

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Re-tooling open and distance learning institutions for competitive survival: Answering the challenges in the Zimbabwe Open University's Masvingo regional campus**

**Dumbu Emmanuel\* and Chadamoyo Patrick**

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As competition in the higher education environment intensifies, opportunities can be harvested only with the right operational mode and the right partners. The study sought to cross-examine how the Zimbabwe Open University, an open and distance learning institution survive in the competitive environment. A convenient sampling sample of 50 Zimbabwe Open University Faculty of Commerce and Law students in Masvingo region participated in the study. The study used a qualitative research design whereby questionnaire with open-ended items solicited responses to how to survive the competition. Data was qualitatively analysed thematically. Findings indicated that the region apply the global service approach by meeting customer demands, efficiency service, maximising business opportunities and differentiating against competitors. The study recommends the global service delivery approach than the traditional fragmented model of delivering service and the region to establish global network solution centres, global delivery centres and local project organisations to beat competitors and satisfy customers.

**Key words:** Re-tooling, competition, open and distance learning, challenges.

## **INTRODUCTION**

We are increasingly viewing education as an industry, courses and programmes as products, delivery of education as a service, and educational institutions as for-profit ventures. The world trade in education represents an important growth opportunity and, increasingly, the means by which solutions to educational challenges are found. There is no doubt that open and distance learning (ODL) will be the primary mode of lifelong education for knowledge workers in the new millennium (Higher Education Management Group, 2010). Traditional forms of education provision would not be able to meet the tremendous increase in the demand for lifelong learning across the globe.

Higher education environment is now characterised by increased competition as many universities are mushrooming form both the private sector and the public sector. Zimbabwe is boasting of at most a state university

in each region of the country. On the other side there are also church owned universities such as the Africa University, Soleus University and the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe University. Competition for the student enrolment is increasing every day for universities in their endeavour to provide higher education. The race for the student numbers does not spare the open and distance learning institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University. The Zimbabwe Open University is mandated to provide higher education through open and distance learning.

Economists speak of competition (Dumbu and Musingafi, 2010) as the rivalry in supplying or acquiring an economic good or service. The open and distance learning institutions and the conventional university compete for the students that are available in the student market as means of increasing their student numbers. The competition among universities in the higher education environment is keen as both the private and public conventional universities face rivalry in the form of open and distance learning University like the Zimbabwe Open University.

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [dumbuworks@gmail.com](mailto:dumbuworks@gmail.com). Tel: 00263912920872.

Competition need not to mean antagonism and hostility among the universities using the different modes of instruction although it evokes envy and even malice among the competitors (Burrell and Grizzell, 2011). This means that competition in the higher education environment is not all about confrontation and fighting. The players in the higher education environment exist to provide the society with the needed knowledge and skills that will make the society prosper for human existence and comfort. In this regard competition aims at excellence in service and competition selects the best university. Customers are the judges in the higher education competitive environment. They determine the position of each and every university whether private or public or whether conventional or open and distance learning.

Today's universities face a new environment (Katz, 2011). This environment is characterised by increased usage of information technology that is preferred highly by students as a mode of learning. As distance education, distributed learning, virtual campuses and digital libraries generate greater interest among prospective students academic institutions such as universities can no longer rely on traditional approaches in order for them to survive the intense competition in the higher education environment (Humboldt, 2010). Each institution should formulate sound policies that can see it survive the competition heat in the environment and prosper ultimately. Sinking ships in the higher education are those that fail to make policies that are aligned to competition whether it means defending a position or attacking to gain competitive ground. It is imperative to note at this stage that the open and distance learning institutions like the Zimbabwe Open University should be crafty in competition survival tactics. The Zimbabwe Open University is competing with some universities that have survived for generations such as the University of Zimbabwe. Such universities have established reputation and have developed a high degree of customer loyalty.

From the aforementioned point it is indicative that the traditional universities are in a position to challenge the upcoming universities in Zimbabwe such as the Zimbabwe Open University. Katz (1999) concurs that a few institutions of higher learning pursue aggressively a set of academic strategies to extend the reach of their instructional offerings geographically or to offer for sale new or packaged products in different markets. The current situation in most universities and other institutions of higher learning in the higher education environment is simple dialogue about how emerging information technologies can be employed to enable the institutions to survive in a seemingly fierce competitive environment. Information technologies are the areas that are so attractive to the modern learner in both conventional and open and distance scenarios.

The marketization of education has resulted in the higher education sector being perceived as a service

provider and market mechanisms have heightened competitiveness among providing universities bringing quality assurance to the fore (Forrester and Parkinson, 2006; Ravis, 1997; Nunan et al., 2000). Consequently, the students in university education environment are positioned as customers and as consumers of higher education that is provided by the universities. The students are increasingly aware of their rights and more mindful of disparities between their expectations of service delivery and the realities of that service (Academic Leadership, 2011). This is the key to success of the modern higher education institutions of which the Zimbabwe Open University should pull up the socks for it to survive the heat of competition from the local conventional universities. The market where these universities draw their clientele is the same as that for the Zimbabwe Open University. Management of the students and staff in the open and distance learning requires the institution to make sure that the idea of competition is considered the key to success.

In these days, aged universities should operate with developing more global approach (Burrell and Grizzell, 2011). Doing so, aids in achieving a global academic community which helps the development of the community. This is what helps create a strong brand for the institutions which will eventually aid in its financial sustainability and academic competitiveness. Competition among universities allows universities to maintain higher placement rates for its graduates. In relation to student retention and recruitment universities, both conventional and open and distance learning, should grapple with the idea that the undergraduates from their universities will have an opportunity to come back to their institutions for another degree programme. The higher education marketplace has changed dramatically. Those undergraduates that the institution successfully recruited, educated and released to the corporate world often return for an advanced degree (Lyll and Sell, 2006; Smith and Trigeorgis, 2006; Johnson, 2007). Often wanting in a manner or fashion that does not conflict with their work and family obligations.

There is great need for re-tooling open and distance learning institution like the Zimbabwe Open University to survive intense competition in university education. For the past 30 years, distance education has proliferated the education industry carrying modes of education accessibility to higher echelon. Distance education is managing to answer the call of the steadily increasing non-traditional student demographic. Burrell and Grizzell (2011) advocate that distance and open learning is a better thoroughfare to a better quality for working adults because they are now more able to get an education while maintaining employment and a standard of living. This requires the retooling of the open and distance learning institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University to survive in the intense competitive higher

education environment where the traditionalists are wrapping a negative picture on distance education by advocating for traditional institutions of higher learning. Most of the traditionalists argue that open and distance learning is creating a gap in the quality of instruction (Zuckerman, 2004) of students versus the almighty dollar desire of education corporations and larger universities.

According to the US Department of Education (2004) regardless of an institution's outstanding reputation, student satisfaction, graduate success rate and regional accreditation, distance education has shown to be just successful, if not better than traditional programmes and is increasingly breaking the stigma established by concrete academic traditionalists. Many institutions today view distance education as a way of managing a larger student body without necessarily spending millions of development funds on building facilities such as lecturer rooms. Distance education can be the answer to many governments' financial issues. It provides universities an opportunity to not only increase local enrolment but also increase the overall potential of its product by reaching a more diverse and perhaps higher qualified demographic (Garvey, 2007).

### **Objectives of the study**

The study intends to determine the strategies for re-tooling the open and distance learning institutions such as the Zimbabwe Open University to survive the intense competition in the higher education environment.

### **Statement of the problem**

Competition in the higher education was not a serious issue until the mushrooming of state university and private universities in Zimbabwe with at least a state university established in each province. A number of factor count as causes of competition now in Zimbabwean higher education environment where there exist declining public funds, arrival of new competition for students from the open and distance learning institution (Zimbabwe Open University) that offer education service in alternative and non traditional form. It seems the higher education environment is featuring high competition for student numbers and there is need for each university to position itself in such a manner that makes it survive the competition. The problem can be stated as, "how Zimbabwe Open University can re-tool itself to fight the intense competition that is characterising the higher education environment?"

### **Research questions**

The study was guided by the following research question:

How can the Zimbabwe Open University re-tool itself to stand against the intense competition in the higher education environment for it to become a world class open and distance learning institution?

### **Significance of the study**

This study will help Zimbabwe Open University in establishing survival strategies and tactics in the intense competitive higher education environment where competition for the students is neck to neck with the conventional universities. This is so because new telecommunication and information technologies are radically changing the operations of the universities. The information and technology issues are leading to increased acceptance of their use by modern students thereby accelerating the changes in higher education market-place. The Zimbabwe Open University will benefit from this research as this will provide a basis for a revolutionary state with the potential of making open and distance learning more effective, more cost effective and more widely accepted and available.

### **The concept of competition**

Competition is the contest between individual organisation for the available resource or consumers of the product or service (Wikilipedia, 2008). In higher education university compete for the available students who have the minimum entry qualifications to obtain a degree or a diploma with an institution. The conventional and the open and distance learning universities fight for the students to enrol with their universities. There is need for survival strategies in competition. Universities have to compete for the available students in the market so that they remain afloat. The universities have to grab a sector of the market so that they can be able to remain in business. Without looking into and considering competition as a source of survival, a university can find itself in a difficult predicament.

The competition occurs naturally between living organisms which coexist in the same environment (Academic Leadership, 2011). Competition is a major factor in education. Competition has been studied in several fields where the studies investigated the natural urge of competition and its circumstances. In these studies group dynamics were studied to detect how competition emerges and what its effects are. Hence there need for studying competition in education as it affects the student enrolment in the various universities whether conventional or open and distance learning. On a national scale, universities in the country are prone to competition because they draw their students from the same pool. So many strategies are to be employed in order to make sure a university is able to lure some many

students to its degree programmes.

According to Smith (2006) universities have been extremely slow in adapting to societal changes. Because marketing to lure student to the universities are not at the top of the list of the priorities of administrators many institutions are finding them in the deep end in terms of competition. Competition needs planning such that the universities need to be proactive to allow them an opportunity for harnessing as many students as possible through outwitting the competitors.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive qualitative design. The questionnaire used had both closed and open-ended sections that yielded qualitative data. Babbie (1997) says, "descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond". Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they felt about strategies for re-tooling open and distance learning institutions for the purpose of surviving the intense competition that has characterised the higher education environment. Borg and Gall (1989) say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. This was the primary goal in this study.

### Target population

The target population for this study was all the 800 returning students for Masvingo regional campus of the Zimbabwe Open University in 2011 first semester (August to December semester) from all the four faculties.

### Sample

A sample of 50 returning students, 30 females and 20 males participated in this study. Convenient sampling technique was used to draw the 50 participants from the four faculties of the university namely, Arts and Education, Commerce and Law, Applied Social Sciences and Science and Technology.

The selected subjects were believed to be knowledgeable about the competition that exists in the higher education environment as they are aware about the availability of study vacancies at other universities in the country because they had gone through at least one semester of their studies at the Zimbabwe Open University. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement was reached on what data

to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

### Data collecting instrument

The study used the questionnaires as the data collecting instrument. The questionnaire was administered to students as they came for registration and other consultations at the regional centre during the period of the start of the second semester of 2011 academic year.

### Data gathering procedures

Respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire on the spot. This method was preferred because it ensured a 100% return of the completed questionnaire and it was cheaper and easier to administer, while the processing of data was less complex than could be the case if, say observations were used (Babbie, 1997; Dumbu and Matanda, 2010).

### Data analysis

Data was organised and qualitatively analysed according to issues or themes that were generated from the responses given by the students in this study

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The issue that characterised the responses was the strategies that the Zimbabwe Open University should use to fight the intense competition that characterises the higher education environment at the moment, especially from the conventional universities both private and public that are scattered all over the country.

### Re-tooling Zimbabwe Open University for competition in higher education

The responses that were given by the students in this study underlined the diversity of academic systems and strategies to win the world's brightest minds, (students). This study managed to summarise the responses into a threefold strategy aiming at making the Zimbabwe Open University a world class university in the country, regional and internationally. The strategies were implicitly summarised as the international strategy, national strategy and the institutional strategy. These strategies need to be employed by the Zimbabwe Open University for it to become a world class university in the country and internationally. The following themes were generated in

the study due to the responses that were given by the research participants.

### **International strategy**

Zimbabwe Open University does not exist in a vacuum both locally and internationally. There are so many other open and distance learning institutions in the southern Africa region and the African continent, let alone the whole world. Students have high class touch with those institutions through the modern technology and can study in these institutions at will. The respondents in this study have the contention that the Zimbabwe Open University should strengthen its role as a university in global knowledge generation. This can be achieved through involvement of its members of staff in research to enhance the attractiveness and international competitiveness of the learning and teaching systems of the university. The world today is thirst for academic talent and cutting edge researchers. Those universities that are left behind in terms of research can face extinction in the global higher education environment.

This is so because the university must remain the community's bank for new knowledge and processes for the economic emancipation of the community and the world over with a new geography of technology and innovations emerging, the Zimbabwe Open University should develop an international strategy policy to strengthen its position in the global market and increase its role in the global knowledge society. Combining foreign culture of providing university educational services with the local instruments the Zimbabwe Open University must develop an international strategy that is ambitious and self confident, competitive and visible. The respondents in this study suggested that the university should develop attractive and competitive instrument for delivering student service to the international students. One of the respondents has this to say:

“In the international contest for most highly motivated and ambitious students the university has to be more competitive and get better at international competition. Financially stipends have to be provided that can keep up with international competitive offers for the university staff because the learning environment for the distance learner in the working environment for the distance learning tutor”.

It was the contention of the respondents in this research that the Zimbabwe Open University establishes a transnational research environment by making joint appointments with institutions of higher education in other countries. This will establish an instrument of brain sharing rather than an instrument of brain gain. Joint appointments would allow universities and research institutions in different countries benefit from the

presence of top flight scholars who would bring change of the approach of the open and distance learning institutions to fight competition in the local marketplace. One of the respondents in this study retorts that:

“Establishment of the transnational research environment by making joint appointments facilitates the exchange of knowledge and ideas from the more experienced institutions in Open and distance learning situation which will benefit the Zimbabwe Open University. It will allow excellent coordinator in open and distance learning institutions to assist the upcoming institutions to be more competitive locally and internationally”.

It emerged from this research that the Zimbabwe Open University should enhance its international image through involvement in the international forums for open and distance learning. The Zimbabwe Open University should show up in the international market by being involved for example in the international researching organisation. The visibility of the university in such activities will allow it to show the kind of staff the institution is made of. It was the contention of the respondents in this studies that Zimbabwe Open University should be able to create marketing instruments to promote the role of the university in the international environment. This can be done through the creation of centres of education, research and innovation in the international environment. One of the respondents has this to say:

“The university should boost international academic and research collaboration and opening up new fields of innovation potential for it to earn a good name in the local and international competitive environment”.

### **National strategy**

The contest for the most accomplished and promising university can only be successful if the university start to shine in the local market through the provision of labour market tailor-made degree programmes and competitive fees being charged of the students. In order for the Zimbabwe Open University to attract the best students and large numbers of the local students it should request a very competitive remuneration. It must be ensured that the internationally cutting edge tutors and managers of the degree programmes are offered an appropriate and internationally competitive remuneration. This is an essential precondition for ensuring that the imparting of knowledge and the guidance of the open and distance learner remains lively and productive. Some of the respondents have the following to say:

“A special national programme should be put in place to allow the open and distance learning institution to appoint eminent academics from abroad who have the

knowledge of the workings of the open and distance learning institutions such as from University of South Africa (UNISA) to pave way for the locals to learn how the open and distance programmes are managed”.

It cropped up in this research that the Zimbabwe Open University should create an environment conducive for the local education funders such as the government and other actors in the higher education to have confidence in the programmes that are offered by the university. It is important that the university take risks and venture into ties with the funding organisation as a way of improving the facilities level of the university and the remuneration of the staff. Motivation of the staff and the availability of resources is a major stride for the open and distance learning institutions in as far as competition in the higher education is concerned. Some respondents said;

“It is important for the university to promote incentive structures and allowing the major higher education funders to fund heavily the open and distance learning because it is the mode that allows production to continue in the operations with the workers participating in acquiring new knowledge in their fields of work”.

“The industry should develop high level of confidence with the degrees the university is offering so that there is synergy in what I learns and what my job requires in terms of knowledge skills and experiences”.

“Open and distance Learning institutions should be funded to such an extent that there is competitive remuneration for the teaching staff so that they become motivated. If they are not motivated with the remuneration there is a tendency of brain drain from the open and distance learning institutions to the conventional institutions”.

### **Institutional strategy**

It emerged from this research that active recruitment of top flight workers in both the academic and ancillary staff is crucial for the defence of the Zimbabwe Open University in the face of stiff competition. Active recruitment of competent staff make the university remain in the global contest for the best ideas that are brought to use by these specialists. This means that the university is urged to professionalise recruitment and appointment procedures. The appointment procedures must be transparent and fight against regionalism and tribalism but on the basis of merit. This will help the university to have the top flight members of staff that are committed to serving the open and distance learning students, hence fighting competition in the higher education environment. Some of the respondents in this research have this to

say;

“Good academic and ancillary members of staff should be appointed timeously so that there is no degree programme that is headed by an acting member of staff but by a substantive individual member of staff. The university should not take years to fill in post that are vacant in the regions and at the national centre. This delay has repercussions on the service delivery and can lead the competition to take advantage of such gaps in appointments in the university”.

Appropriate and correct staffing is the key to successful provision of student services satisfactorily in the open and distance learning scenarios. Students need no time wasting members of staff because of their complex nature. Rigid staff appointment schemes must make way for more flexible appointment options.

It emerged from this research that the senior academics and directors must play an active role in human resource development for the teaching and administration members of staff so that they are abreast with whatever changes are taking place in the higher education environment. The members of staff need career advisement and their career paths should be monitored and tailor made to their day to day routines. This will sharpen the skills of the member of staff in providing student services hence increasing the competitiveness of the university in the higher education environment. The respondents have this to say;

“The regional directors and the senior academic members of staff should guide their respective subordinates in career choice especially when they are advancing their levels of education. The link between what one studies and what he/she does assist in making the provision of services to the students become more pronounced in open and distance learning scenarios.

To fight competition in the higher education the university should put in place the upgrading courses on the table for consumption by both the academic and non academic members of staff to increase their competitiveness on the provision of the service to the students”.

The study found out that the universities are facing a new environment in which information technology is rapidly becoming the preferred mode of learning. As distance learning, distribute learning and virtual campuses and the emergence of digital libraries the university should turn its attention to such things in order to attract the modern learners. The university cannot afford to remain relying on traditional methods to survive in the intense competitive higher education environment. For the university to prosper and survive there is need to get on the toes for the new information and technology that is generating great interest among the prospective students

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The study concluded that the Zimbabwe Open University should develop international, national and institutional strategies for it to re-tool itself for the fierce battle for students in the higher education environment that is characterised by higher competition from the conventional private and public universities. Without developing marketing strategy, the survival of the university in the higher education environment will be a dream.
2. Technological advancement is one of the factor that need to be consider as a tool for fighting competition in the open and distance learning scenario as the universities are all facing a new environment in which information technology is rapidly changing and becoming the preferred mode of learning by many learners. On the basis of these issues the study recommended that the Zimbabwe Open University should develop sound international strategy to make sure that the university stand the competition in the higher education environment.
3. On the issue of national strategy to fight competition the university should provide adequate remuneration for the members of staff and should develop confidence with the funders of education in the country such as the government and the other stakeholders.
4. The study also recommended that the Zimbabwe Open University should professionalise recruitment and appointment procedures. In this there is need to increase the level of transparency, developing and offering career support and advisory task to the members of staff and creating a n attractive working environment.
5. The Zimbabwe Open University should avail resources to the provision of the services to the students. This is so because once students have matriculated, their choices for the university are circumscribed by campus resource constraints.

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