

Perceptions of Students on the Conduct of Tutorials in Zimbabwe Open University: A Case Study of the Midlands Region

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Abstract

This research paper examines the perceptions of students towards tutorials in the Midlands Region of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). In particular the study intended to establish whether the tutorials were conducted in a manner that satisfied the students. This case study was pragmatic in approach as it utilized both quantitative and qualitative techniques such as questionnaires, interviews and observations. The study established that both tutors and students had problems in distinguishing between tutorials and lectures. Most students preferred being lectured to, although this was not the delivery mode used in ZOU. The study further established that in some cases tutors and students did not prepare adequately when they came for tutorials. This affected the smooth flow of sessions. Lack of modules affected the conduct of tutorials. The study recommends that tutors should be inducted on how to conduct tutorials. Modules should be provided before the commencement of the semester.

Background to the study

The distance education method has been adopted to bridge the gap left by the conventional education system. It is the answer to governments of developing countries' problems of educational provision and claims have

been made that distance education can improve access to, and quality of educational provision and at lower cost to the participants of distance education. Keagan (1996) states that the term Distance Education (DE) refers to an educational approach in which there is a quasi separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space. Open learning on the other hand refers to the philosophical constricts that seek to remove barriers and constraints which may prevent learners from accessing and succeeding in quality lifelong education. The growth of higher education has been phenomenal since the attainment of independence in Zimbabwe in 1980. The establishment of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is one of the greatest and most welcome achievements by the Government of Zimbabwe. ZOU as an ODL institution was established by an Act of Parliament in 1999 (Benza, 2001). It was meant to cater for a substantial group of people who by design or by default; whether intentionally or unintentionally could not be accommodated in conventional universities. The conventional education system cannot meet fully the demands of today's socio - educational demands, hence the introduction of ODL. The quest for higher level qualifications has brought to the fore the issue of ODL as an innovative and cost effective way to the education process. ZOU was established to offer these people an opportunity to study in the comfort of their homes and at their workplaces through ODL/DE. ZOU's mandate is to provide ODL to everyone who has an interest to attain a higher level of education. ZOU uses a multi-media instruction delivery approach which includes print-based courses otherwise known as modules within ZOU, face-to-face tutorials, telephone tuition and electronic tuition. Modules constitute ZOU's dominant delivery mode and are given at registration to all registered student. In ZOU, the learner and the tutor are separated by time and space making use of the modules as instructional materials; hence the module is referred to as "the lecturer" within ZOU. Tutorials are therefore used to complement the modules and electronic media, and students are therefore encouraged to attend tutorials. Tutorial facilitation is optional for students. Unlike conventional universities which are housed in the same location/locality ZOU is found in all the ten provinces of Zimbabwe and has the eleventh which is referred to as the **virtual region**. The virtual region caters for students outside Zimbabwe who carry out their studies through e-learning. ZOU has five faculties and these are found/represented in every/each region. Respective regional coordinators are responsible for the running of the departments at regional level. At the National Centre, that is where the chairpersons as well as the programme leaders are based. Each of the five faculties is administered by a dean who is responsible for the academic activities of his/her faculty.

Tutorials promote the exchange of ideas as well as create relationships between students and their tutors and among students themselves as they form study groups. Chidakwa and Majoni (2005) in their study revealed that tutorials in ZOU were very useful in assisting distance education students to interact with their peers and their respective course tutors. Chikoko and Chiome (2013) also state that students being the university's customers should be given an opportunity to relate their experiences using tutorials in ZOU and demonstrate to what extent their critical service meets the quality criteria. It is very critical to ensure quality of tutorials offered by ZOU tutors in the Midlands Region. ZOU students come from different backgrounds, such as some being housewives, while others are high flying professionals some with very senior posts at their workplaces. Students who come for tutorials should not expect to be lectured to but to be tutored, since tutorials are the mode of service delivery in ZOU. Makoni (2000) says that a tutorial refers to a small group learning context that supports and extends learning through distance learning modules. Tutorials differ from lectures in that they provide opportunities for students to construct and refine their own knowledge by means of feedback from peers and more knowledgeable tutors. Nhleya-Ndereya et al. (2003) say that the main aim of tutoring is to provide the learner with effective academic support by creating an opportunity for the learner to interact with the tutor and fellow learners. According to Allen and Seaman (2007) improving students' access to higher education has been cited as a major reason for offering ODL courses and programmes.

ZOU has organized weekend schools for students to hold their tutorials. Weekend schools by their very nature do not disturb the learners work programme and most learners do not go to their workplaces on weekends. Normally these weekend schools are placed at month ends in order not to inconvenience students as well as

part-time tutors. Tutorial hours are six hours per semester divided into three two hour sessions. Students therefore meet with their tutors for face-to-face tutorials for six hours per course per semester. Tutors are employed on a part-time basis. A tutor is responsible for the overall academic progress of a group of learners allocated to him/her. The tutor acts as a guide and mentor to the learners in the academic activities.

Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) state that it has been confirmed by research and by practice that individualized learning is a lonely activity and that most distance learners are faced with the challenges of family, work and their social demands, some of which take precedence over their programmes of study. In comparison, students in the conventional system remain in close and easy contact with their institution. In ODL settings the students are often isolated and contact with their regional centre are at best infrequent and more often than not take place at a distance. The ODL student has therefore to have good study skills, self-discipline and self-motivation, and these attributes are needed to retain learner autonomy. Moore and Tait (2002) argue that tutorial delivery modes in ODL attempt to minimize the physical separation of learners from tutors and from other learners by utilizing learners' social and work environments and by continuously exploring learning opportunities that overcome barriers caused by personal, work commitments and geographical location.

Purpose of the study

The study was conducted to establish the perceptions of students on the conduct of tutorials in the Midlands Region of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. To obtain perceptions of students on the conduct of tutorials in the Midlands Region
2. To ascertain tutor preparedness in meeting students' needs during tutorials
3. To establish the adequacy of resources for weekend school tutorials
4. To recommend suggestions regarding the effective implementation of tutorials

Significance of the study

Open and distance learning has become an important component in the education system of Zimbabwe. ODL through ZOU caters for several people at both undergraduate and post graduate levels. ZOU uses the module as its basic text as elucidated before, which are complemented by tutorials. It is however apparent that most of the students and tutors within ZOU lack the understanding of what tutoring as a delivery mode entails. It is therefore imperative that students and tutors should appreciate tutorials which are a key element during their study period with ZOU. The academic fraternity should also understand how tutorials are conducted in ZOU as part of their enrichment.

Area of study and methodology

The study was conducted in the Midlands Region of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Midlands Region is one of the ten regions that make up Zimbabwe Open University locally, the 11th being the virtual region which caters for students outside Zimbabwe. ZOU regions are located in the national provinces. Midlands Region is located in Gweru the capital of the Midlands Province. This was a case study because the team wanted to get a detailed account on the perceptions of students on tutorials. The study was delimited to students enrolled in the

Midlands Region in the January to June Semester of 2014 and part - time tutors working the respective faculties in the region. Purposive sampling was used because the study team wanted to reach a targeted sample quickly. Furthermore, the research team consciously selected ZOU students and tutors who were exposed to tutorials for inclusion in this study because they were the most appropriate. Samples of N = 82 students out of an enrolment of 667 students and 50 part – time tutors were involved for the study. The samples were considered relevant as the researchers wanted to elicit information specifically from the Midlands Region students and part – time tutors. This concurs with Babbie (1992) who contends that this method is used when the researcher selects his sample on the basis of one’s knowledge of the population. The researchers used the likert – type scale questions to collect data from both the students and the part- time tutors. The respective questionnaire for students also required that the respondents fill in their programmes of study, level of study and gender while that of part – time tutors required that they indicate the programme they were under, their qualifications and gender. These questionnaires were administered to respondents when they visited the regional office centre. The face-to-face interviews were also utilized in the collection of data. This method enabled the research team to obtain detailed information on tutorials as informants went beyond the questions. Interviewers were able to adjust questions that looked a bit difficult. Observations were also used to obtain first hand information on what was going on during tutorials. Since the research team was comprised of lecturers in ZOU, they were able to have access to how tutoring was being conducted. They were able to pick and record some behaviors that were associated with tutoring. Observations were used to complement questionnaires and interviews and this allowed for the collection of rich data.

Data presentation and discussions

Table 1 Students’ faculty and level of study (N = 82)

Faculty	Gender		Level of Study			
	Male	Female	1 st Year	2 nd Year	3 rd Year	4 th Year
Applied Social Sciences	9 (4, 0%)	13 (59, 0%)	0 (0%)	5 (22, 7%)	7 (31, 8%)	10 (45, 4%)
Commerce & Law	18 (64, 2%)	10 (35, 7%)	0 (0%)	7 (25%)	8 (28, 5%)	13 (46, 42%)
Education	4 (44, 4%)	5 (55, 5%)	0 (0%)	3 (33, 3%)	2 (22, 2%)	4 (44, 4%)
Arts	8 (50, 0%)	8 (50, 0%)	0 (0%)	2 (12, 5%)	5 (31, 2%)	9 (56, 2%)
Science & Technology	5 (71, 4%)	2 (28, 5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (42, 8%)	4 (%57,1)

Source: Research data, 2014

Table 1 presents the faculty and level of study of the respondents. The total number of male respondents was 44 (53, 6%) while that of female respondents was 38 (46, 3%). Although more male than female students responded to the questionnaires this did not mean that there were more male students than females students in the Midlands region. In actual fact the overall enrolment showed that there were more female students (340) than male students (327).

The level of study is reflected in Table 1 above. Part 2 students comprised 17 (21%) respondents, and Part 3 students had 25 (30%) respondents, while Part 4 students had 40 (49%) respondents. Part 1 students were not

represented in the study as they had only had been in the university for one semester. It was felt that participation by Part 1 students was too early as they still had to make impressions about the conduct of tutorials. The number of respondents was highest among Part 4 students because there were in their final year of study, hence the determination to register and finish their courses.

Table 2: Tutors by faculty by qualification by gender (N = 50)

Faculty	Gender		Academic and Professional Qualifications			
	Male	Female	1 st Degree Holder	Masters' Degree	Doctorate	Other
Applied Social Sciences	5 (10%)	4 (8%)	2 (4%)	7 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Commerce & Law	13 (26%)	5 (10%)	3 (6%)	15 (30%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Education	7 (14%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	10 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Arts	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	5 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Science & Technology	3 (6%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)	5 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Source: Research data, 2014

Table 2 above shows the professional qualifications and gender of tutors included in the research. The total number of male respondents was 33 (66%) while that of female respondents was 17 (34%), showing a total male dominance of tutors. The number of tutors with a first degree qualification only was 8 (16%) and those with a Masters degree were 42 (84%). There were no PhD certificate holders among the respondents. The other qualifications category registered a zero percent. This suggests that the respective faculties employed suitably qualified tutors for their students. First degree holders were used in special subject areas where there were limited number of tutors with relevant qualifications and specialization.

Eighty per cent of the students included in the research were in agreement that tutorials were worthwhile. This was corroborated by all the tutors (100%) who echoed the same sentiments. Ten per cent of the students did not agree while 4% was not sure. This could be attributed to the fact that those who did not agree and were not sure did not regularly attend tutorials hence, saw no benefit in doing so. Ngara and Ngwarai (2013) in their study also hinted to the fact that the students with negative perceptions were those who did not attend tutorials regularly. In the interviews conducted with ten participants it emerged that quite a number of students were not attending the scheduled tutorials but still performed well in both their assignments and examinations. This created an impression that tutorials were not essential. The picture was however different for those that attended the tutorial sessions. They revealed that tutorials provided them with an opportunity to consult tutors on difficult areas. Tutorials also helped them discuss techniques used to approach examinations. Some of the respondents believed that they did well in examinations because they attended tutorials. The research team observed that students who usually attended tutorials fared better in both assignments and examinations compared to their counterparts who did not attend tutorials. The team also observed that some of the students who did not attend scheduled tutorials made private arrangements such as creating study groups outside the university prescribed time. Such students could also do well in their examinations as they will have made adequate preparations for

the examinations. It cannot be denied that those students with negative perceptions may have been tutored by ineffective tutors.

The timing of tutorials was left to the Region and respective departments, while students and part-time tutors had no input in this. They were just informed of the dates of tutorials. The timing of tutorials could sometimes be inconveniencing to both the students and the part-time tutors, who needed to plan ahead in order to attend tutorials. It should be borne in mind that students came from the different parts of the province to attend tutorials and had therefore to make arrangements for transport and accommodation. The fact that they did not participate in the timing of tutorials had a negative effect on their respective schedules. Students were drawn from the different districts of the province. Districts such as Gokwe North and Gokwe South were more than 300 kilometres and 200 kilometres respectively from Gweru. Some students were located in the remote areas of these districts with poor transport networks. As a result such students could not attend tutorials as often as they would have wanted. Some students from outside Gweru revealed that they had challenges in securing over-night accommodation in the city when they came for weekend school tutorials. This affected their attendance at weekend schools. Since the dollarization of the economy in 2009 (Mangizvo and Jerie, 2011) students found it difficult to have extra income to spare. Their primary objective was to attend to bread and butter issues. Observations made by the research team showed attendance at weekend school had declined since the political and economic meltdown that affected Zimbabwe in the late 2000s. The situation had not improved at the time of study. Most students ended up attending only one tutorial session instead of the prescribed two sessions.

The study also wanted to establish whether number of tutorial sessions in a semester were adequate. Thirty seven per cent -of the students interviewed were comfortable with the number of tutorial sessions per semester while 63% felt that the number of tutorials should be increased. They argued that it was not possible to cover all their problems in the six hours allocated for tutorials in a semester. They felt they could benefit more if the hours could be increased to ten or more. Some of the tutors who were interviewed concurred with these students. They mentioned that in most cases they were forced to abandon tutoring and instead resorted to lecturing. Observations made by the research team showed that a number of tutors actually lectured to students; hence it was impossible to cover all the work within six hours. The study established that some of the tutors failed to distinguish between tutoring and lecturing. This was mainly because the tutors were not inducted when they were taken on board. The situation was worsened by the fact that some of the tutors did not have an ODL background; hence they tended to lecture as it was the delivery mode they were accustomed to.

The study also wanted to find out whether tutors came well prepared for tutorials. Twenty four per cent of the respondents disagreed with the 52% who said tutors came prepared for tutorials while 9% was not sure. The students' perceptions of the tutors' teaching techniques revealed that they differed very much in their attitudes towards the tutorial approach to teaching and learning. One student interviewed expressed concern that tutors failed to pass on information they had as they were not articulate. This perhaps could be because the tutors were not always drawn from people with a teaching background. They were drawn from people of diverse backgrounds and professions. The students expected to be taught and so they considered tutors who used the tutorial approach to learning/teaching as incompetent. Tutors were commended for being punctual for tutorials. However punctuality did not necessarily match competence to service delivery by the tutors. Tutors were happy with the punctuality of students for tutorials. Punctuality to tutorials was a sign that students were committed to their studies. The tutors however lamented that while students were punctual in attending tutorials, but came unprepared for the tutorials they do not study the module prior to attending tutorials. As already discussed earlier on the module is the basic text used in ZOU delivery mode, it contains the course content. In ZOU it is often referred to as the lecturer as it can replace the physical lecturer. Observations made by the study team were that on the one hand some students did not read the module beforehand. They expected the tutors to lecture to them. On the other hand some tutors lacked depth in their respective areas. During interviews some students revealed

that such tutors could not engage the students meaningfully. These tutors tended to read from the module and this did not instill confidence in the students. They mentioned that they preferred tutors who showed that they were wide-read and consulted sources other than the module. The students also mentioned that some tutors did not prepare adequately for tutorials and did not carry notes or some reference materials. Lack of preparation by both tutors and students tended to affect the effectiveness of tutorials as it was difficult for to initiate meaningful discussions. Commitment of tutors to tutorials is a motivator for student participation while lack of it demoralized the students and hence affected turn out for tutorials. Ngara and Ngwarai (2013) state that good mastery of the subject matter by the tutor contributes to tutor effectiveness as students turn up for tutorials, if they (students) feel they benefit from tutors' contributions. Ngara and Ngwarai (2013) go further to state that when students participate in tutorials they learn to argue purposefully and present their ideas rationally.

One of the key objectives was to establish whether tutorials were necessary. Eighty percent of the students said that tutorials were worthwhile. Students said that tutorials gave them an opportunity for discussing and mastering concepts that were difficult for them. Students learn to inquire critically evaluate and knowledge presented by others and experience. This could be attributed to the fact that these students could be having a negative attitude towards tutorials. There could also be some tutors who come not well prepared for tutorials or are not adequately equipped with skills to conduct tutorials.

The study also wanted to find out whether tutorials were utilized meaningfully. This question wanted to establish whether students were tutored or lectured to. Fifty seven per cent of the respondents said that they were engaged meaningfully during tutorials. were quite in agreement with this showing a positive attitude towards tutorials by students. Fourteen per cent however disagreed with this while 39% were not sure. Students who were not sure were likely to be those students who registered for respective courses but did not attend tutorials for reasons best known to themselves. Furthermore these students did not know the difference between tutoring and lecturing. The mode of delivery in ODL is tutoring which is different from the lecture method used by lecturers in conventional universities. Chabaya, Chadamoyo and Chiome (2011) in their study quoted Chimedza in the New Orientation Handbook (undated) who challenged that tutorials were the best method of delivery. Some of the students were used to the conventional method of teaching and these got lost; hence they misconstrued the whole essence of tutorials that when they (students) came for the face to face tutorials should not expect to be lectured to but to be tutored. Makoni (2000) stated that tutorials referred to a small group-learning context that supports learning offered through the modules provided to students at registration. Some post graduate students who came for ODL had not been exposed to tutoring, and found it difficult to adjust to this type of lesson delivery. In tutorials there was a likelihood that all students got involved actively in gaining insight and understanding of their subject matter. Seventy seven per cent of the respondents indicated that they had respect for their tutors. This was an indication that the students enjoyed their studies. The 10% who were not sure could be made up of students who seldom attended tutorials and hence had not cultivated a relationship with their tutors.

Fifty six per cent of the students and 86% of the tutors agreed that the learning environment was conducive for tutorials. In the Midlands Region tutorials were held at the Gweru Polytechnic College and at Stanley Primary School. At Stanley, they are allocated rooms used by the junior school. The learning environment consisted of adequate rooms, furniture, toilets and a good water system. The percentage of respondents in support of the conduciveness of the learning environment was an indication that students and tutors were comfortable with the environment in which the tutorials were conducted. The premises used were suitable because they were academic institutions that were established to provide a learning atmosphere. Twenty four per cent of the students and 8% of the tutors however disagreed with the foregoing. The 7% students and 6% tutors who were not sure is an indication of failure to appreciate efforts being made by the Midlands Administration to attend to the needs of the students as well as tutors.

Tutorials could only take off if modules were available to students since these were the basic unit as already mentioned earlier on. Fifty six per cent of the students indicated that modules were readily available before the onset of tutorials. Modules were supposed to be supplied to students on registration. Twenty seven per cent disagreed and 17% were not sure. During interviews it emerged that lack of modules was a major hindrance to the progression of tutorials. Students could fail to get modules if they did not pay their fees in full. This was prevalent in the 2000s when most people could not raise enough money due to hyperinflation. The university was also affected by the economic meltdown and could not produce enough modules for all students. Observations by the research team showed that participation of students who did not have modules was rather poor. In most cases they preferred not to attend tutorials.

Conclusion

The study sought to investigate the perceptions of students towards the conduct of tutorials in the Midlands Region of the Zimbabwe Open University. Students and part –time tutors were used as they came to the regional centre to conduct business. The likert - type scale was used to collect information from both the students and the part – time tutors. Interviews were also conducted to get collect information from both the students and the tutors. Basing on the analysis of the data elicited from the interviews, questionnaire and the likert-type scale, the following are summarized as follows:

- The assessment of student perceptions on the conduct of tutorials showed that students generally had positive perceptions towards the conduct of tutorials.
- The majority of the responses on tutor preparedness were positive. The students' perceptions were overall that tutorials were very necessary and beneficial to them and that tutors were committed to their work.
- The level of preparedness had a bearing on the outcome of tutorials.
- Both tutors and students did not have a clear understanding of what tutorials entailed as students expected to be lectured to.
- Tutorials were hampered by lack of modules which were the basic texts.
- The geographical location of the regional centre was an inhibiting factor for students who came from outside Gweru where the regional centre was located.
- Students want to have more contact time with tutors.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings and the conclusions drawn from this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Workshops should be run for tutors in order to equip them with skills to organize and run tutorials, thus improving their professional competence
- Tutorials should be conducted at month end so that students do not incur double expenses in terms of transport and accommodation costs as they will conduct their personal business as well as attend tutorials
- Learning materials should be provided on registration
- The number of tutorials be increased for effective student – tutor face to face interactions
- Tutorials should be conducted in strategic venues around the region to enable students to attend tutorials at centres convenient and close to their homes and/or workplaces.

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