

Andragogic Implications of the Changing Student Enrolment Patterns at the Zimbabwe Open University

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I. Background to the Study

In recent years, we have noticed that The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is enrolling a new generation of students, who are different in many ways from those who passed through the University in its early years. In the early years (1993-2000), ZOU enrolled mature, working class and self motivated students. In most cases, students were responsible for paying their tuition fees. They owed it to themselves, their families and employees to do well in their studies. They attended tutorials without being coerced. However, in recent years, in addition to the older generation of students, a new generation of students is populating the University. In our view, this new generation of students is characterized by the following: composed of mostly school leavers; young and immature; not employed; many lack intrinsic motivation; academic expenses met by parents/guardians; was used to teacher-driven learning; computer literate and lack the perseverance and patience which are a prerequisite for success in ODL (Madhlangobe, Mafa, Chikasha and Kurasha, 2014).

Kotler (2007) noted that the basis for effective service delivery and customer satisfaction is an intricate understanding of the customers, their needs and motivations. It is, therefore, imperative that the Open and Distance learning student is correctly and consistently profiled by the service provider as this has important implications on teaching strategies and other related service packages.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The changing profile of the student learning through the open and distance learning mode of education has important andragogic implications. The effectiveness of the andragogic strategies used by higher education institutions are derived from the characteristics of the learner, the expectations of stakeholders such as the employers and the resources at the disposal of the University. There has not been a study carried out to analyse the andragogic implications of the changing profile of the ODL student in Zimbabwe.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The study sought to evaluate the changing profile of the ODL learner in Zimbabwe and establish the andragogic implications of these changes.

Our assumption is that the ODL delivery mode that has been serving the older generation of students with distinction may not effectively meet the needs of the new generation of ODL students. Therefore, the question begging for attention is: How can the characteristics of the new generation of ODL students inform andragogy in ODL? In order to address this question, this research speaks to the following objectives and questions:

1.3 Objectives of the study

- To analyse the evolution of the characteristics of the ODL learner.
- To assess the challenges faced by the ODL sector as a result of the changing enrollment patterns.
- To establish a response profile for ODL universities to the changing characteristics of the ODL learner.

1.4 Research questions

- How does the new generation of ODL students differ from the old generation?
- What are the challenges caused by the changing enrolment patterns?
- How can the changing enrolment patterns inform andragogy in ODL?

1.5 Review of Related Literature

The clear understanding of the demographics and characteristics of distance learning students is essential for ODL instructors and administrators in developing service packages and andragogic strategies. Thompson (1999) noted that distance learners were committed hence instructors could expect quality work and vibrant and diligent participation. Platforms for students to express themselves should therefore be developed. ODL learners were also noted to be usually busy with families and jobs hence had little time to thoroughly work on their assignments and course logistics. It was, therefore, recommended that instructors should provide

thorough and detailed syllabi. Administrators should also be flexible with student requests, within reason because distance learning students have so many obligations which may interfere with their coursework.

Wang et al (2008) found out that there was a relationship between psychological characteristics and learning scores of distance learners. The researchers noted that there was a relationship between self-efficacy, learning strategies and learning results; secondly, there was also a direct relationship between self-efficacy, internal attribution, learning motivation and learning results. The study also revealed that learning motivation and learning strategies were clearly associated with positive and predictable effects on learning results.

Romainville (1994) and Bessant (1997) concluded that successful distance education students were more conversant with the learning strategies and procedures they used. It is, therefore, imperative to closely monitor the alignment of student characteristics and andragogy. The researchers also found that there was a significant correlation between the learning strategy employed by the students and instructors and the learning results. The implication, therefore, is that universities should adjust teaching strategies to the changing characteristics of the students. Studies by Chaney, J., Chaney, E. Stellefson, and Eddy, 2008 concluded that instructional designers were required to employ intensive strategies to integrate the technologies to meet the needs of distance learners and foster collaboration and interaction among these learners.

There are two general schools of thought in understanding the theory and practice andragogy. It has been described as the science of understanding and supporting the lifelong education of adults (Knoles, 1984, Henschke, 2003). The term Andragody has been extensively used in distinguishing between the mainstream conventional education and self directed education employed in distance learning institutions and more recently in online learning platforms.

Andragogy has been often been compared to pedagogy which has more often been used to describe the learning of children and conventional education students. Knoles (1984) later developed the theory of andragogy and posited it as a pedagogy-andragogy continuum ranging from teacher directed to student directed learning. He argued that these approaches were appropriate for both adults and children education depending on the situation. The argument was also buttressed by Hanson (1996) who argued that learning was more related to characteristics, culture, power and other societal settings affecting education rather than age and the stage of life.

The concept of andragogy is based on six assumptions centering on the motivation of adult learning. The first one is the need to know, the argument is that adults must be explicitly made to understand the reasons why they are taking up education programmes. The second assumption to adult education is foundation, where experience which includes making errors and learning from them is the basis for learning activities. Adults are also assumed to be responsible for their decisions; they are more involved in planning for their education and also evaluation of their instruction. Adult education is thought to have more immediate relevance to their work and social lives. Adult learning is also more trouble shooting oriented, content oriented and seeks to develop solutions.

1.6 Research Methodology and Design

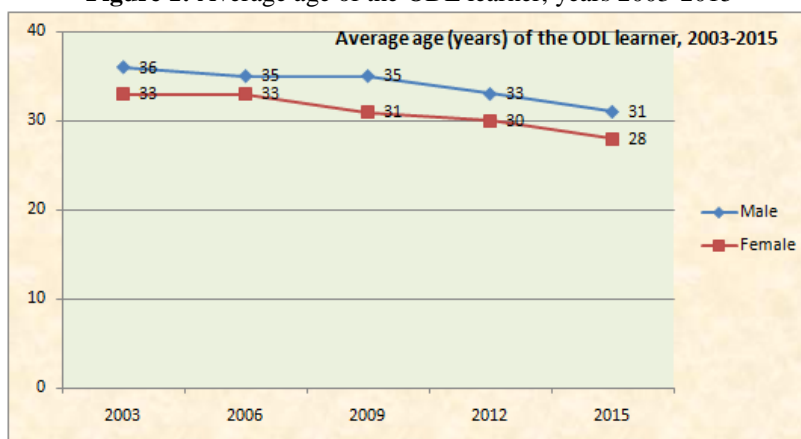
The study was rooted in the pragmatic philosophy and will therefore use mixed methodology. The methodology will made it possible for the researchers to achieve the following: Firstly, to collect descriptive data from a high percentage of the new generation of students regarding their characteristics, challenges they are experiencing in andragogy and their suggestions on how their needs should be met. Second, generate qualitative data from Regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs). The data generated from Regional programme coordinators centred on the RPCs juxtaposition of the old and new generation of ODL students' characteristics; RPCs experiences in teaching the new generation of ODL students; RPCs' suggestions on what need to be done by the University in order to effectively cater for the needs of both the old and new generation of ODL students. The population consisted of all the students and RPCs in those degree programmes having a preponderance of the new generation of students. The quantitative sample consisted of 200 new generation students randomly sampled from those degree programmes with a predominance of the new generation (20 students per region). The qualitative sample was made up of 20 RPCs (2 per region) purposively sampled. Data from students was collected through the use of a self-completion questionnaire, while data from RPCs was generated through a questerview.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Evolution of the ODL learner Characteristics

Average age of the ODL learner

Figure 1: Average age of the ODL learner, years 2003-2015



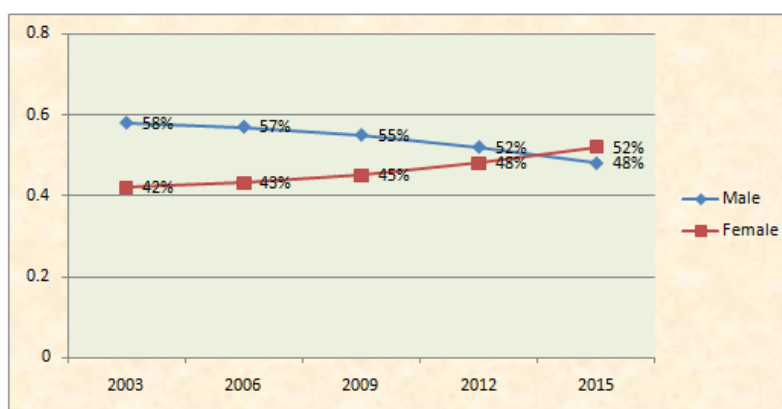
The study revealed a steady decline in the average age of the ODL learner from 2003 to 2015 for both the male and female categories. Data on figure 1 above shows that the ODL learner is getting younger, hence, the preferences of the learner are also bound to evolve in accordance with the age profile of the younger learners.

The evolving age profile of the ODL learner at the Zimbabwe Open University has had andragogic implications for the University witnessed through the increased demand for tutorial hours bordering on requests for lecturers proper. A study by Ndudzo (2014) on perceptions and expectations of ODL learners at the Zimbabwe Open University revealed that students generally preferred an increase in tutorial hours.

Younger students who could otherwise have enrolled with conventional universities were becoming more prevalent at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study revealed that these young adults were more interested in meeting and socializing with other student groups online and on campus as part of the learning process. The ODL learner, therefore, has evolved from a less engaged learner to a learner who is more involved in all the aspects of the academic life.

The study revealed that there was an increase in student to student interaction as a result of the abundance of convenient social media applications and a general reduction in communication costs in Zimbabwe brought by advances in information and communication technologies. The University has only grasped this new fact and has started to facilitate these communications and social media groups through Programme Coordinators based at Regional Centres.

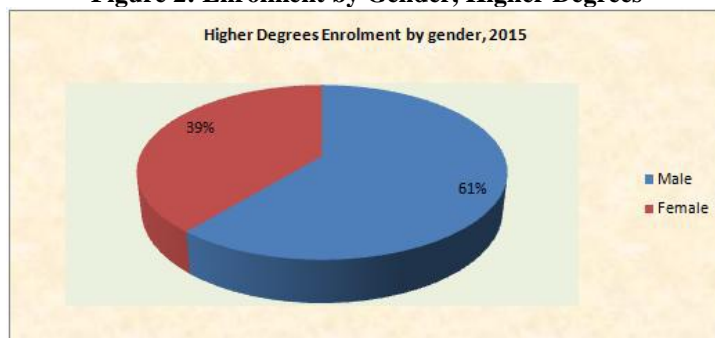
Enrolment by gender: 2003-2015 trends



The study revealed that there was a transformation in the gender profile of the Zimbabwe Open University enrolment from 2003 to 2015. Total enrolment at the University initially was dominated by Males but the trend has changed and Females constitute the majority of the ZOU students after 2012.

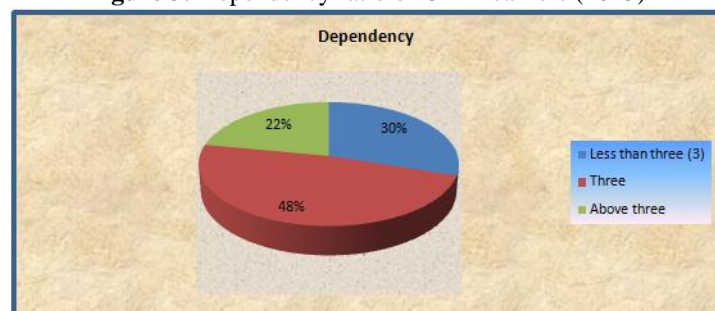
The trends however differ on postgraduate levels as these are still male dominated. The 2015 enrolment statistics indicated that males constituted 65% of Masters Programmes enrollment while females constituted 35%. For Doctoral degrees, Males constituted 61% while females constituted 39% of enrolment as indicated on figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Enrolment by Gender, Higher Degrees



The above trends of the total enrolment of undergraduate programmes, master’s and doctoral degrees imply that the University will experience an increase in female enrolment in post graduate degrees as the female undergraduate students progress with their academic careers into higher degrees. It is therefore imperative that the ODL University’s instruction delivery model for Higher Degrees programmes should be made more sensitive to the female learners as they increase in frequency. The University, however, should investigate the reasons behind the depressed female enrolment in post graduate programme and doctoral degrees.

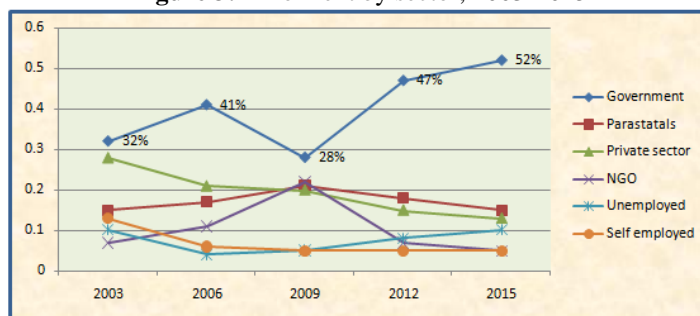
Figure 3: Dependency ratio of ODL learners (2015)



The study revealed that there was a steady increase in the dependency ratio sustained by the ODL learner from the year 2003 to 2015. The respondents indicated that, among other factors deindustrialization experienced in the country, effects of HIV/AIDS, emigration and the high octane retrenchments experienced in 2015 were the main causes of the high dependency ratio sustained by the ODL learners. The increasing dependency ratio poses a threat to the University’s enrolment because of the pressure exerted on individual students’ finances.

Enrolment by employment sector (2003-2015)

Figure 3: Enrolment by sector, 2003-2015



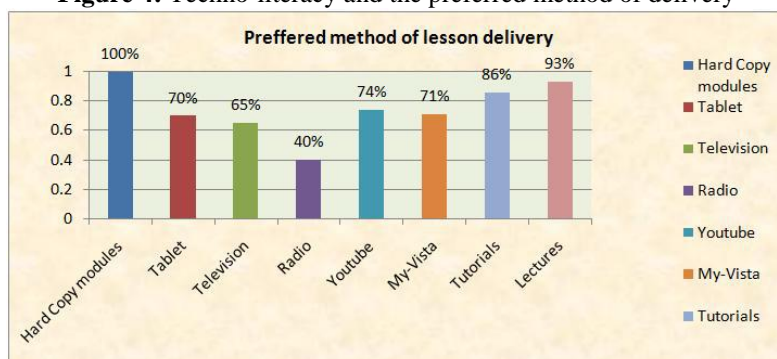
The study revealed that the majority of ODL learners were employed in Government. The trend was sustained since the establishment of ZOU in 2003. The relative frequency of Government employees enrolled with ZOU was increasing has been increasing since 2009 to 2015. The frequency of students employed in the private sector, NGOs, parastatals and the self employed has been on a decline since 2009.

The Zimbabwe Open University should aim to establish a balanced profile of students with regards to employment sectors. There is danger that the University would be severely affected by retrenchments or

remuneration instability in Government. It has become more urgent for the University to address this issue because of the continued speculation of imminent staff rationalization in Government. Curriculum overhaul to suit the needs of sectors that have low enrolment representation is pertinent if the University is to maintain a balanced enrolment profile of students.

Techno-literacy of the ODL student and the preferred media of delivery

Figure 4: Techno-literacy and the preferred method of delivery



The study revealed that the hard copy module remained the preferred method of instruction delivery with 100% of respondents approving it. The second most preferred method with 93% approval is the lecture method though the University is not yet offering lectures. The University's tutorials were also highly approved at 86%. Respondents also indicated that they had access to Tablets, Televisions, Radios, YouTube and the Internet generally, options which could be used by the University in instruction delivery as reflected on figure 4 above.

II. Conclusions

The profile of the ODL student studying with the Zimbabwe Open University has evolved significantly since the year 2003 to 2015. The ODL learner is getting younger as the mode is attracting more of young adults. This new generation of ODL learners is more techno-literate and is more prepared to use technological resources.

The ODL mode of education is attracting more female learners than males, the trend has shown that female enrolment has gradually increased and had surpassed male enrolment by the first semester of 2015. This implies that there should be a transformation of student services to cater for more female learners who bear more the social burden of taking care of the family. The frequency of female enrolment in higher degrees which currently are dominated by men is set to increase.

Trends in the employment sectors of ODL learners from 2003 to 2015 reflect an increase in government employees enrolling for ODL programmes. Frequencies of ODL learners employed in other sectors except government reflect a declining trend. The University therefore could be offering programmes which are attractive and more relevant in Government more than in other sectors. The dependency ratio ODL learners support was significantly high and could have an effect on the ability of the students to continue smoothly with their studies without deferring.

On instruction delivery, the study concludes that there was a gradual shift in preferences from 2003 to 2015. The 2015 student though significantly preferring the hard copy module was more prepared to use electronic material, information and communication technologies and other virtual learning strategies.

III. Recommendations

The study proffered the following recommendations;

- The University should institute strategies that increase student engagement and student interactions among the younger ODL learner
- Student support services should be prepared for an increase in female ODL learners and for a likely increase in higher degrees female students
- The University should review and revamp its curriculum to cater for other sectors of society and reduce reliance on the government sector for enrolment
- ZOU as an ODL institution should expand its instructional delivery strategies and use more information and communication technology solutions for an increasingly techno-literate society.

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