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## ODL Graduates in Management: Issues and Challenges from the Subordinate's Perspective

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**Abstract:** *The present study was a tracer study undertaken to assess the performance of ODL graduates in management positions in selected institutions. The study adopted the descriptive survey design and used questionnaires to gather data from the respondents. A convenience sample of ten institutions was used in the study out of which four subordinates each working under an ODL graduate were chosen as respondents. The total sample was therefore, 40 respondents. The data collected from the 40 respondents through questionnaires which solicited for both qualitative, through open ended questions, and quantitative data. Results from the study reveal that an overwhelming majority indicated that the ODL graduates were really effective in managing their departments as there was a generally good performance in their departments as depicted by the results. ODL graduates in management had good managerial skills and were very knowledgeable on the jobs while they possessed the most appropriate skills. Most respondents perceived the graduates in management as resorting to expert power to appeal to the subordinates while the least adopted power base was legitimate power. Most superiors were deemed democratic and collaborative while a minority was seen to be autocratic. ODL graduates in management performed equally the same with those graduates from conventional colleges but had shortcomings among them being poor in computer literacy, lacked confidence and some were too democratic in decision making to the extent of delaying decisions. It was therefore, recommended that there was need for cultivating strong computer literacy among ODL graduates. There was also need to dispel negative notions about ODL acquired qualifications and hold refresher courses for graduates through continuous development programmes. There was also need for the formation of an ODL graduates in management association to enhance professional growth.*

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### 1. BACKGROUND

In Zimbabwe and the world over, there has been a lot of debate on the performance of ODL graduates in all sectors of the economy. While there is a general belief that graduates from conventional institutions do better than those from ODL institutions, studies reveal that instead, ODL graduates perform equally well (Basaza, Milman & Wright; 2010) or even better than their conventional counterparts. In Zimbabwe, open and distance learning can be traced to the colonial period when it was referred to as correspondence education. After independence, the Zimbabwean government, through its attempt to equalise educational opportunities, introduced ODL at university level through the establishment of the Centre for Distance education at the University of Zimbabwe. This culminated into the Zimbabwe Open University, a fully fledged university with its own charter whose mandate was to offer open and distance education to those who could not afford to go to conventional institutions for various reasons. By its nature, ODL has not been well received by some sectors which feel that the graduates are half baked.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the perceptions of stakeholders on ODL graduates have been undertaken, though not exhaustive. While most studies on the perceptions on ODL have tended to look at the general perceptions, there appears to be scanty researches on the perceptions of subordinates working under the ODL graduates.

Most studies to do with perceptions held by various stakeholders on ODL graduates have tended to focus on the perceptions of employers. Due to this reason, literature on subordinates' perceptions of ODL graduates in management appears scanty. For example, some employers have indicated that they were employers of ODL graduates because these graduates were rated highly on diligence, perseverance, willingness to learn and general job skills. However, employers were uncertain about

whether or not the quality of ODL graduate employees was comparable to graduates of other types of universities (OUHK, 2009).

Some studies have applauded ODL graduates due to their personal attributes such as motivation and initiative, experience, computer literacy, and administration skills (Munge, 2007; Everard, 1997; Garvey & Gass, 1999; Medina, 2001; Thomas & Nicita, 2003). Attributes such as attitude, motivation, initiative, self-confidence, and flexibility were most prevalent among ODL graduate employees (Barnes, 2004), Gassner, 2002; Thomas and Nicita, 2003) as it has been argued that someone's attitude is a key contributor to their effectiveness. A study by Lekamge (2006) indicated that most ODL graduates were tolerant of other people's views at the work place and hence they were deemed very democratic.

On the other hand, some employers preferred to hire the candidate with the traditional degrees (Flowers and Baltzer, 2006; Adams and DeFleur, 2005). Studies carried out in telecommunications, data systems, insurance, and finance and rental businesses industries established that employers still preferred to hire traditional degrees holders to degrees obtained through other means although hybrid degrees were gaining acceptability (Seibold, 2007; Carnevale (2007). Reasons advanced by prospective employers for not being at liberty to hire ODL graduates included lack of rigor, lack of face-to-face interactions and increased potential for academic dishonesty. Lack of emotional intelligence which represents an ability to validly reason with emotions and to use emotions to enhance thought is not available in an ODL setting (Gunnell, 2010; Carnevale, 2005, 2007). Prospective employers have an overall negative perception about ODL degrees particularly on-line degrees (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Columbaro and Monaghan, 2009) as there is a clear bias toward traditional degrees. In academia, studies found that traditional degrees were viewed more favorably than the ODL degrees (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Flowers & Baltzer, 2006). However, some employers gave equal weight to ODL versus traditional degrees (Chaney, 2002; Wellen, 2006)

Numerous studies have been undertaken to dispel the negative notions held against ODL graduates (Meyer, 2002; Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002) but some employers and other stakeholders among them subordinates of the graduates and co-workers, still hold these negative views about ODL. According to Allsop (2008), some employers have been misinformed about the perceived poor quality of ODL to the extent that some have become wary of hiring ODL graduates. Some tracer studies show that ODL graduates can perform competently in the job market and are not being given an inferior education can convince those who remain sceptical (Boettcher, 2006)

Watkins (1991) established that a student who had prepared a certain number of lessons in the distance education institution knew more of the subject treated during lessons, and knew it better, than the student who had covered the same ground in the classroom. Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) seem to suggest that students engaged in ODL would likely achieve learning outcomes similar to those offered by conventional educational methods. Comparisons between distance education delivery methods and traditional forms of educational delivery have shown that there is "no significant difference" in student achievement (Meyer, 2002). In support of this, studies carried out in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Turkey and India have in the teaching field have shown that learners have rated those teachers trained through ODL as effective as those who had studied through the traditional way (Boaduo et al 2009; Kangai and Bukaliya, 2011).

A study by Latif and Bahroom (2010) shows that ODL graduates have problems in the use of computers at the workplace and hence they advocated for strengthening of the ICT component in their training. Renny, Chandra, Ruhama and Sarjono (2013) advocated for tracer studies to carried out so that ODL institutions can get feedback for the improvement of their graduates and identify aspects of continuous professional development.

### **3. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

There has been skepticism on the performance let alone employability of ODL graduates the world over. While some sectors in the economy have embraced these graduates others are still adamant that such graduates are very employable and in some cases their ability and task performance is better than those trained through the conventional system. This study therefore assists in answering the issues of ODL graduates' in management performance from the perspective of the subordinates engaged under ODL graduates.

#### **4. AIM OF THE STUDY**

The major aim of the current study was to assess the performance of ODL graduates in management against their counterparts trained through the traditional conventional system, as perceived by their subordinates.

##### **4.1. Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of the study were, therefore, to:

- assess the extent to which ODL graduates in management are effective;
- evaluate how ODL graduates have performed in their current posts compared to conventional graduates as perceived by their subordinates;
- assess the challenges confronting the ODL graduates in management as perceived by their subordinates; and
- Derive the implications for the ODL institutions in light of the challenges so identified in the ODL graduates.

##### **4.2. Research Questions**

The current study intended to answer the following sub problems which stood as research questions:

- To what extent are ODL graduates in management effective?
- How have ODL graduates performed in their current posts compared to conventional graduates as perceived by their subordinates?
- What challenges confront the ODL graduates in management as perceived by their subordinates?
- What are the implications for the ODL institutions in light of the challenges so identified in the ODL graduates?

##### **4.3. Research Design and Methodology**

The present study was a tracer study undertaken to assess the performance of ODL graduates in management positions in selected institutions. That being the case, the study adopted the descriptive survey design and employed a mixed method approach to data collection in which data were gathered through the use of the questionnaires and interviews to promote data triangulation. The descriptive survey design was deemed the most appropriate in the gathering of people`s views, beliefs and perspectives on a given phenomenon.

##### **4.4. Population and Sample**

A convenience sample of ten institutions was used in the study out of which four subordinates each working under an ODL graduate were chosen as respondents. The total sample was therefore, 40 respondents. The data collected from the 40 respondents through questionnaires which solicited for both qualitative, through open ended questions, and quantitative data. Data were presented and analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Tables, graphs and pie charts were used to present data while descriptive statistics were used in the analysis of the data.

#### **5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings and discussions are presented under the different research questions.

##### **5.1. The Extent to Which ODL Graduates in Management are Effective**

The first questionnaire item required the respondents to indicate whether ODL graduates they worked under were effective in management of their departments. Out of the 40(100%) respondents an overwhelming majority of 28(70%) indicated that the ODL graduates were really effective in managing their departments. The other 12(30%) respondents expressed skepticism on the performance of the graduates. Asked to explain why they felt the graduates were effective, most of the respondents seemed to point to the view that there was a generally good performance in their departments as depicted by the results. These findings are in agreement with those by several studies which have revealed that ODL graduates can perform competently in the job market and are not being given an inferior education can convince those who remain sceptical (Boettcher, 2006; Ojo and

Olakulehin (2006) as there is “no significant difference” among those trained through ODL and those from traditional institutions (Meyer, 2002). Also in support are findings elsewhere that have shown that some stakeholders have rated those ODL graduates as effective as those who had studied through the traditional way (Boaduo et al 2009; Kangai and Bukaliya, 2011). However, for those who expressed doubt on the performance of the graduates, the most widely held view was that most of the graduates resorted to old fashioned ways of leadership which resulted in non accomplishment of set goals year in, year out.

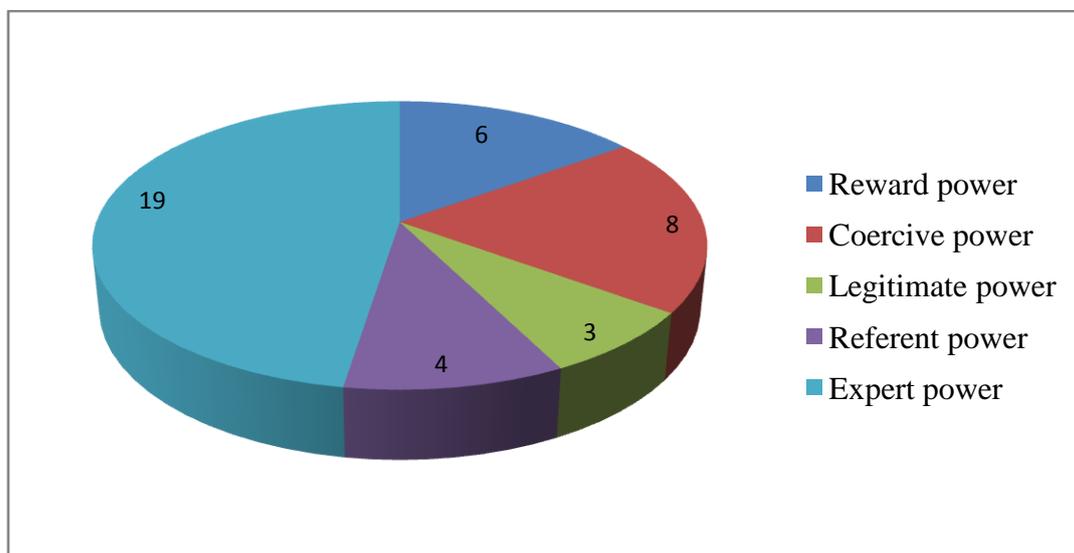
Respondents were asked to indicate the attributes that their superiors manifested during the execution of their duties. Table 1 below shows the views of the respondents.

**Table1:** *The attributes of ODL graduates in management*

Attribute	Number	%
Good managerial skills	29	73
Good leadership qualities	28	58
Very knowledgeable on the jobs	22	55
Possess the most appropriate skills	21	53
Effective in resource management	25	63
Very experienced in problem solving	22	55
Innovative	18	45

From table 1 it shows that most of the respondents were of the opinions that ODL graduates in management had good managerial skills. This was according to 29(73%) respondents. Some 28 (58%) ODL graduates in management had good leadership qualities. Twenty-two (55%) indicated that the graduates were very knowledgeable on the jobs while some 21 (53%) stated that they possessed the most appropriate skills. Another 25(63%) indicated that the graduates were effective in resource management whereas some 22(55%) perceived them as being very experienced in problem solving. Eighteen (%) saw the graduates as being innovative. Generally, these findings point to the view that ODL graduates in management are very effective. As they possess the right skills for the management posts they hold. This is because they are not being given an inferior education (Boettcher, 2006). In support several studies have come in support of the present findings (Munge, 2007; Everard, 1997; Garvey & Gass, 1999; Medina, 2001; Thomas & Nicita, 2003). These studies have remarkably endorsed the quality of ODL graduates as they come in to fill vacant posts that the conventional system has failed to make up for.

When asked which power bases were peculiar among their bosses, most prevalent among the responses was the expert power base. Figure 1 below summaries the responses.

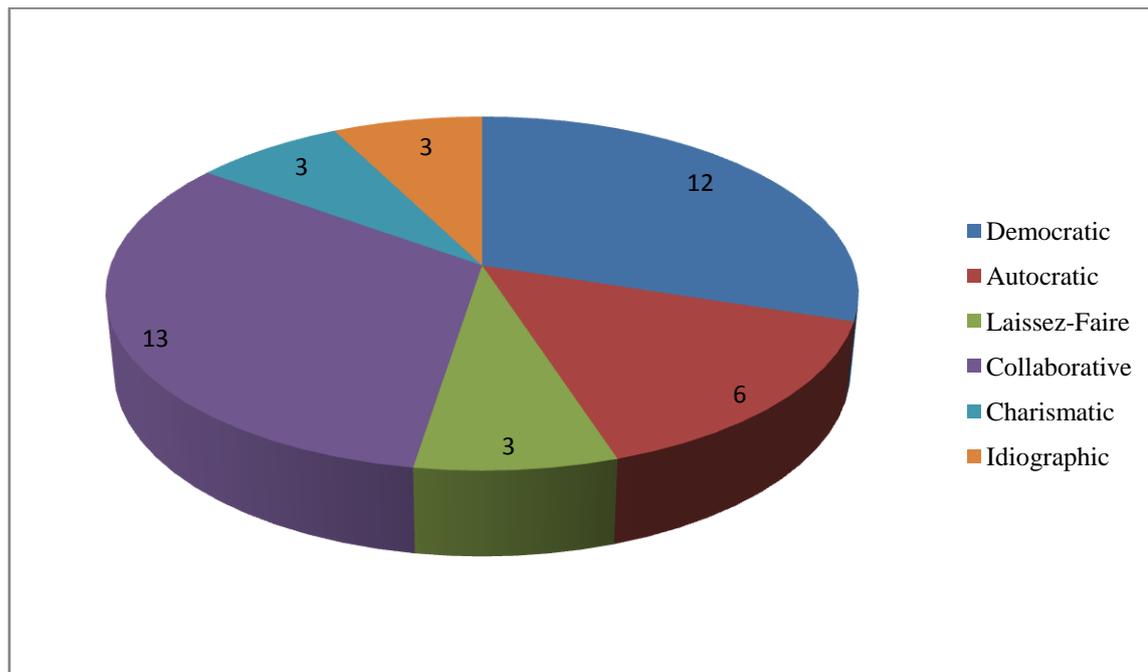


**Figure1.** *Power bases peculiar among bosses*

Figure 1 shows that the majority of the 19(48%) respondents perceived the graduates in management as resorting to expert power to appeal to the subordinates. Some 8(20%) indicated that their superiors adopted coercive power to appeal to them while 6(15%) used reward power. The least adopted power base was legitimate power which was indicated by only 3(8%) respondents.

**5.2. How Subordinates Working Under the ODL Graduates Perceive their Management Styles**

Respondents were asked to indicate by ticking the leadership styles that their superiors most exhibited at the workplace. Figure 2 below shows the views from the respondent.



**Figure2.** Leadership styles most exhibited at the workplace by superiors

Figure 2 shows that 12(30%) viewed their superiors as being democratic while a minority of 3(8%) indicated that they were autocratic. Another 3(8%) stated that their supervisors adopted the laissez-faire style while a majority of 13(33%) perceived their superiors as collaborative. The ODL graduates in management were perceived as charismatic by 3(8%) respondents and idiographic by the same number of respondents.

Asked to elaborate why they had indicated these views, those who had stated that their superiors were democratic indicated that the superiors always included them in decision making processes. The respondents who had labelled their superiors as autocratic had no kind words for them. One indicated that the ODL graduate ran the organisation with an iron fist and though that he knew everything to the detriment of the department. However, those stated that their leaders were collaborative indicated that there was a general friendly and conducive working environment as all people worked in a collegial manner. All this goes to show that the ODI graduates in management hold positive attitudes towards both the work place and the personnel under them. Positive attitudes, motivation, initiative, self-confidence, and flexibility found among ODL graduate employees (Barnes, 2004), Gassner, 2002; Thomas and Nicita, 2003) have therefore contributed to their effectiveness through the application of the appropriate leadership styles. The results are also in line with those in a study by Lekamge (2006) who established that most ODL graduates were tolerant of other people`s views at the work place and hence they were deemed very democratic.

**5.3. How ODL Graduates have Performed in their Current Posts Compared to Conventional Graduates as Perceived by their Subordinates**

There were mixed reactions from the respondents when asked how the subordinates viewed their ODL graduate superiors compared to those who had graduated from conventional institutions.

**Table3.** Respondents` views on ODL graduates as compared to those from conventional institutions

Response	Number	%
Equally the same	26	65
Better than those from conventional colleges	14	35
Poorly as compared to those in conventional colleges	16	40
More mature than their counterparts	26	65
More effective and efficient	21	53

Table 3 shows that 26(65%) respondents rated ODL graduates in management equally the same with those graduates from conventional colleges while 14(35%) thought that they were better than those from conventional colleges. Some 16(40%) thought that the ODL graduates were poor as compared to those in conventional colleges whereas 26(65%) indicated that they were more mature than their counterparts. Twenty-one (53%) stated that they were more effective and efficient. Going by the majority of the respondents, it would appear that there were similar outcomes in engagements involving both ODL and conventional graduates. This is why previous studies (Ojo and Olakulehin, 2006; Boado et al 2009; Kangai and Bukaliya, 2011; Meyer, 2002) seem to suggest that students engaged in ODL would likely achieve similar outcome to those offered by conventional educational methods, thus there is “no significant difference” in student achievement (Meyer, 2002).

#### 5.4. Challenges Confronting ODL Graduates in Management as Perceived by their Subordinates

Respondents were asked to enumerate challenges they discovered among their superiors as they performed their supervisory duties. Table 3 below shows the responses.

**Table4.** Challenges subordinates discovered among their superiors who had trained through ODL

Challenge	Number	%
Poor computer literacy and hands on	14	35
Lack confidence	8	20
Too democratic in decision making to the extent of delaying decisions	12	30
Inferiority complex	6	15
Looked down upon by subordinates	8	20

Table 4 shows that some 14(35%) respondents perceived ODL graduates in management as being poor in computer literacy and hands on while only 8(20%) stated that they lacked confidence. Some 12(30%) stated that they were too democratic in decision making to the extent of delaying decisions while only 6(15%) perceived them to be suffering from some inferiority complex. Eight (20%) stated that they were looked down upon by subordinates. In concurrence, some studies have shown that ODL graduates have problems in the use of computers at the workplace and hence (Latif and Bahroom, 2010, Kangai and Bukaliya, 2011, Bukaliya and Dzimano, 2012). Those suffering from inferiority complex could have been in that state due to their subscription to the misguided belief that ODL is inferior to the traditional conventional system.

#### 5.5. Implications for the ODL Institutions in Light of the Challenges Identified in the ODL Graduates

Owing to the existence of the above challenges, respondents were asked what they thought ODL institutions should do in an effort to alleviate the identified challenges among ODL graduates in management. The following table shows some of the respondents' views.

**Table5.** Strategies to alleviate the identified challenges among ODL graduates in management

Response	Number	%
Improve computer programmes that are on offer to include more practical components	13	33
Dispel negative notions about ODL acquired qualifications	21	53
Hold refresher courses for graduates through continuous development programmes	10	25
Formation of ODL graduates in management association to enhance professional growth	6	15

Table 5 shows that 13(33%) respondents advocated for the improve computer programmes that are on offer to include more practical components for their superiors who lacked computer literacy. Some 21(53%) advanced the view that there was need to dispel negative notions about ODL acquired qualifications while 10(25%) stated that there was need to hold refresher courses for graduates through continuous development programmes. Some 6(15%) respondents advocated for the formation of an ODL graduates in management association to enhance professional growth.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

From the above results, it can be concluded that:

- ODL graduates are really effective in managing their departments as there was a generally good performance in their departments.
- ODL graduates in management have good managerial skills and were very knowledgeable on the jobs while they possessed the most appropriate skills.

- Most ODL graduates in management resort to expert power to appeal to the subordinates while the least adopted power base was legitimate power.
- Most ODL graduates are deemed democratic and collaborative while a minority was seen to be autocratic.
- ODL graduates in management perform equally the same with those graduates from conventional colleges but have shortcomings among them being poor in computer literacy, lacked confidence and some are too democratic in decision making to the extent of delaying decisions.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the above conclusions, it is therefore, recommended that:

- There is need to dispel negative notions about ODL acquired qualifications and hold refresher courses for graduates through continuous development programmes.
- The ODL institutions should facilitate the formation of an ODL graduates in management association to enhance professional growth.
- There is need for cultivating strong computer literacy among ODL graduates.
- There is need to boost the confidence of the ODL graduates in the workplace so that they do not feel inferior to their counterparts trained through the traditional conventional mode. Strategies to be adopted could include workshops and posting weeklies through internet based communication platforms.
- More tracer studies need to be carried out on ODL graduates in whatever capacities they may be in the field of work to ascertain their deficiencies and strengths so as to improve the ODL programmes on offer.

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