Student Retention as a Function of the Quality of Learner Support in Open and Distance Learning: Students’ Perceptions at the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract
Student retention is critically linked to the quality of service in open and distance learning (ODL). Peterson (1997) points out that students will form favourable perceptions regarding the quality of their experience and decide to persist. Student retention could therefore be viewed as a function of the learners’ perception of the quality of service and support. Low student retention rates have a negative impact on the perception of the institution. It is, therefore, pertinent to enhance the student retention rate in ODL. The study used Tinto’s model of student retention as a theoretical base which underpins the need to satisfy students’ social and educational needs in order to retain them. The study is a descriptive survey utilising multistage purposive sampling in order to include students across faculties and regions. The questionnaire and in-depth interviews were the methods of data collection. The results indicated that, student retention was affected by a fees’ prizing policy that did not take into consideration the students’ ability to pay and lack of timely supply of learning materials. It would appear that students’ retention as a function of the affordability factor, was affected by the negative macro-economic environment existent in Zimbabwe at the time of the study.

Introduction
Student retention is a critical construct for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) because it has some correlation with the quality of service delivery. Jones (2009) defines student retention as “the act of retaining or keeping students on the programme until its natural conclusion or they have achieved their academic goals.” Institutions therefore ought to strive to keep their retention rates high. Low retention rates can be an indicator of poor performance and are potentially damaging to the reputation of any institution. Petersen cited in CAPDM (2009) points out that;
The overall aim of improving student retention is to provide an experience that is so educationally beneficial that students will view the quality of their experience favourably, and persist with their studies.

Tinto’s (1975) model of student retention presupposes the need to satisfy students’ social and educational needs in order to retain them on the programme. Following on from Tinto’s model, academic and social integration could be viewed as integrally the functional dimensions of the student retention construct.

Managing learner support in many ways enhances the academic and social integration of the students thereby impacting positively their retention. It should be understood that students in ODL operate in contextually different academic and social environments than those in conventional settings. It is also quite easy for conventional students to identify and integrate socially with their institution than learners in ODL. The ODL students often work and study and their social activities are not campus based but family and community based. ODL students, therefore, may fail to complete their studies due to competing work and family commitments. Learner support is therefore pertinently indispensable in assisting the ODL learner to cope with academic and social pressures in such a way that they achieve the requisite level of academic and social integration (Badza & Chakuchichi, 2009).
Conceptual Framework

The concept of student retention has deeper ramifications than meets the eye. On the surface it focuses on attrition rates as a quantum. However there are the causal factors and the impact factors which include negative perception of an institution. In order to fully comprehend the theoretical context of the relation between student retention and the quality of service delivery, we should revisit its various dimensions.

According to Grote (2009), student retention refers to a number of issues which include, ‘student mortality, engagement, drop-out, attrition, persistence, progression, withdrawal, completion, conclusion, successful completion, preferred learning and success barriers.” Retention in a programme or course of study does not simply imply staying on the programme but essentially remaining active and succeeding in completing the programme of study. The student retention construct in ODL insinuates getting the desired credentials at the end of the programme of study despite differential pedagogy and delivery factors when compared with conventional programmes. ODL retention rates range from less than 10% to about 35%. For course completion the rate may increase to about 50% of the original cohort (Huelsmann, 1999). In other studies Bunny and Illing in Grote, (2000), New Zealand and Australian colleges had 10% student withdrawal within the first year of study. Grote (2009) suggests that the situation has to be worse as the ODL institutions deal with a much more desperate student body with varied backgrounds and the widest possible age range. The apparent diversity of backgrounds inherently situates the basis for student drop outs in the complex and desperate nature of ODL student body. In the United Kingdom where the OECD average dropout rate was about 30%, the dropout rate at the Open University UK, a mega university with over 125 000 students was 25% for new students and 22% for students in stream in 2000, (CAPDM 2007). In another ODL college in the UK, with an enrolment of 4 000 students, the dropout rate was as low as 15%. What is important is that even with this very low dropout rate, CAPDM (2007), suggests that reducing it from 15% to 7.5% would increase the revenue of college by an annual income of 750 000 pounds.

If the dropout rate is translated to loss in revenue then the student retention index, which is the reverse of the dropout rate, should be viewed as a critical statistic in every ODL institution. It also becomes pertinent to interrogate the causal factors to student college dropout phenomena.

Causes of Students’ Withdrawal

Withdrawal of students from the programmes whether temporarily or as finality, which essentially is the dropout phenomena, affects the students’ retention in ODL. Studies have shown that the major causes of dropout in higher education ODL institutions are multi-dimensional (Southerland, 2009; Sukati, 2009; Bernath and Rubin, 2004, and Grote, 2000). The causal factors include dissatisfaction with service delivery, lack of time which essentially is mismanagement of study time causing students to fall behind their expected study schedules, complex study matter as in quantum subjects like Mathematics, Accounts and Statistics and resource allocation problems. Dissatisfaction with service delivery includes what Sukati (2009:7) points out as lack of clarity in modules (learning materials) and what Grote (2000:9) suggests as inappropriate course/programme selection; underestimation of the difficulty and time requirements of distance study; clash with personal study preference; lack of academic ability and preparedness; weak motivation or goal orientation and withdrawal of external support. CAPDM (2009) gives the following as causal factors to student dropout; inappropriate course choice, time management, quality of tutorial and tutor. For example, at the Open University, UK, in 2000 it was found that 18% of students were dissatisfied with their tutorials and this factor was rated as the third most cited reason for students’ dissatisfaction. Sukati (2009:11) and CAPDM (2009; 2) agree that the quality of learning materials is a considerable causality to students’ dissatisfaction. Inherent in the quality of tutorials or learning material are the poor clarity, navigability of the materials, lack or excessive activities. Morgan and Tam cited in Grote (2000; 16) conclude that:

No single factor can be attributable to student withdrawal or non-persistence. Rather, it is in the interaction of numerous factors, situational, institutional, dispositional
and epistemological that produces the outcome of completing or not completing the course.

As could be seen the causal factors to student dropout rate are quite multi-dimensional and can be reduced to Tinto’s (1975) lack of academic integration and lack of social integration. In order to reduce the student dropout rate and increase the student retention rate, institutions should, therefore, improve the quality of service delivery to all learners. The strategies for improving the service delivery should focus on both the academic integration centred on quality of tutorials and learning materials and the social integration which looks at the relational aspects, time management and self-management. Woods et al cited in Sukati (2009:8) emphasize that a key success factor for distance learning courses to meet the needs of the consumer is the quality of instructional materials.

### Theoretical Contexts of Student Retention

Two aspects related to student success in higher education are student retention and student persistence. The later aspect resides in the student while the former which is student retention is a result of a multiplicity and interplay of factors inherent in institutional service delivery and personal motivation on the part of the student (Southerland, 2009). The theoretical base for student retention is founded in Tinto’s (1975) model which espouses that insufficient social interaction and incongruence with prevailing value patterns in the institutions results in student voluntary withdrawal from programmes of study. Tinto’s model specifies two realms within the institution as the academic and the social spheres. According to Tinto’s schema, the individual’s integration into the institution’s academic and social systems directly relates to his/her continuance with that programme of study. Southerland (2009) explains Tinto’s model as using specifically two constructs which are goal commitment and institutional commitment as key factors of student retention.

In Tinto’s model of student retention, academic integration is seen as the degree to which the student is incorporated in the academic fabric of the institution and function which is measurable by student performance and intellectual growth. In the same model social integration relates to levels of congruence between the individual and his social environment. The role of academic and social integration in student retention has been proven in conventional educational setting but may have slightly different ramifications in ODL. Studies (Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Cleveland, 1994; Bean and Metzner, 1985) cited in Mannan (2009) indicates that in ODL or non-conventional education settings, the academic integration construct has been found to positively correlate with student retention while social integration had less or no influence on student retention. It had been assumed (Weidman cited in Southerland, 2009) that the implicit norms of an institution had the same powerful expectation in ODL as in conventional learning contexts. However, this scenario has shifted even in Tinto’s (1993) article that academic integration is more significantly correlated to student retention in ODL than social integration. As alluded to before, the social settings of ODL students are quite different from that of conventional students and hence the social integration factor is less effective. Notwithstanding this assertion McGivney (2004), found high quality course content and presentation and supportive learner group as critical success factors in ODL. In other contemporary studies Hansman and Kasworm in Southerland (2009) found lack of access to counselling, mentoring and academic advisement as causal to student dropout in ODL. Also Sweet (1986), found strong correlation between social integration and student retention. Both Kember (1995) and Bajtelsmit (1998) cited in Mannan (2009) found both academic and social integration to be critical factors that influence student retention. Simpson (2003) suggests that the concept of integration, both academic and social, is useful in assessing student retention strategies. Mannan’s (2009) study on the application of the integration concept as perceived by distance learners, found out that the respondents had highest ratings on study material and that male student’s rated social integration higher than female students. There is strong affirmation from literature of the link between social and academic factors and the enhancement of student retention in higher education.
How to Maximise Student Retention

Student retention is essentially the function of the learner support construct. Learner support is defined as the management of activities by staff which maximises the chances of successful completion of the programme (Jones, 2009). The link between student retention and learner support is therefore quite apparent. Strengthening student support translates into increasing student retention especially in ODL institutions. Badza and Chakuchichi, (2009) assert the need to search for alternative learner support and ODL pedagogies that will enhance women access and participation in higher education. According to Jones (2009) the University of London lifelong learning institute has experienced a phenomenal growth rate of 30% in student retention by augmenting its learner support through the following strategies;

- A comprehensive communication plan with all students
- Standardisation of correspondence
- The availability of course material
- Increased access to tutors
- Review of all course materials
- Surveillance of passively withdrawn students

Jones (2009), learner support augmentation factors concur with Badza and Chakuchichi (2009), findings on self-reported learners support systems which enhance women’s access and participation in ODL which are as follows;

- The need for more tutorials and internet access
- Making relevant reading materials available
- Making internet services free and available to students
- Increasing reading materials in the library
- Attending to students’ complaints and rectifying their problems

Southerland (2009) concludes that student engagement occupies a prominent place in the repertoire of student retention and that in many ways student academic integration is seemingly more important to social integration in learner persistence in ODL.

The quality of learner support, particularly, service delivery is closely linked to student retention. In a study on how to increase student retention in MBA programmes with an Online Element, Geri, Mendelson and Gefen (2009) found out that retention, loyalty and self-reported use were significantly affected by the overall e-learning quality, supplementary teaching materials and communication services. It can, therefore, be argued that in ODL, managing the quality of service delivery, including the quality of communication with students, may enhance the maximisation of student retention. Learner support was found to be an integral dimension in the whole spectrum of critical issues in quality service delivery to students and retention rates in ODL.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to establish student’s perceptions on impediments to student retention in the Zimbabwe Open University. The Zimbabwe Open University is the largest institution in the country with an enrolment peaked at over 21 000 in 2007, has seen its enrolment drastically reduced 32% in 2008/2009. It is, therefore, pertinent that institutions in similar situations should essentially attend to student retention issues for them to experience growth. This study, therefore, focuses on critical issues of interest to the institution with wider implications to other ODL institutions in the region.

Methodology

The study to establish the students’ perceived impediment to retention utilised the descriptive survey research design. The questionnaire method was used to collect information from students.

The study used multi-stage purposive sampling in order to collect information at both the regional level and the faculty level. The sample frame was made up of 400 participants made up of 40 per region and 10 per faculty per region. The participants were selected as and when they presented themselves to the regional office for other services.

The students on presenting themselves to the region were presented with a questionnaire which they were requested to complete and leave it
with the student adviser. The exercise was done within a period of one month soon after the examinations. The completed questionnaires were then forwarded to the researchers for analysis. Data analysis was through the classical verbal analysis whereby responses were reduced to categories and then into common themes.

Findings

A total of 400 students from the 10 regions of the Zimbabwe Open University and across faculties participated in the study. The average age of the participants was 38.6 years. Forty-six percent (46%) of them were male and 54% female. Nearly all the participants had a family of their own such that 80.75% were married, 7.5% widowed, 7.5% were single parents and only 3.75% were single. Also most of the participants 88% were employed in the public service as teachers, nurses, police officers and other posts.

The response of the participants were placed into four categories which are;

1. Factors inhibiting students performance as perceived by the students
2. What the student has done to improve own performance
3. What student believes the institution could do to improve performance and
4. How the university could improve quality of service.

In their responses, some participants alluded to social integration issues such as stress and lack of funds to attend discussion groups. It appears discussion groups form an important aspect of adult learning as they share information and appraise each other of the requisite levels of academic performance. In the second category of responses focussing on what the participant did to improve own performance, most of the participants indicated the following:

Table 1: Factors inhibiting students performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance is inhibited by:</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate &amp; delays in supply of learner materials</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>98.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Tutorials</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding the studies</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of travelling</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the captured responses below indicate how much the participants were affected in ways that stalled progress and precipitated poor performance and or withdrawal;

- Incomplete set of modules....
- Financial problems....
- Short time for tutorials....
- Shortages of study materials and the inaccessible building....I am a wheelchair user....

Delays by the institution to provide basic learning services i.e. books
- Some tutors are not reporting for tutorials hence my pass rate is affected

Most of these responses indicate that the performance of students which is part of the academic integration is indeed affected by quality service delivery issues such as inadequacy and delayed delivery of learning materials and poor tutorials. It is also important to note that most participants are citing funding problems, a factor which is closely linked to students dropout rate. The responses should also be viewed in the context of the prevailing macro-economic situation existent in the country at the time of the study. Zimbabwe was in a difficult hyperinflationary economic environment which induced distortions in pricing structures such that incomes especially those of public service employees were eroded to unprecedented levels. Some participants had this to say about the situation:

- Socio-economic situation....I'm currently teaching at A....School It's very far from town and it is now very expensive to get help from students who have already done the same programme
- ....Stress on escalating fees....Distance from ZOU for the sake of discussions- I cannot afford.
- ....lack of adequate funds due to the less far below the poverty datum line salaries..

In their responses, some participants alluded to social integration issues such as stress and lack of funds to attend discussion groups. It appears discussion groups form an important aspect of adult learning as they share information and appraise each other of the requisite levels of academic performance. In the second category of responses focussing on what the participant did to improve own performance, most of the participants indicated the following:

Table 2: Strategies by ODL students to improve their performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joining discussion group</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet search</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>53.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying for private lessons</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>31.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for library books</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sourcing for funds</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants’ responses recorded below indicate the level of effort put by ODL students to remain on the programme and improve their performance.

I have involved myself into group work with others so as to improve my performance
I have tried to get help from other students in the faculty
Creation of own study groups
Group studies in my area…meeting twice a month and making use of Internet to get information to assist me in my assignments. Persuading the lecturers to come to our area for assistance instead of going to the regional centre which is costly.
I am trying to work hard by sourcing information from libraries and also getting help from students who have already done the programme.

Going online

These sentiments by the participants show that most student in ODL believe in group work in order to enhance their performance. Group work has actually become an assurance strategy for achieving the correct level of academic performance and sharing information and gathering information. Group work in many ways has become student survival strategy in ODL. However in line with Tinto’s (1975) students retention model, group work satisfies both academic and social integration.

In the third category, the study sought to establish perceptions of students on what the institution ZOU, could do to improve their performance. Most of the participants’ responses pointed to the following aspects as essential to the improvement of their performance;

| Table 3: Perceptions of ODL students on how the institution could improve performance |
|-----------------------------------------|---|---|
| Institution could improve performance by | Na | % |
| Adequate supply of learning materials | 338 | 97 |
| Charging affordable fees | 334 | 83.5 |
| Increasing tutorial time | 266 | 66.5 |
| Improving Assignment marking turn-around time | 246 | 61.5 |
| Internet provisions | 229 | 57.25 |
| Engaging students in mutual discussions | 200 | 50 |

Most participants’ responses on how ZOU could improve their performance, had concern with instructional delivery as shown in the typical excerpts below;

By increasing tutorial time
By reviewing its fees which are very high
By providing adequate modules for the semester
If as stated above ZOU can bring libraries in various districts to avoid long distances to the few libraries we have.
Improve feed back on any submitted assignments and ensure students get learning materials of all courses registered on time.

Participants’ responses, as seen from the above excerpts, were focused on only the academic integration indicating that students expect the institution to address and enhance instructional delivery for them to improve their performance. However, if responses in this category are juxtaposed with those of the second category it can be implied that the students expect themselves to organise group work/discussion and enhance social integration while the institution focuses on academic integration through enhancement of instructional delivery.

Category four solicited for information on students’ perceptions on the improvement of the quality of service offered by the university. Participants’ responses included the following ways to improve quality of service:
• Provision of adequate instructional materials (99.3%)
• Charging affordable fees and allow for part payment of fees (86.0%)
• Increase tutorials (56.8%)
• Improve communication and consultation with students (53.3%)

The responses from the participants indicate the need to consider their representation in order to improve the quality of service delivery. These four aspects recorded above are seemingly some of the indicators of massive student dropout as experienced during the hyperinflationary and price distortions period. The following excerpts typify the participants’ responses:

Provide a full set of modules and increase tutorial lectures.

Ensure that students who have financial constraints are allowed to continue with the programme of study after paying part of the registration fees.

By making sure all modules are fully supplied as well as considering affordable fees or payment per course---balancing it by what is being earned by the individuals.

It is possible to note from the participants’ responses that they were operating in very difficult economic circumstances such that it affected their perception of quality service delivery. For instance fees payment cannot be a quality issue unless it is directly linked to the quality of service delivery. Participants in their responses seemed to suggest that affordability of fees was a quality issue. However, the adequate and timely supply of learning materials and the increase of tutorials and consultation with students were critical quality issues in ODL.

Implications of the Study

As concluded by Simpson (2003), student dropout or similarly student retention is a multi-dimensional construct that essentially is not a one-size fits-all, but requires multi-party solutions. While the results from this study adhere to a large extent to Tinto’s model of student retention in terms of the need for academic integration as well as social integration, some of the factors responsible for the low retention rates were embedded in the prevailing economic conditions. The quality factors were strongly linked to academic progress which closely relates to student retention. The participants included other extenuating variables such as affordable student fees. It is very possible that students will drop out when fees are unaffordable and rejoin when they can afford. The fact that most of the participants were married and working as public servants makes the issue of affordability a clinical factor as students are likely to dropout en-mass during difficult economic times and return when the inflation tide is down.

Geri, Mendelson and Gefen (2009: 61), acknowledge that quality factors correlates with student satisfaction which impacts students’ retention and students’ loyalty. Student loyalty, according to the authors, links with retention. Loyalty was found to have a multiplier effect as the students were more willing to recommend the programme to prospective students (Geri et al, 2009:64). This study indicated that most participants were concerned with quality issues such as provision of adequate learning materials, the need for quality instruction and organisation. The implication is, therefore, that based on Geri et al (2009) findings, as the quality of service delivery improves so does the student satisfaction index which then guarantees student retention and student loyalty. Student retention and loyalty will guarantee viable consistent enrolments which in turn ensures adequate revenue levels within the institution. We are reminded in CAPDM (2007) that one United Kingdom distance learning college reduced its dropout rate from 15% to half which is 7.5% and realised 750,000 pounds. When ODL institutions realise the loss of revenue they experience because of low retention rate then they would augment their learner support and quality service delivery. The quality of service delivery is an indispensable aspect in student retention as students easily dropout when they become dissatisfied with the quality of service as found out by the Open University, UK, in 2000, (CAPDM, 2007). There are a number of factors that can improve student satisfaction such as the following acknowledged in Jones (2009):

• Availing academic e-mail addresses for correspondence, reminders and additional support
• Student referrals
• A comprehensive communication plan
• More effective tracking systems and statistical analysis
According to Jones (2009), these measures improved recruitment of students for the University of London Life Long Education Institute by 66% and student retention up from 40% to 70% from 2005. With the proliferation of ODL practices even in conventional colleges and universities, dedicated ODL institutions therefore need to strengthen their student support programmes and quality assurance practices if they want to remain viable.

In asserting their position as centres of excellence in the global learning environment, ODL institutions should context their practices and interventions within “the pedagogical, technological and economic aspects of distance education” (Bernath & Rubin, 2004:2). The study has shown that participants alluded to pedagogical concerns in the quality of tutorials, technological concerns as they requested for Internet services and economic aspects as they pointed out the need to charge affordable fees. It is also important to interrogate the construct of student retention even from the point of registration in order to ascertain the amount of loss due to non-starters, attrition and disloyalty. Bernath and Rubin (2004:7) suggest that “research is clearly needed to better assess students’ reason for drop out and to guide interventional decisions.”

The implications of this study are therefore for ODL institutions to improve quality of service provision in order to manage student retention. In seeking to improve student retention ODL institutions could work out intervention strategies that impact quality instruction, information computer technology and the economies of scale regarding affordability of education.

Conclusion

The study to establish the connection between quality of service delivery, learner support and student retention targeted current students of the Zimbabwe Open University in all regions and all faculties. The survey on students perception of quality service showed no gender differentiation but established gross dissatisfaction with provision of learning materials, tutorial period, affordability of fees, communication and other menial aspects. It was also apparent from the study that these hygiene factors were threatening student retention in the institution. Suggestion from the participant responses for improvement of service delivery were in agreement with other studies on the same construct (Southerland, 2009; Bernath & Rubin, 2004; Mannan, 2009; and Jones, 2009). The implications of the study were that the Zimbabwe Open University and other ODL institutions, for their viability need to focus on student retention construct and find intervention within their service delivery that will increase student satisfaction and thus impact positively on recruitment, retention and loyalty. In addition, the study also established the importance of quality service through learner support which enhances academic and social integration as advanced by Tinto’s model.

Learner support was found to be linked to quality service delivery including facilitative communication and consultation. Student retention with its multi-dimensional face is a function of the quality of learner support. ODL institutions could therefore improve on service delivery by augmenting learning material provision, enhancing instructional strategies and increasing communication opportunities through use of information computer technology. While the cost benefit of these interventions could not be ascertained, it was proven that institutional revenue was profoundly increased by increasing student retention. Increased revenue could be then used to improve quality of service delivery in a manner that would make ODL institutions competitively viable.
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