Full Length Research Paper

Strategic Imperatives Fostering Environments that Accelerate Learning and Creativity in the Zimbabwe Open University

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This study gathered information from the leadership team of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) on strategic imperatives fostering environments that accelerate learning and creativity in the Zimbabwe Open University. This was a case study of one university. The information was triangulated with developments in the global arena. The leadership that participated in the study were purposively sampled. The findings of the study revealed that the strategic imperatives fostering environments that accelerate learning and creativity in the Zimbabwe Open University include, but are not limited to access and demand for Higher Education, limited focus on science and technology, governance issues, funding constraints, quality assurance, staff rationalisation/ utilisation, emerging opportunities, regionalisation/ globalisation and access and use of ICTs. The study concluded that ZOU is well positioned to foster an environment that nurtures creativity, innovation and student learning once it addresses the mentioned strategic imperatives.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, strategic imperatives, innovation, creativity and student learning.

INTRODUCTION

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) community is faced with several challenges and opportunities that are critical to its survival. Many of these have been brought in the fore by emerging trends in Higher Education around the globe. Chief among the catalysts is technology. According to UPCEA (2014), many university leaders and senior administrators now agree that online learning is a strategic imperative and are beginning to centralize strategic decision making around emerging trends in technology. The Zimbabwe Open University is a distance teaching university that offers degrees through the open and distance learning mode. Its vision is to be a world class open and distance learning university. To attain this vision, the university must stay abreast of trends in higher education so that it centralizes strategic decision making around these trends.

Many authors now believe that universities that are not proactive will be left behind while others rapidly pass them by. This was confirmed by Nagel (2015) who argued that the burden is on universities to advance the culture of innovation, "to foster environments that accelerate learning and creativity" and "to create the conditions for innovation to happen". In fostering learning in a technological environment, the roles of both students and lecturers must change. Tutors must act as facilitators of learning while on the other hand; students must rise to the occasion and learn to be knowledge creators.

Statement of the problem

The open and distance learning (ODL) industry is in its formative years in Zimbabwe, with only one fully fledged university delivering education through the ODL mode. On the international stage, ODL industry has made strides and has Universities commanding global relevance, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA). There is limited availability of literature on the imperatives for success in ODL delivery. This is a threat on the sustainable development and growth of the industry, especially in Zimbabwe where ODL is seen as an alternative to conventional education under conditions of resource constraints and reduced funding for education.

Purpose of study

This research sought to unearth the strategic imperatives that the university is facing in the context of fostering environments that accelerate learning and creativity in the University. Mastering of these imperatives would see the University and ODL in general increase relevance, get more funding and contribute more effectively to the socio-economic development of the Country.

Key research question

The study sought to answer the following question;
• What are the strategic imperatives fostering environments that accelerate learning and creativity in the ODL University?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative research methodology; hence the interpretivist philosophy was adopted. Data were gathered from a sample of ten (10) respondents composed of middle and senior management of the University selected using the purposive sampling technique. The key issues were also deliberated upon by the respondents and other colleagues in a workshop coordinated by the University. The main objective of the workshop was to stimulate debate and critical thinking within the key constituents of the University so as to steer the University in a strategic direction which was relevant to the global trends in higher education and ODL in particular. The workshop also sought to align the University with government policy and make it a relevant and strategic player in the economic development matrix in Zimbabwe.

RESULTS

Access and Demand for Higher Education

The study was premised on the firm view of the University that investment in education and a vibrant education system thereof is the essence and lifeblood of successful socio economic models. The late former president of South Africa Nelson Mandela shared the same perspective as he once posited that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

True to the Zimbabwean situation, education is essential to the realization of the national development aspirations under the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim-ASSET, 2014) blueprint which include among other objectives; eliminating gender inequality, reducing poverty, creating a sustainable economic empowerment model, and fostering peace. The key constituents of the University were in agreement that in the knowledge based global economy; education was the currency by which Zimbabwe and other countries could achieve economic competitiveness and global prosperity.

It was the view of respondents that, to be proud global players, a nation had to stimulate innovation and more importantly value addition and beneficiation. It was agreed that these national attributes could only be achieved through enhanced access to a quality and relevant education system. That's where ODL would fit in as a second to none business model on making higher education accessible to all constituents of society.

It is quite apparent that demand for higher education is increasing. Due to resource scarcity and other reasons, Zimbabwe, the Region and the World in general cannot meet this demand through the conventional mode of education alone. ODL has the capacity to educate increase the capacity of people empowerment and human capital development programmes and help countries attain national development goals.

It is a fact that the Sustainable Development Goals that will take over from the Millennium Development Goals

post 2015 will guide efforts to reduce poverty and improve well-being up to 2030, without destroying the earth (UN, 2015). Zimbabwe is also committed to these goals which require nations to increase access to higher education. The international age cohort enrolled at higher and tertiary education institutions has since increased to above 26%. In the Southern African Region, the percentage is only 5% (World Bank, 2014). In South Africa, it is estimated that universities and diploma colleges cater for only 72% of their local demand. The Zimbabwe Open University, through market intelligence has also come to the same conclusion on low capacity compared to market potential.

The respondents were agreeable that there is need to be conscious of the responsibilities as an ODL University. Respondents indicated that through ODL, ZOU had the mandate and model to reach out to the most remote constituents of the society and empower them with relevant education. In this regard, it was noted that ZOU had gone an extra mile to establish District Centres in order to reach out to the students. The University was in the process of making the District Centres as viable as possible and justify their strategic relevance.

Limited Focus on Science and Technology

The study revealed the belief by academics that there was a generally low focus towards science, technology, engineering and mathematics in the Country and in the Region in general. To this effect, His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe Cde R. G. Mugabe in his opening statement at the Education Expo on Wednesday 16 September 2015 emphasised the need to promote Science, Mathematics and ICT subjects in Zimbabwe.

The President said:
"In pursuit of a new trajectory of accelerated economic growth and wealth creation, the Government of Zimbabwe formulated Zim-ASSET. To realise the objectives of Zim-ASSET, and to promote entrepreneurship, the country requires an effective and efficient education system that guarantees returns on investments through its contribution to national development. In this regard, the education system has an important role to play in developing competencies that are required for value addition and beneficiation of raw materials".

This is the kind of thrust, in curricular development and in tandem with Zim-ASSET goals the University would have to pursue in an endeavor to effectively contribute towards the socio-economic transformation of Zimbabwe.

There is need to draw the readers' attention to a study conducted by Mwapachu (2010). The study revealed that

only 28% of students in African universities were enrolled in science and technology programmes while the figure was as low as 21% in SADC. At ZOU, the first semester 2015 enrolment in the Faculty of Science and Technology accounted for only 13.8% of total enrolment. This is one of the reasons why most of the research in the academic fraternity in Zimbabwe has not producing ground breaking scientific solutions as compared to the trend in Europe, Asia and America where science and technology is prioritised.

The challenge for the ODL University was mandated to the Faculty of Science and Technology which was encouraged to come up with significant, ground breaking research that could transform lives. It was also noted that the integrity and reputation of any University was hugely dependant on its research output. There was general consensus in the University's management that ZOU needed to come up with bankable research projects which donors and other stakeholders would be willing to partner the University and commit resources.

Governance Issues

Empirical evidence from studies by several scholars including Ploch (2011), Sayed et al (2008), SARUA (2010) showed strong evidence that the higher and tertiary education sector in Southern Africa had been adversely affected by governance issues at national and institutional levels. The impact at national level manifested the in reduction in enrolment caused by emigration, funding shortages, breaks in academic semesters, destruction of infrastructure, the exodus of academics, and censorship on the freedom of scholarship among other adverse results. Respondents to the study agreed indicated that the strategic imperative for the open and distance learning university was to build an institution around a business model that revolves around good corporate governance. This would encourage Government and the public to avail resources to the University with a guarantee that these resources would be properly utilized and fully accounted for.

Good corporate governance is the epitome of sound business administration. The study revealed that the need for diligence in upholding principles of good corporate governance on the part of managers and leaders within the ODL institution was highly regarded as a key element of the University's branding strategy internally and externally. Adherence to sound corporate governance was mainly assessed through Asset management including utilization of finances. Management is expected to exhibit the highest levels of integrity by adhering to the institution's policies and procedures.

Funding constraints

Globally there is a notable relative reduction in funding for Higher Education. A UNESCO (2014) report revealed that while total funding for education globally increased steadily from 2002 to 2010, it had been falling by an average of 10% annually since then. Zimbabwe had not been an exception and the Government was in the process of streamlining its costs. In the process of austerity, the Government reduced subsidies and grants for higher education. It was expected that the trend would continue for the then foreseeable future.

The implications of the reduced funding for education are immediate and apparent for an institution particularly those that teach through the distance education mode. Against the background of reduced funding, it was emphasised at ZOU that there was need to invoke an entrepreneurial spirit and find means for the university to raise the funds required for important institutional projects that support teaching and learning. This brings us to income generating projects. University stakeholders must be prepared to take the lead in income generation through conceiving bankable projects.

Quality Assurance

Yeneayhu (2006) correctly observed that the problems with the education system in Africa was not universality but rather quality. The system, he argued, needed to produce thinkers, scientists, researchers and entrepreneurs who will make a difference in industry and society. Major quality indicators that are critical in a university include academic and laboratory infrastructure, staff & student ratios, number of high profile academics, quality of libraries and repositories and relevance of curricula and graduates produced. A report by SARUA (2014) indicated that 76% of Universities in the SADC region had quality assurance systems. ZOU therefore, was at the same level with other peers in the Region. The University had a whole Department responsible for quality assurance.

Institutional ratios

ZOU as an ODL university has some impressive institutional ratios. For instance, its staff retention rate is above 95%. Its pass rate is also fairly high at 81.06%, though the general view among University leadership and academics was that it should be improved. Other ratios of the University were satisfactory though they could also be improved.

Below are some of the average International ratios that could be used as benchmarks for the ODL industry;

1. Attrition rate 12.6 %
2. Retention ratio 52 %
3. Enrolment Growth ratio 32.6%
4. Re-entry ratio 35 %
5. Throughput ratio 62 %
6. Pass rate 93.6%

Universities in the ODL sector, as part of their mandate, should pay particular attention to two important issues. These are the quality of tutorials and timeous availability of modules. These are fundamental service delivery issues central to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the ODL learner.

Access and use of ICTs

ICT has become an integral element of our civilization; the World Bank (2014) identified it together with an educated labour force, adequate ICT infrastructure, an effective innovation system and a conducive business and governance framework as the pillars for the development and progress of a knowledge society. ODL must not be left behind, ICT is more fundamental to the sustainability of ODL than the conventional mode of learning hence ODL universities must move with the times and embrace ICT.

A baseline study by SARUA (2014) revealed that, with the exception of South Africa and Mauritius, most universities in the region were seriously constrained in their use of ICT by a shortage of computer stations and a lack of access to affordable high-speed Internet connectivity. It was observed that 'access to computers is still low, on average four lecturers per computer, three administrative staff per computer, and 70 students per computer. As a strategic imparative, respondents were of the view that ZOU must establish its own facts. It was recommended that statistics and indicators for the University should be developed and monitored so that the University could effectively benchmark against international trend setters.

Respondents proffered the idea that the technological environment was gradually rendering traditional libraries systems obsolete. There was an increased dependence and preference for online libraries and databases. ZOU therefore, had to urgently address the application of ICTs in the management of academic information services to enhance quality. It was suggested that teaching should be inspired by technology thus the need to ensure that lectures are conversant with teaching technologies.

The University was encouraged to maintain relevance in this technological era through effectiveness in online registration, tutoring and assessment. Student engagement has always been an issue in ODL. In that regard, there is need to leverage on ICT tools such as

social media, whatsapp and SMS services to increase interaction with students and among students.

Regionalisation/ Globalisation

The use of technology, increased knowledge production and dissemination in the knowledge economy has resulted in increased integration of economic and knowledge economies. This integration has given rise to the need for operational efficiency because of increased competition. It is therefore important to be knowledgeable of the demands of this new competitive environment. Survival here requires ODL institutions to meet new managerial, financing and knowledge production standards at an international level in a bid to link with international networks.

This notion of regionalization brings urgency on the need to foster collaborative relationships, harmonisation of the teaching process, research and other institutional designs and processes. ZOU had developed successful relationships with international partners and there was a drive to derive maximum value from these partnerships. Possible areas of cooperation included student and staff inter-institutional mobility/ exchange programmes and minimising operational costs by sharing of existing capacities and experiences between institutions and academics. The process is, however, not immune to risk because of the diversity and disparity of countries, organizations and education systems.

Emerging opportunities

Internationalisation of Higher Education in many of its forms, highlighted potential threats and challenges that may emanate from current and topical issues in higher and tertiary education. Embedded in these issues, however, are opportunities with the potential to create revolutionary business opportunities for an ODL university. New mineral deposits were being discovered time and again in Zimbabwe, the agricultural sector was being revived. There was, therefore, need for the University to consider avenues to participate in value addition and beneficiation.

The government of Zimbabwe has been developing markets for Zimbabwean graduates; the University should be in a position to identify countries in the Region with skilled manpower shortages and look for opportunities to train their locals. Zimbabwe country has good bilateral relations with most countries in Africa and as a strategic imperative, there is need to take advantage of this goodwill. The University has to develop programmes that are relevant to the business environment and suit the current and future needs of the local markets as well as the international markets.

Staff Rationalization/ Utilisation

In many countries, the press has been awash with stories on staff rationalization. However, the most relevant word is utilisation. It means organisations must reap maximum benefits from their employees. This is on its own a strategic imperative. Thousands of workers have lost their jobs in the recent past. In Zimbabwe, this has been so because the companies have gone insolvent. There are good prospects of growing the business through aggressive recruitment and retention of students. What is missing though is for every employee to justify his/her existence on the University payroll through the volume of business that one is bringing to the University.

CONCLUSION

While the government of Zimbabwe has done its part by deploying enormous human, material and financial resources towards the establishment of thousands of schools in both rural and urban areas, the onus now is with ODL to take that challenge further and make education universally accessible in Zimbabwe. The government is doing wonders in the area of recruitment of teachers and distribution of learning resources. It has established a number of universities to empower Zimbabwean people. It is critical that the strategic imperatives discussed in this paper be made a reality. In such a way, they will translate into tangible benefits to society at large and to ODL students in particular. An ODL institution must also encouraged its constituent parts to advance the cause of adult education within its areas of jurisdiction.

The success or failure of an institution is dependent on the collective performance of its employees. The onus is on the employees to candidly discuss the issues before them and come out with strategies that bring about results which benefit every stakeholder of the institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

•	Science and technology should be put at the forefront to ensure graduates have the requisite skills to meet today's technological and scientific challenges.
•	Good governance practices are a cornerstone of a reputable ODL institution.
•	It is critical that ODL institutions utilise their staff in such a way that they get maximum benefit from engaging them
•	Funding which is a perennial challenge can be a source of inspiration to find creative and innovative ways of making education accessible and affordable.
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•	Funding which is a perennial challenge can be a source of inspiration to find creative and innovative ways of making education accessible and affordable.

•	Quality Assurance is a weapon available to institutions to make their services credible and acceptable by those being served.

•	Institutional ratios and statistics can be utilised to enable management to quickly establish where the institution could improve so that effective decisions could be made promptly on resource distribution and prioritisation.

•	Utilising access to ICT to reach the unreached and non-traditional students will go a long way in making quality education available to many.

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