Exploring Parastatal Employers' Perceptions of Open and Distance Learning Graduates: The Perspective of the Human Resources Managers/Officers

[1]Richard Bukaliya, [2]Augustine Kudakwashe Mubika

[1]Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland East
[2]Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland West Region
[1]*bukaliar@gmail.com*, [2]*akmubika@gmail.com*

Abstract: *This study was undertaken to explore the perceptions of human resources officers in parastatals on the employability of ODL graduates from the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Data were drawn from participants who included Human resources Officers from the Grain Marketing Board, parastatals in the communications industries, municipalities, and revenue collecting authorities, transport sector, and the electricity supply authority. The study adopted the cross sectional survey to accommodate diverse opinions from various parastatals in Zimbabwe. In order to gather data from the respondents, interviews and document analysis were employed. Respondents were chosen through convenience sampling techniques. Ten Human Resources Managers/Officers made up the sample. Due to the fact that they found ODL graduates as mature, diligent, assiduous and unremitting, among other attributes, this appealed to parastatals employers who found them employable. According to the majority of HRMs/HROs, ODL graduates were of comparable quality to those trained in the conventional tertiary institutions, particularly in the municipalities, communications industries, and Grain Marketing Board. However, lack of interaction between the distance teaching institutions and parastatals and non involvement of the employers in course designs were areas of concern raised HRMs/HROs. Internships should be invigorated so that practicing students get hands on experience. HRMs/HROs including top executives from the different parastatals should be involved in writing modules, course outlines and readers for use in different programmes at ZOU.*

Keywords: *Parastatals, Qualifications, Open and Distance Learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional conventional education appears to have gotten the better of ODL, but to many ODL has been greeted with satisfaction as many who had been deprived of education due to one reason or the other obtained their qualifications through the mode. To some, ODL is inferior and due to these diverse views, ODL has been received with mixed feelings by various stakeholders but facts on the ground show that ODL in Zimbabwe and indeed, in most developing countries, has played a pivotal role in equipping the nations with highly skilled personnel in various sectors of the economy. While the quality of ODL graduates has been called to question (Dede, 1996; Harrison, 2001), some such as Basaza, Milman & Wright (2010) have noted that there is no significant difference in quality between the quality of ODL and conventional system graduates. It is behind this background that some sectors shun ODL graduates to the credit of those from conventional learning institutions. In Zimbabwe, the Civil Service Commission, the employer of all civil servants in Zimbabwe, for example, does not recognize some of the degree and diploma programmes offered through ZOU, but by and large the majority of the ZOU degrees are recognized for employment purposes by the same employer. A study by Bukaliya (2011) on the acceptance of ODL graduates in the private sector enterprises in Zimbabwe revealed that the majority of the sectors which included financial services sector, mining and agriculture showed that ODL graduates were being accepted in these sectors for their high quality of performance. However, the study mainly focused on those already in employment who would then get promoted on the basis of their ODL qualification.

For this reason, this study sought to establish the extent to which ODL qualifications from ZOU were acceptable for employment as entry level qualifications in parastatals, which are companies established through Acts of Parliament in Zimbabwe, just like ZOU, which was established through the ZOU Act. The study also provided some valuable suggestions and recommendations for the various officials from the parastatals.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Most conventional institutions the world over cannot accommodate all aspiring graduates and nations have to find other alternatives to provide education to the masses. ODL is seen as an option to close the deficit created in the traditional systems. However, while some have accepted the option, others have doubted the credibility of ODL graduates as they question the mode of delivery and are not enthusiastic about most of the ODL graduates they employ (Harvey, 1993; Hinde, 1997). The current study was, therefore, aimed at answering the question: To what extent are ODL graduates accepted in employment in parastatals from the point of view of the Human Resources Officers/Managers in these parastatals in Zimbabwe?

2.1 Research Questions

In order to answer the main research question, the following research questions stood as sub problems:

1. What features in ODL graduates entice parastatals employers to employ ODL graduates?
2. What do parastatals HROs/HRMs perceive as benefits accruing to them through the employment of ODL graduates?
3. How comparable is the quality of ODL graduates with those from conventional tertiary institutions from the perspectives of the HROs/HRMs in parastatals?
4. What characteristics of ODL graduates dissuade parastatals employers from engaging ODL graduates?
5. What reservations do HROs/HRMs in parastatals hold against the employment of ODL graduates?
6. How can ODL graduates be made more employable in parastatals?

2.2 Review of related literature

2.2.1 Defining Open and Distance Education

Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2000) asserts that ODL and its definition are relatively new in the field of education. ODL has gained prominence only in the past 15 to 20 years. According to the same source, the language and terms used to describe distance learning activities can still be confusing, with geographical differences in usage adding to more confusion. Related terms, therefore, commonly used to refer to ODL are correspondence education, home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, among others (COL, 2000).

Some have defined ODL as delivery of instruction in a format that separates the teacher and learner, often both in time and space (Keegan, 1980) while for others it is a systematically organized form of self-study in which student counselling, the presentation of learning material and the securing and supervising of students' success is carried out by a team of teachers, each of whom has responsibilities (Dohmen, 1967). Peters (1973) sees ODL as a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes which is rationalised by the application of division of labour and organisational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, especially for the purpose of reproducing high quality teaching material which makes it possible to instruct great numbers of students at the same time wherever they live.

2.3 Related Studies

Very few empirical research studies have been conducted by the scholars related to the present theme of the study perceptions towards the employability of distance education graduates (Open University of Hong Kong, 1999).

In a study by OUHK, (1999), employers' perceived distance education as acceptable and advantageous in terms of staff continuity, ease of personnel management, the degree is immediate workplace application of skills acquired by staff and continuous professional development of staff. In the same study, distance learning was viewed to be as good as tradition face-to-face mode thus some employers preferred staff to enhance professional development through distance education. There were 184 employers who indicated that they were employers of ODL graduates. These employers rated ODL graduates highly on diligence, perseverance, willingness to learn and general job skills. However, according to the same study, employers were uncertain about whether or not the quality of ODL graduate employees was comparable to graduates of other types of universities.

Research conducted by Adams and DeFleur (2005) regarding doctorate graduates indicates that given the choice of selecting job candidates who possessed online (a form of the ODL mode) or traditional doctoral degree credentialing, 98 percent of 109 employers surveyed preferred to hire the candidate with the traditional doctoral degree. Flowers and Baltzer (2006) study replicated and confirmed the study by Adams and DeFleur (2005). Findings by Flowers and Baltzer (2006) revealed that employers were less likely to engage a candidate with an ODL doctoral degree for a full time position.

Guendoo (2008) investigated the acceptability of online degrees among 52 administrators of colleges in the United States and found that online degrees were not a hindrance to one`s chances for employment. Chaney (2002) researched the issue of acceptability of online degrees for employment in eight Midwest pharmaceutical companies and focused on the perception about online degrees for those being hired in various positions that mostly require scientific backgrounds. The findings indicated that although all the participants questioned whether scientific content and labs could be taught online, most of the respondents made no distinction between an online degree and a traditional degree when considering applicants in the hiring process.

Studies that looked at the on-line or partially online credentials for obtaining employment in the healthcare professions established that given the hiring decision for a healthcare position, 95% of the employers would prefer the applicant with a traditional degree to one who completed an online degree (Adams, DeFleur and Heald, 2007; Columbaro and Monaghan, 2009). Twenty-nine percent would select a candidate with a hybrid degree where half of the courses were taken online (Adams et al., 2007). According to the same research, findings suggest that when companies attempted to fill management or entry-level positions in accounting, business, engineering, and information technology, 96 percent indicated that they would choose the candidate with a traditional degree. Concerns such as accreditation, perceived interaction among peers and professors, quality, skills, and work experience were raised as reasons for not hiring online candidates (Adams, DeFleur and Heald, 2007; Columbaro and Monaghan, 2009).

Studies in the telecommunications, data systems, insurance, and finance and rental businesses industries showed employers` preference in hiring holders of traditional degrees to degrees obtained through ODL although hybrid degrees were gaining acceptability (Seibold, 2007). Employers surveyed in other studies indicated that they would select a candidate with a traditional degree over one who earned the degree through some form of distance education, and 41 percent would view both degrees equally (Carnevale, 2007). Reasons advanced by prospective employers for their reticence in accepting ODL degree credentials included the following: lack of rigor, lack of face-to-face interactions, increased potential for academic dishonesty, and concerns about online students' true commitment evident from regularly venturing to a college or university physical location. Gunnell (2010) argues that emotional intelligence which represents an ability to validly reason with emotions and to use emotions to enhance thought is said to be enhanced by the face to face interaction that a classroom provides. But this is lost in an ODL setting.

Conditions that could influence ODL degree acceptance in the hiring process were: name reputation of the degree-granting institution, appropriate level and type of accreditation, candidates' relevant work experiences, and whether the graduates were being considered for promotion within an organisation or if they were vying for new positions elsewhere or in a new field (Carnevale, 2005, 2007).

In other studies, prospective employers have an overall negative perception about ODL degrees particularly on-line degrees (Adams & DeFleur, 2006). For example, a research by Columbaro and Monaghan (2009) concluded that the hirers have an overall negative perception about online degrees. Adams et al (2007) found a clear bias toward traditional degrees. For example when examining the hiring in academia for tenured faculty positions, the studies found that traditional degrees were viewed more favourably than the ODL degrees (Adams & DeFleur, 2006; Flowers & Baltzer, 2006).

However, when some prospective employers were skeptical about employing ODL graduates, in the healthcare sector, Chaney (2002) found that employers gave equal weight to online versus traditional degrees. At the Bank of America, at Daimler-Chrysler and in the United States Air Force, respondents regarded online and face-to-face instruction as equally valuable, with 10% regarding online education as more valuable and 38% as less valuable (Wellen, 2006).

Some studies have shown that employment does not hinge on the possession of a degree acquired through whatever means (Munge, 2007). Rather employers look for characteristics such as personal attributes such as motivation and initiative, experience, professional certifications, attendance, computer literacy, and administration skills (Everard, 1997; Garvey & Gass, 1999; Medina, 2001; Thomas & Nicita, 2003). Characteristics such as attitude, motivation, initiative, self-confidence, and flexibility were most sought after by employers in whatever qualification. This finding concurs with those by Barnes (2004), Gassner (2002) and Thomas and Nicita (2003) that someone's attitude is a key contributor to their employability and their effectiveness. This therefore goes to show that some employers do not bother about the mode used to attain a degree, that is, whether by distance education or the traditional system. To them, what matters most are these attributes and characteristics which make the difference. However, these characteristics and attributes may be imbedded in prospective employees by virtue of their studying through either the traditional mode or through any form of ODL (Adams, 2008) hence there is need to establish this from the employers.

Numerous studies have been undertaken to dispel the negative notions held against the quality of ODL (Meyer, 2002; Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002; Bukaliya, 2011) but some employers and other stakeholders 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. However, in a research by Watkins (1991), it was 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. According to Ojo and Olakulehin (2006), the tutorials in use in ODL were found to be as effective as the lecture methods used in the conventional system and this indicates that there was little difference in students' perceptions of lectures or tutorials used in the conventional institutions versus ODL institutions. This, therefore, suggests that students engaged in ODL would likely achieve learning outcomes similar to those offered by conventional educational methods.

Despite the continued increase in popularity, ODL qualifications have been tainted because of the influx of fake degrees and bogus diploma mills sprouting up to make money on the sale of fake degrees (Jackson, 2008). With skepticism influenced by all the bogus diploma mills, no wonder employers are being more cautious.

However, studies have found little difference in the quality of education received through distance learning versus conventional university classroom settings (Meyer, 2002, Bukaliya, 2011). This has been established in comparisons between distance education delivery methods and traditional forms of educational delivery which have shown that there is "no significant difference" in student achievement (Meyer, 2002, Bukaliya, 2011).

A number of remedies have been put forward to make ODL more attractive to stakeholders among which are the prospective employers. While some have advocated for the use of existing pools of mainstream expertise and infrastructure and avoiding setting up of own structures in curriculum development, materials production and outreach infrastructures (Creed, Allsop, Mills and Morpeth, 2006, Bukaliya, 2011), others have suggested that institutions must collaborate among themselves and with business to provide an infrastructure that will support distance learning (Basaza, Milman and Wright, 2010; Ngoma, 2006, Bukaliya, 2011), thus creating strong relationships that may work towards the undoubted recognition of ODL qualifications. Prestera and Moller (2007) suggest that distance education programmes should assess the needs of all stakeholders, including potential and existing ones.

2.4 Population and Sample

The respondents for the study were drawn from ten parastatals in Zimbabwe. The parastatals involved in the study included the Grain Marketing Board, communications industries parastatals such as Tel-One, municipalities and local government authorities, revenue collection authorities, transport sector parastatals, and electricity utility sector. Out of these parastatals, 10(100%) Human Resources Managers/Officers (HRMs/HROs) were chosen through convenience sampling because of availability and proximity to the researchers.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the current study was all about parastatals employers` perceptions on ODL graduates` employability, the cross sectional survey strategy was adopted to avail data form a diversity of respondents in terms of different parastatals approached in the study. Surveys are the best designs to adopt where perceptions, views and beliefs of subjects are sought and these surveys describe and interpret what it is concerned with, conditions or the relationships that exist, opinions that are held, processes that are going on, effects that are evident or trends that are developing (Leedy, 1997; Best and Kahn, 1993).

According to Fogelman in Coleman and Briggs (2004), surveys need not be restricted to questionnaires only but also to unstructured and structured instruments such as interviews. This study, therefore, employed a multi-method approach to data which entailed using a combination of interviews and document analysis. This enabled triangulation to cross validate the validity and reliability of the solicited data from the HRMs/HROs.

3.1 Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Data obtained from the respondents were presented according to the research questions. Presentation was both qualitative and quantitative with descriptive data being presented in form of totals and percentages. Data solicited from the interviews and document analysis were mainly qualitative though presented both qualitatively and quantitatively through descriptive statistics.

3.2 Presentation and Discussion of Results

Most employers that have been interviewed on their perceptions of ODL graduates seem to be centred their arguments on the promotability of these graduates already in employment. However, the results of this study centre on their perceptions of new recruits who are being churned out of ODL institutions. What is clear from the responses by the majority of the HRMs/HROs is that ODL graduates are very welcome in most of the parastatals that were selected to take part in the study. One of the respondents actually remarked that there were more gains in engaging an ODL graduate than one from the conventional system mostly due to the view that ODL graduates worked with minimum supervision as what happens during their studies.

3.3 Characteristics of ODL Graduates that Entice Parastatals Employers to Engage ODL Graduates

HRMs/HROs who took part in the study were asked to list ODL graduates` attributes appealing to them as employers. That graduates were mature, diligent, assiduous and unremitting, appealed more to the parastatals employers. These accounted for 9(90%), 8(80%), 8(80%) and 9(90%) respectively. ODL graduates were also rated highly on their experience on the job with 7(70%), hardworking 6(60%) and being cooperative 7(70%). Five (50%) rated the graduates as willing to learn. These are some of the attributes of ODL graduates which made them employable (Barnes, 2004; Gassner, 2002; Thomas and Nicita, 2003; Everard, 1997; Garvey & Gass, 1999; Medina, 2001). The attachment programmes that ZOU has included in the training programmes have also given rise to the much needed on the job training. Most faculties and departments have mandatory practicum or attachment programmes that are required for one to graduate.

3.4 Perception of Employers on Benefits Accruing from Employing ODL Graduates

The HRMs/HROs were asked to enumerate the perceived benefits of employing graduates who acquired their qualifications through ODL. Results show that the majority of respondents 6(60%), are in agreement that ODL qualifications enhance employees` skill, while 7(70%) feel ODL qualifications improve job performance. Eight (80%) of the HROs also indicated that employees got promoted on the strength of their ODL degrees and there was no segregation as to the type of mode one went through in order to acquire a degree (Chaney, 2002; Gagne and Shepherd, 2001; Russell, 2002). This is why the majority particularly from the transport sector and communications industries stated that ODL qualifications were well recognised in their parastatals mainly due to hands on experience of the graduates coupled by learnt theory (Holmberg, 1990). Most respondents 9(90%), also felt that university closures were a rare feature of ODL hence there could be sufficient coverage of content

within a given semester giving rise to improved job performance and efficiency. The modules that ODL students are given at ZOU are prepared by experts who have excelled in different areas and these are always available for the student even on the job as reference material, thus enhancing job performance.

3.5 A Comparison of the Quality of ODL Graduates with those from Conventional Tertiary Institutions

Opinions on the quality of ODL graduates` performance were sought from the HRMs/HROs. A majority of seven (70%) HRMs/HROs identified ODL graduates as comparing favourably well with those from conventional colleges in terms of performance. The majority of respondents stated that they saw nothing wrong in recruiting ODL graduates since their qualifications were just the same as those of their colleagues from the conventional systems. Asked if they felt compelled in future to employ ODL graduates, all 10(100) HRMs/HROs agreed. Document analysis on the staffing statistics also goes to support the claims made by the respondents. In 2004, one of the parastatals engaged ODL graduates who had qualified with a Bachelor of Education degree in Management. Most of those recruited were in posts of responsibility such as Depot Assistant Managers. According to one of the respondents, these junior managers performed quite well in their duties and there was no doubt about their ability and maturity on the job. Contrary to these findings, Young (1994) established that there was skepticism, ridicule and hostility against distance education universities, rendering the graduates unemployable in some sectors of the economy. However, Bukaliya (2011) found that respondents were very keen in employing ODL graduates because they performed even better than those from the conventional colleges.

3.6 Characteristics of ODL Graduates Dissuading Parastatals Employers from Engaging ODL Graduates

HRMs/HROs` views were sought on the general characteristics of ODL that dissuaded them from engaging the ODL graduates. Despite generally appealing quite well to most of the HRMs/HROs, ODL institutions and inversely, their qualifications had their own weaknesses which the majority of the respondents felt mitigated against the employability of graduates holding ODL qualifications. Results from the current study show that 7(70%) respondents felt dissuaded from employing ODL graduates due to lack of interaction between distance teaching institutions and parastatals. This probably implies non involvement of the employers in course designs, resulting in them not trusting the level and suitability of course content. Five(50%) viewed cheating in the process of acquiring ODL qualifications as a potential threat to their engaging ODL graduates as they felt that there was a lot of room for dishonesty in the ODL systems (Carnevale, 2007). Employing ODL graduates would be tantamount to employing unskilled or unqualified personnel.

According to 9(90%) HRMs/HROs, name recognition or the reputation of the degree-granting institution can weigh against employing an ODL graduate. Only 1(10%) respondent thought otherwise. However, if the ODL college or university has the coveted seal of approval, it means the distance learning degrees they are offering have met basic standards of excellence necessary to adequately offer degree programmes through ODL. Lack of rigor in the ODL studies accounted for only 4(40%) respondents thereby concurring with the findings by Seibold (2007), with the majority of 6(60%) perceiving lack of rigor not being influential in their engagement of ODL graduates. Inadequacy of face-to-face interactions between learners and tutors 8(80 %) was one of the reasons why HRMs/HROs felt obliged not to accept ODL qualifications for employment purposes. Probed further, respondents indicated that there was very little contact time in ODL thereby giving rise to little coverage of content. To a few, HRMs/HROs emotional intelligence was not present in ODL graduates due to lack of face to face interaction (Gunnell, 2010).

3.7 Reservations by HRMS/HROS against the Employment of ODL Graduates

Respondents were asked to indicate the attributes of ODL graduates they found not appealing to them. Current results also show that dishonesty, laziness, lack of confidence on the job and the demand for a lot of guidance and supervision, made ODL graduates unappealing to a minority of the respondents (Seibold, 2007). Two (20%) indicated that ODL trained graduates were dishonest while 3(30%) stated that graduates were lazy. However, 4(40%) HRMs/HROs indicated that ODL graduates required a lot of extrinsic motivation mostly in the form of monetary rewards. This finding is understandable

bearing in mind that the majority of these graduates are elderly folk who may have a lot of responsibilities at home. Four (40%) stated that ODL graduates were not prepared to take up posts of responsibility, one of the assumptions of Theory X as propounded by McGregor. This was most likely due to lack of confidence and competence, according to the respondents. This was mostly evident from the data supplied by those in the communications industries. According to 8(80%) HRMs/HROs, ODL graduates lacked computer literacy and in this computer age the HROs/HRMs felt compelled not to employ any such graduate. However, most of ZOU programmes have a computer component in them. That being the case, however, most of the computer courses are only meant for computer appreciation and thus the graduates lack hands on experience in the use of computers.

3.8 Recommendations for making ODL graduates more attractive in parastatals

Most of the respondents provided with very meaningful recommendations for making ODL graduates more attractive for employment in parastatals. The majority of 9(90%) respondents indicated that there was need for the involvement of all the ODL graduates in positions of power in the university alumni. One of the respondents remarked that once those in position of power were included in the alumni association, there was great potential to take on board graduates from the institution. Some still studying through ZOU needed to be incorporated in to the Student Representative Council and make their voices heard. Just like in previous studies, most prevalent among the recommendations was the need to form MOUs and MOAs with prospective employers who would be involved in course designing as well as offering part time tutoring (Basaza, Milman and Wright, 2010; Ngoma, 2006, Bukaliya, 2011). There was also a call from 4(40%) respondents that there should be a regular revision of course content in line with current demands of the various parastatals in Zimbabwe (Prestera and Moller, 2007, Bukaliya, 2011). As technology and ways of parastatals operations change, so should the content of courses on offer.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were drawn from the findings:

1. HRMs/HROs in parastatals have employed ODL graduates because of their maturity, diligence and unremitting nature, among other positive attributes.

2. One issue to the appointment of ODL graduates emanated from lack of face to face contact between the institution and the student.

3. Parastatals also perceived ODL graduates as employable due to their enhanced employees` skills and improved job performance.

4. ODL graduates were of comparable quality with those from the conventional tertiary institutions in the public accounting, administration and management work.

5. HRMs/HROs felt that most ODL graduates were ready to accept posts of responsibility mostly due to their maturity.

6. ODL graduates were detested in some parastatals due to lack of interaction between the distance teaching institution and parastatals and non involvement of the parastatals in course design, resulting in them not trusting the level and suitability of course content.

7. HRMs/HROs agreed that ODL qualifications enhanced employees` skill and improved job performance while making employees get promotion on the strength of their ODL degrees.

8. Parastatals as arms of government, should take part in course designing for ODL programmes in order to enhance the positive perceptions of HRMs/HROs in parastatals.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the above conclusions:

1. Internships/Attachments should be invigorated so that practicing students get hands on experience in different set ups. This also helps to cement relationships between ODL institutions and the prospective employers.

2. There is need for the involvement of top executives in the production of materials such as modules, course outlines and readers.

3. Formation of MOUs and MOAs with parastatals can also help increase opportunities for ODL graduates by parastatals.

4. Holding of consultative meetings with parastatals executives, sensitisation and exposure to distance education methods will help stakeholders and employers to shift their attitudes towards distance education.

5. Offering courses on demand. Market search on which courses are on demand may also help in the absorption of the ODL graduates rather than offer courses that may have no takers coming up as employers.

6. Seeking sponsorship for students from the parastatals: This enables employers to engage ODL students whom they would have sponsored during studies.

7. Use of the existing pool of mainstream expertise and infrastructure so to perpetuate the quality of curriculum development, materials production the present ODL system gets overshadowed by the traditional institutions.

8. The ZOU could also promote the university`s graduates employability through the mounting of employer, recruiter and head hunters` workshops especially on issues centering on what content to include in the courses and how to break down any unfounded biases leveled against ODL qualifications (Adams, 2008).

9. Furthermore, a more expanded investigation needs to be undertaken to encompass more parastatals. There is also need to increase the size of the sample in order to accommodate more respondents, thus increasing the representativeness of the responses.

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