenges faced by ODL students, Gibbs et. al. (1982) delved on the following commonly given explanations:

- Students lack the necessary study skills;
- Students are of different types, and some students have limited approaches to studying ;
- Students choose their approaches to studying, and some students choose ineffective or inappropriate approaches;
- Students develop in their sophistication as learners and some are less developed than others;
- Some aspects of course design constrain students in their learning.

Mclean (2006) summed up on what contributed to ODL learners' dropout by suggesting one important pointer which reduced learner interest during the course of the ODL programme. Teachers in the study were said to suggest that the greatest concern for distance education institutions was the lack of consistent and vibrant interaction among the student community and between students and lecturers. This was said to be an important factor contributing to a reduction in satisfaction with the learning experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative research methodology. This approach enabled the researcher to investigate and examine, in an in-depth manner, the needs and key characteristics of the ODL learner, the challenges they faced and the factors that compelled them to learn through the ODL mode of delivery. The researchers, having adopted the qualitative research methodology, utilized the interpretivist research paradigm. The study produced narrations and statements from the University's students which required the researchers' interpretations.

This study used the case study research design where the Zimbabwe Open University was the case or entity under investigation. Leedy (1997) defines a case study as a type of qualitative research in which the researcher explores a single entity or case within its real life context, bound by time and activity. The case study design was, therefore, chosen for this research because it gave the researcher the chance to conduct an in-depth investigation of the ODL University in its natural setting.

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The target population of this study was the ZOU student body, which comprised local students studying through the 10 Regional Centers. This study was based on a total sample of 330 Zimbabwe Open University students selected through purposive sampling. Data were generated through a combination of techniques which included observation, the questionnaire instrument, document survey and focus group discussions. Data presentation, therefore, was mainly in the form of narratives presenting the thoughts, expectations and attitudes of the ODL learners. Basic statistical methods were employed to present quantitative data. Tables, pie charts, line and bar graphs were the main instruments used on data presentation.

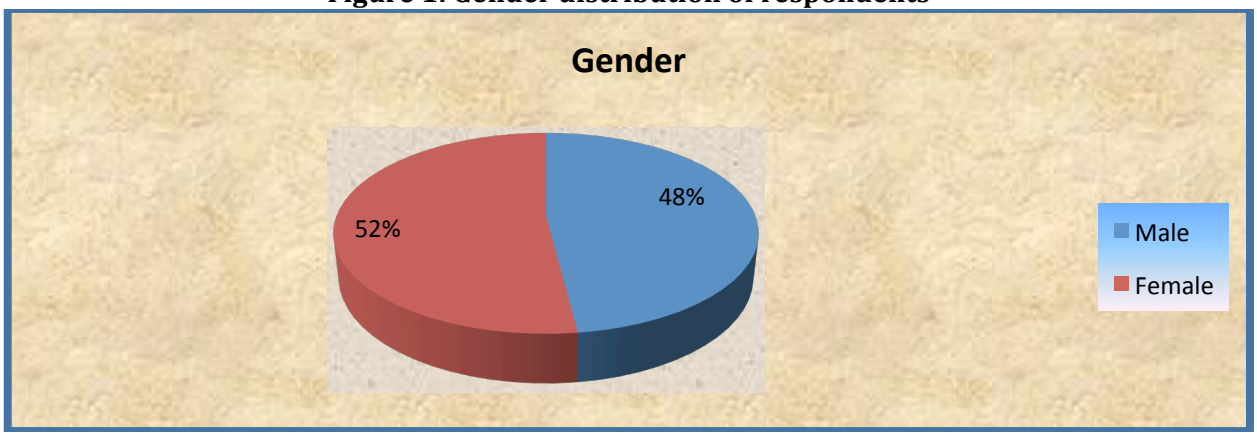
Rigour, trustworthiness and credibility of this research were enhanced through the triangulation of methods. The researcher used questionnaires, observation, document survey and focus group discussions. The subjectivity of the qualitative nature of the research was addressed through fusion of both qualitative and quantitative data.

In order to adhere to high ethical standards and observe the necessary legal requirements, responses from the subjects in this study were treated with utmost confidentiality and were used for the scholarly purposes of this study only. The study was carried out within the legal framework and requirements of the laws of Zimbabwe. The researchers took extra care in maintaining independent relationships with respondents so as to uphold the credibility of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender of respondents

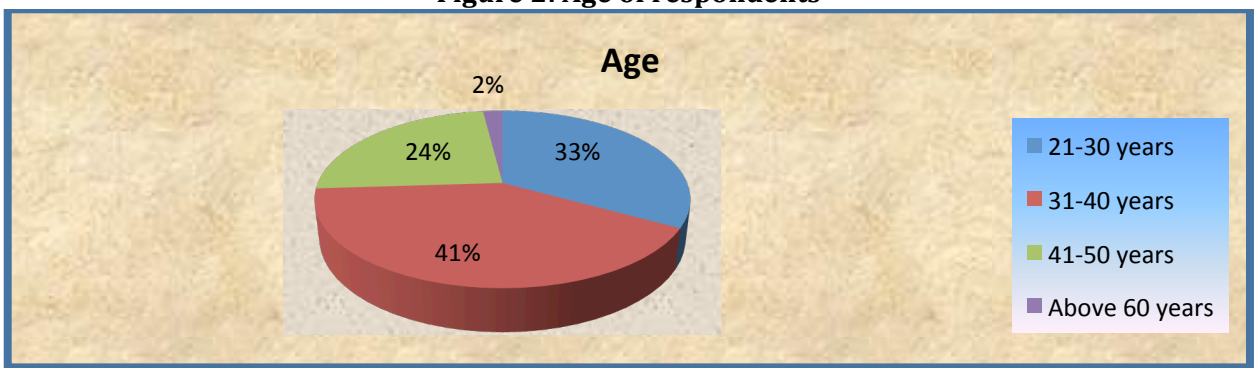
Figure 1: Gender distribution of respondents



The study had a fair gender representation. 52% of respondents were female while 48% were male. The findings, therefore, show that the University has gone a long way in establishing gender parity in the recruitment of students. When asked to comment on the gender distribution and the perceived milestones made by the University in fostering gender equality in its recruitment drive, the following was one exhaustive comment from a senior manager at the University: "The University has been able to recruit extensively from both sides of the gender divide, women are increasingly enrolling in education institutions because of government policies towards gender balance and the changing roles of women in society. Most young couples are both employed hence they are attracted to the convenience of distance education". The findings in this study disconfirmed the findings by Qureshi et al. (2002) who revealed that females constituted about 67% of ODL students. Yener (2013) also found a different gender pattern in ODL with male students making up 47% of the total ODL students in Canada. The findings in this study, therefore, could be a reflection of Zimbabwe's milestone in making ODL education accessible without gender discrimination.

Age of respondents

Figure 2: Age of respondents



The study revealed that 41% of the respondents were in the age ranges 31-40 years, while 33% were between 21-30 years. The 41-50 years age range was fairly represented with 24%. Only 2% of respondents were above 60 years. The study revealed that the ODL learner is usually an adult between 20 and 50 years. The major finding from the age analysis was the lack of representation of students below 20 years of age. It shows that the University has not come up with a strategy of appealing to this segment of the market since the majority of school-leavers fall within this bracket. The researchers identified this as a gap which needs further investigation. The reasons why the ODL mode of education is not attractive to the learner below 20 years of age have to be established so that the University and other ODL service providers can alter their service offerings to suit the needs of the school-leaver.

During focus group discussions, the age of the ODL learner was identified as an important factor to consider when engaging with the student. Most of the focus group respondents indicated that "ODL learners are mature adults, some of whom occupy important positions in industry, government and society, employees in ODL institutions should exhibit respect and utmost courtesy when communicating with these students because their expectations on the level of professionalism are high".

The age characteristics of the ODL learner in this study correspond with the findings of Eduventure (2008) and Moore and Kearslsley (1996), where the ODL learner in America was characterized as between the ages 25-50 years. Eduventure (2008) averaged the age of the distance learner to be at 38.8 years. The findings in this study were in contrast with Qureshi et al's (2002) findings on the age distribution of the ODL student. In this study, the largest age group was 31-40 years at 41%. Qureshi et al. (2002) revealed that in Canada ODL was more attractive to the school-leavers at the 20-24 year age group representing about 42% of the total enrollment. In Zimbabwe, only 33% of ODL students were between 20-30 years.

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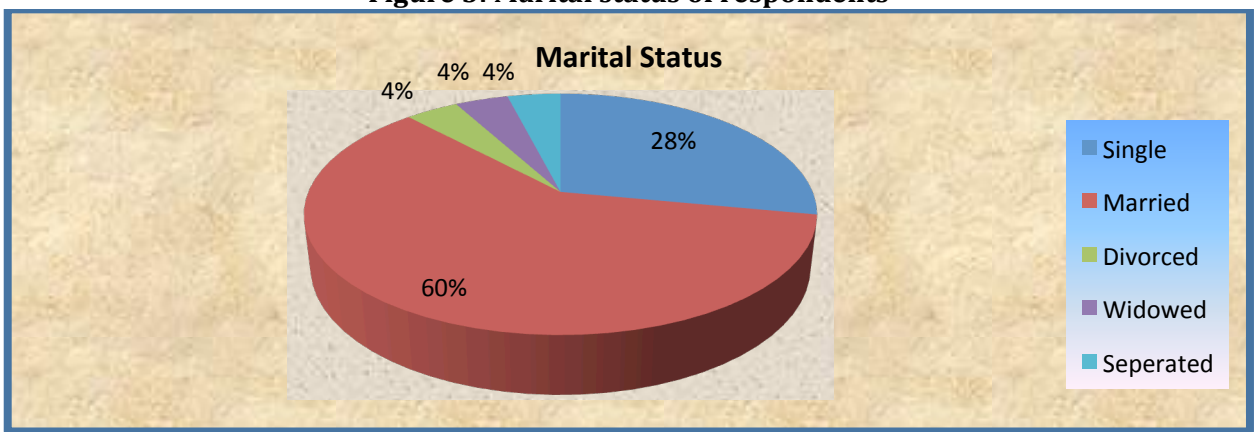
Marital Status and dependency of respondents

Figure 3: Marital status of respondents

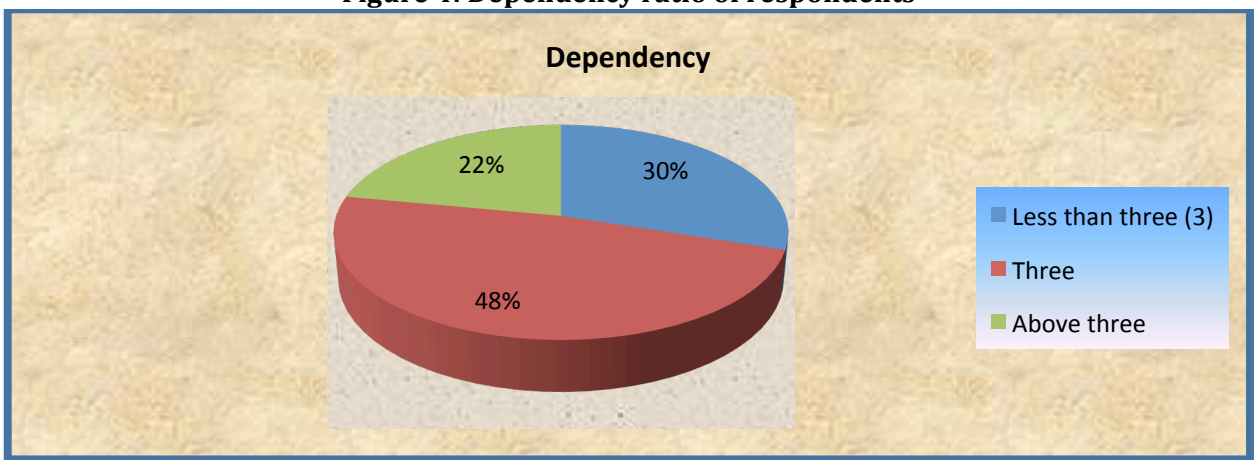


The findings show that the majority of ODL learners are married. 60% of respondents were married. The second biggest representation was in the single category with 28%. The percentage of those who were divorced, widowed and separated was 12% with a 4% representation across the three categories. During focus group discussions, it emerged that marital status and employment were two of the most important factors attracting individuals to distance education. It also emerged that marital status was an important factor to women in the Zimbabwean society, and in choosing a mode of education, women are expected to have a more 'hands-on relationship' with children and the family at large. Conventional universities are said to require women to relocate, a condition married women in Zimbabwe are generally not prepared to meet, as noted by one female student who commented as follows: "I only had my wedding 7 months ago before enrolling with the University. My husband was not willing to have me relocate to another city just for getting University education. We deliberated on it and decided that the best option was for me to enroll with a distance learning University. Fortunately the Zimbabwe Open University has Regional offices in Marondera and I am able to have my tutorials and write examinations and get services within my hometown, thanks to the Zimbabwe Open University".

The findings were in line with Qureshi et al's (2002) findings on the status of the ODL student. In their study of the motivation of the ODL student, Qureshi et al. (2002) revealed that 30% of the ODL students were married and also that ODL generally attracted married students. Pontes et al. (2010) survey indicated that 45% of distance learners were married. The findings by Pontes et al. (2010) also established that married distance education learners had a higher satisfaction index than single students and that the former were less likely to drop out than single students. This study also substantiated findings by Eduventure (2008) on the distance learner where the majority of distance learners were described as married, and one third had dependent children under the age of 18 years living at home.

Dependency ratio of respondents

Figure 4: Dependency ratio of respondents

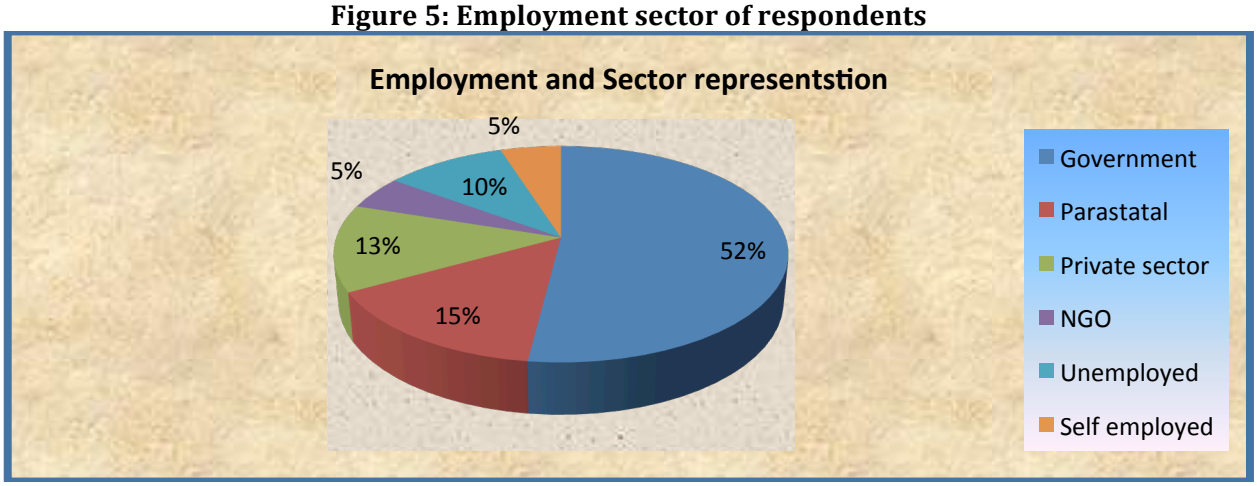


The marital status of the ODL learner, as represented in figure 4 above, is the most significant indicator in explaining the significant burden ODL students have in supporting dependents. The study revealed that the ODL learner was carrying an average of three (3) dependents, as shown on figure 4 above. This dependency level, coupled with the average incomes of respondents, impacts heavily on the ability of the learner to meet the fees requirements at the University. The researcher noted during focus group discussions that the dependents under the care of the ODL student in Zimbabwe were not limited to the learners' children only. The ODL learner also looked after his/her parents who, in most cases, were said to have reached retirement age without any form of social security or assets from which they could sustain themselves.

Other respondents and participants during focus group discussions revealed that their dependency ratio was as a result of common social problems facing the country, mainly the HIV pandemic. Respondents argued that the University should be better positioned to read problems faced by the society which the ODL student was not spared. "I'm taking care of my deceased two brothers' children, their mothers are not feeling well, and sometimes I supplement them, but I also need to go to school. It really affects my ability to pay fees on time, and the University should be sensitive to some of these situations," commented one participant.

Employment status

Figure 5: Employment sector of respondents



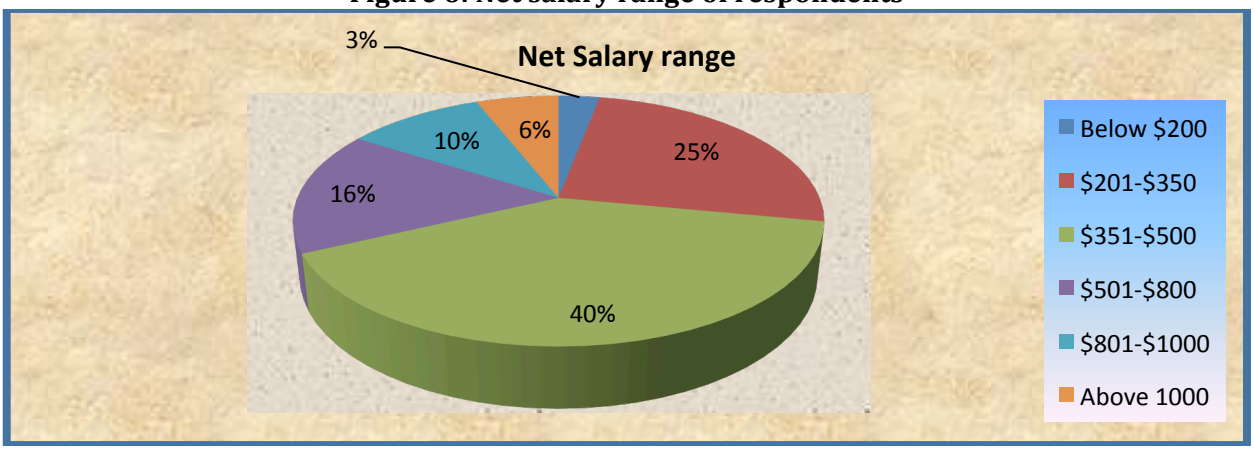
The study revealed that the majority of ODL learners (90%) were employed professionals while 10% were unemployed. The government is the biggest employer of the ODL students with (52%) of respondents while parastatals employed the second biggest number of respondents with (15%) representation. Only 13% of respondents were employed in the private sector, while 5% were self-employed entrepreneurs, and another 5% was employed by Non Governmental Organizations.

Though the majority (90%) of ODL learners studying with the Zimbabwe Open University was employed or raising income through entrepreneurial activities, the study also revealed a worrying trend where the majority of the learners could be clustered in the low-income groups. Possibly, this could be as a result of the fact that the majority of respondents were employed in the government where salaries are relatively low, as shown on Figure 5 above.

The findings in this study indicated that distance education in Zimbabwe attracted more employed adults than distance education in developed countries. Qureshi et al's (2002) study on distance education in Canada and the United States of America revealed that only 30% of distance learners were employed. A comparison between the two studies above shows that the differences in employment status were mainly because the distance learners in developed countries tended to be younger and dependent on parents and therefore did not need to be employed. This study also substantiates research by Eduventures (2008) in which the distance learner was found to be 'usually employed full-time'.

Net salary range

Figure 6: Net salary range of respondents



The study revealed that the average (mean) net salary range group for ODL learners was the $351-$500 group. 40% of respondents indicated that they were earning between $351 and $500. The second largest group (25%) earned between $201 and $350. The results show that very few ODL learners were in the high income groups. Only 16% of respondents earned between $501 and $800 while 10% earned between $800 and $1000, and 6% of respondents revealed that they earned above the $1000 threshold. 3% of respondents earned below $200.

The mean salaries of ODL learners ($351-$500/ month) revealed in this study, when compared with the challenges of the dependency facing the learners and their academic fees requirements, pose a great challenge to the fee pricing strategies of the University. It calls for flexibility, patience and well-thought out flexible fees payment schemes by the ODL University.

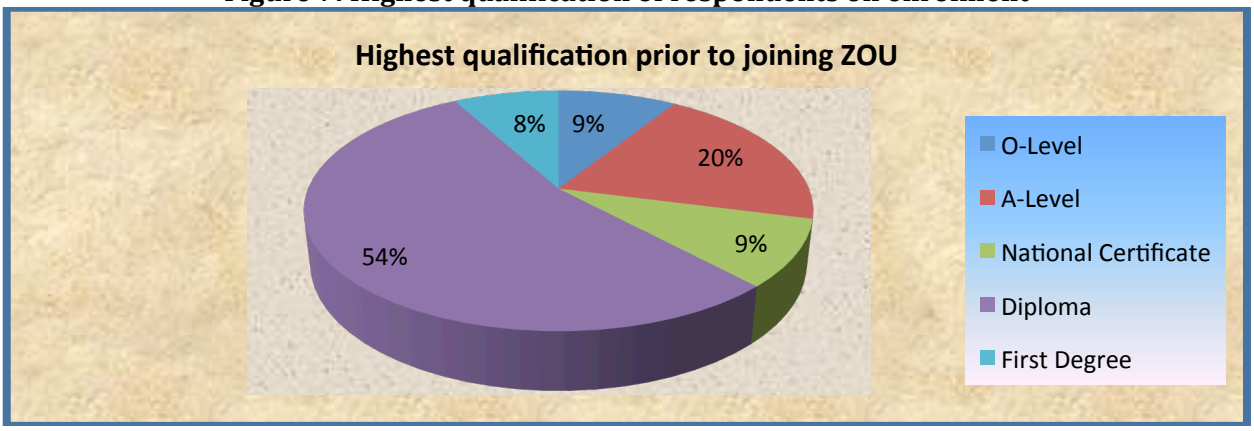
Comparisons in income between distance education students in Zimbabwe and developed countries studied by Qureshi et al (2002) showed significant differences. While (40%) of

Zimbabwean distance education learners earned less than $500 per month and the second largest range was $201-$350 with 25%, the majority of distance education learners in America earned about $1000 per month, the second most common income range (13.9%) earning $3000-$4000 per month. The study therefore shows a danger in generalizing strategies in different ODL environments as different economic backgrounds may require different strategies. Eduventures (2008) estimated the average monthly household income to be approximately $6400 in the United States of America, which is significantly different from the average income of the ODL learner in Zimbabwe which is between $330 and $500 per month.

Highest qualification prior to joining ZOU

The highest qualification of the student prior to joining the University is also an important indicator of the possible sources of ZOU and ODL students and the types of individuals attracted to ODL. Of the total number of respondents, the modal group (54%) enrolled after attaining their diplomas. 20% of respondents had attained their Advanced level studies; 9% had attained their O-levels, while another 9% had National Certificates, and 8% had attained First Degrees.

Figure 7: Highest qualification of respondents on enrolment



The competitors of the Zimbabwe Open University locally are the conventional universities. The competitors mainly enroll students after their Advanced level. The fact that only 29% of the University students are from High School should be of major concern to the University. However this situation presents an opportunity as well for the University to expand its market-share by targeting this particular age group.

MOTIVATION

The researchers managed to conduct in-depth discussions on the motivations of the ODL student during focus group sessions. The discussions dwelled on why respondents pursued education through ODL, in particular. The most common reason for pursuing education was for enhancing one's chances of securing a better paying job. Most respondents were not satisfied with their salaries, hence the perceived need to improve qualifications in an endeavor to seek better paying jobs in the private sector and in neighboring countries, with South Africa being the most preferred destination. The second most important reason was to improve job security; respondents indicated that there were high chances for retrenchments in non-governmental organizations, parastatals and the private sector due to the declining economic well-being of the country. Higher qualifications were seen as one way of improving job security.

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Other respondents simply cited personal development as the major reason why they chose to seek higher qualifications. This was common for respondents in government departments because promotion was seen as of little significance as there was no significant pay rise from promotion. Job security was considered to be better in government hence respondents indicated that they were just interested in improving their literacy in certain areas relevant to their jobs. Others were transferred to new positions and sought academic expertise to enable them to perform their jobs effectively. The study, therefore, substantiated the findings by Ference and Vockell (1994) who argued that ODL students also have external motivation and sought better job opportunities and an improved standard of living by pursuing higher education.

Some respondents in this study indicated that they enrolled at ZOU so as to take advantage of tuition assistance offered by their employers. This was also reported in a study of USA higher education students by Eduventures (2008). On why they chose to study through ODL, respondents in the Eduventure study also singled out flexibility and convenience of ODL education as critical factors in their decision-making process. ODL was viewed as a mode of education which allowed students to pursue academic progression while attending to their families and work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

- The University should capture ODL learners' data in a very effective manner so as to keep up-to-date records of its clients. This would enable the University to be kept abreast of the changing characteristics and needs of its students.
- The University should align fees with the financial capability of its students as most of them belong to the low-income groups in the public sector
- More effort should be directed towards making ODL compatible with the expectations and needs of high school graduates. The age distribution of respondents indicated that the University has not been able to adequately attract young adults from high school.
- Develop more strategies for understanding the learner and getting constant update of changes in learner preferences.
- There is need for more research on why students in the age group 20 years and below are not keen to study through ODL.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to analyse the key characteristics, needs and motivations of students who study through ODL in Zimbabwe. The major contribution of the study has been its ability to clearly articulate these characteristics from a Zimbabwean perspective. The age, gender, marital status, employment, salary levels, entry level qualifications and dependency load of the ODL learner was established in this study. The study also clearly articulated the specific needs and motivations of ODL students in Zimbabwe, The study concluded that practitioners may have been operating with limited knowledge of the characteristics of the ODL learner. It was also revealed that the University's data gathering instruments used to capture students' information on registration do not sufficiently capture some of the most important attributes of the ODL learner. The study also concluded that the characteristics of and circumstances facing the ODL learners directly influence the service expectations of these learners. These characteristics and needs of the ODL learners also directly influence the ODL learners' choice of the mode of education. The implication of the ODL practitioners operating without precise knowledge of the specific needs, characteristics and motivations of customers is that services would not be delivered in a manner that meets customer expectations.

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