Push and Pull Factors in ODL Service Delivery: A Case Study of Learners at the Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors which attract and those which discourage learners from pursuing their studies through Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The study employed a case study research design which falls within the qualitative research paradigm. The questionnaire method was used to gather information. A sample of 44 student respondents was randomly chosen from the 10 Regional Centres. The study revealed that ODL learner is attracted to ZOU because it is conveniently located with Regional Centres in all the country's provinces. The major factors which discourage learners to pursue distance education with ZOU include limited contact time with tutors, nature of induction given to learners, inaccessibility of computers and the internet, lack of financial resources to fund education and unfavorable fees payment schemes. The study recommends that ZOU invest more resources into attracting learners below 20 years and those above 50 years.

Key words: Open and Distance learning, Service quality, Student orientation, Student attraction, Student retention.

1.1 Background to the study

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is now considered as a reputable method of education as evidenced by the establishment of numerous ODL institutions worldwide and the increasing enrolment of students in these institutions.

In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Open University, the only state owned ODL University has been experiencing mixed trends in enrollment. The University experienced increasing growth of student enrollment from its inception in 1999. In 2003, a total of 19,228 students were enrolled in the university which constituted 46.9% of the total university enrolment in the country. In 2006, more than 20000 students were enrolled in the university which made ZOU the largest university in Zimbabwe.

Student enrollment has however declined significantly from 2007 to slightly above 8000 for the 2nd semester of year 2012. The University has experienced negative publicity with students complaining through the media, negative articles were published about ZOU and some of its programmes were suspended by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). Students have occasionally dropped out and some fail to complete their studies with ZOU.

Globally, ODL enrollment has increased with improved access to the internet and the trend towards globalization. In India, for example enrollment in ODL institutions is high and growing. 22 percent of the total number of students enrolled in India's higher education system enrolled in

ODL institutions (Dikshit, 2003, VC Report 2004). Concomitant with the growth of ODL, there is the problem of high rates of student dropout. Research has shown that ODL student dropout rates are typically higher than student dropout rates in conventional, face-to-face forms of higher education (Barefoot, 2004; Kember, 1995; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons that motivate learners to study through ODL as opposed to the conventional type of learning. It also investigates learner support services that are expected by the ODL learner.

1.2 Statement of the problem
The Zimbabwe Open University has been experiencing a decline in student enrollment from 2007. Enrollment in the traditional ODL learner groups who are mainly adults and professionals has declined and a growing number of learners are dropping out of programmes before completion. Students have frequently dropped out or failed to complete their studies in time.

1.3 Aim of the Study
The study seeks to get an in-depth understanding of the ODL learner. The researcher seeks to explore the factors which attract students to ODL as well as outlining the factors which discourage learners from pursuing studies through ODL. It is hoped that the findings of this study will assist the Zimbabwe Open University in understanding the ODL learner, develop a service delivery strategy that would result in increased student satisfaction, increase enrollment and reduce student drop out. The study seeks to address the following objectives:

1.4 Objectives of the study
1. To find out the distinctive characteristics of the ODL learner
2. To find out the reasons why the learner chose distance learning
3. To find out the learner support services expected by the ODL learner
4. To find out factors that drive away learners from ODL

1.5 Research questions
The research questions were as follows:
1. What are the distinctive characteristics of the ODL learner?
2. Why did students choose the distance learning mode of education?
3. What are the student expectations of learner support services?
4. What are the Push factors in ODL service delivery?

1.6 Justification of the study
This study sought to get an in-depth appreciation of the ODL learner at the Zimbabwe Open University. Knowledge of the learner's motives of studying through ODL with the Zimbabwe Open University is essential for aligning the university's service offering with the customer's expectations. The study will contribute knowledge in terms of who the Open and Distance Learner is at the Zimbabwe Open University and in Zimbabwe in general.

It is also hoped that the findings from this study would greatly assist the Zimbabwe Open University to identify and map out a service package that meets the students' expectations and increase satisfaction. An effective service strategy depends on the extent to which the service provider knows the customer. It is thus essential for ZOU to get an appreciation of the characteristics of its students. The University needs to understand the socio-economic

background of its students so as to create an effective service strategy.

It is ZOU's objective to increase student enrollment, reduce student drop-out and correct the negative image that has been created by unfavorable publicity of the institution. Satisfied students through positive word of mouth communication are effective in correcting the negative image.

2.0 Literature Review

ODL learners are attracted and retained through matching or exceeding their service expectations. Poor service quality likewise may drive away students. It is essential for the Zimbabwe Open University to create and market a service promise which matches customers' expectations consistently.

The Gap model of service quality gives a theoretical understanding of the factors which cause customer dissatisfaction through provision of perceived poor service quality.

2.1 The Gap theory of Service Quality

The Gap theory or the Servqual model was proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry in 1985. Service quality here is defined as the difference between expected service and the customer's perception of actual service delivery. This model identifies the different sources of gaps between the expected service and the customers' perception of the actual service delivery.

A deficit in service quality (where the perceived service is less than the expected service quality) may result in customer dissatisfaction and drive away customers. If the perceived service exceeds the expected service, the customer would be delighted.

Four gaps were identified as causing a deficit in service quality.
Customer gap: The difference between customer expectations and perceptions − the service quality gap. This is a result of the following four gaps.

Gap 1: represents the difference between what customers expected and what management perceived about the expectation of customers.
Gap 2: represents the difference between management's perceptions of customer expectations and the translation of those perceptions into service quality specifications and designs.
Gap 3: The difference between specifications or standards of service quality and the actual service delivered to customers.
Gap 4: The difference between the actual services delivered to customers and what the organisation communicates with customers about its service quality

It is necessary for the Zimbabwe Open University to be able to identify and close any gaps between actual service delivery and the expected service by the students. The gaps theory gives an understanding of the origins of ineffectiveness in service delivery and the resultant customer dissatisfaction. It encourages and gives a theoretical underpinning for more research on customers, their social and economic backgrounds and their service expectations. Knowing customers expectations is a strategic resource which enables organisations to develop service packages which exceed customer expectations.

This study therefore seeks to define the ODL learner, their socio economic background, their needs and service priorities. It seeks to explain the reasons why learners are attracted to ODL as opposed to the conventional mode of learning.

2.2 Characteristics of the ODL learner

Ference and Vockell (1994) noted that ODL learners are adults whose characteristics include: active learning, independent, solution driven, value driven, skill seeking and self directing.

2.3 Learner support services

Learner support services refer to complementary services provided to learners which include counseling, organisation of resource centers, library facilities, telephone teaching and interactive teaching through TV and . In general, the objectives of learner support services are; to provide all the information learners may need; to encourage students to fully utilise the available facilities; to motivate learners to assimilate what they learn; to provide necessary counseling and to create a friendly environment among students, the faculty and the administration (Chander, 1998).

3.0 Methodology

This study employed the case study research design which falls under the qualitative research design. Due to its qualitative nature, the study utilized the interpretivist philosophy. Data collection was done using the questionnaire instrument which had both open ended and closed questions. Data was collected from a sample of 44 students from the 10 ZOU Regional Centres. Respondents were chosen randomly from the Regional student population.

3.1 Delimitations/Scope of the study

This study focused on students enrolled at the Zimbabwe Open University. It explores the factors that attract students to ODL and the push factors which lead to students dropping out or choosing conventional education over ODL.

3.2 Assumptions of the study

All data collected from the field are contributed independently and truthfully by respondents
The sample population truly represents the opinions of the Zimbabwe Open University students and candidates.

3.3   Ethical and Legal considerations to the Study

Responses from the respondents are treated with utmost confidentiality and are used for the purposes of this study only. The study was carried out within the legal framework of Zimbabwe.

4.0 Discussion of findings

4.1 Socio-economic Background (Characteristics) of the ODL learner

The Zimbabwe Open University has made strides in achieving gender balance in student enrollment, 57% of respondents were male while 43% were female. However, there is potential for the University to increase enrollment through attracting more female learners. (see figure 1.)

The majority of ZOU students (43%) are in the age range (31-40 years). The age range (21-30 years) contributes 25% of the students' population while the range (41-50 years) contributes another 25% of the student population.

The age ranges (Below 20 and 51-60 yrs) make up only 2% and 5% of the student population respectively. The Zimbabwe Open University need to make concerted efforts in targeting enrollment initiatives in these age group ranges, (see figure 2)

It emerged that most of the ZOU learners generally are married (89%). Only 9% and 2% of students are single and widowed respectively, (see figure 3). The ODL learner is thus an individual with family responsibilities which require significant financial resources and the balancing of limited time.

The ODL learner is an employed professional. 70% of the ZOU students are employed in the Public sector. 16% are employed in the private sector, 7% are employed by NGO's while only 7% of the students are unemployed, (see figure 4). This implies that ZOU has great potential to increase student enrollment by targeting the public sector. The University may also consider coming up with learner sensitive fees payment schemes given the low salaries paid in the public sector

The ZOU student is a moderate earner. 41% of students earn salaries in the range US$151-$400. Another 41% of the ODL students earn salaries in the range of US $401-$800 per month. Only14% of the students earn above US$800 while only 4% earn below $150, (see figure 5).

The above employment and earnings statistics imply that the ODL learner is capable of funding their studies as they have consistent income. The student however may be a sensitive spender because their average wage range falls just on the Zimbabwean poverty datum line which is said to be around $600. The ODL learners therefore must balance their family responsibilities, their academic progression and professional aspirations.

What drives the learners into choosing Distance Education with ZOU?
- **Accessibility**

91% of respondents indicated that they have access to a ZOU Regional Centre within a reasonable distance from their area of residence. The institution thus should note on this strength through equipping the Regional Centres with state of the art equipment and other learner support services to attract more distance learners, (see figure 6).

A considerable number (50%) of respondents however do not have easy access to the internet which makes it difficult for them to pursue online learning, (see table 1). It is thus necessary for ZOU to invest in more computers and reliable internet connectivity at Regional Centres.

The majority of respondents said that the Application form was easy to obtain as it can be easily downloaded from the internet or purchased from Regional Centres.

Respondents (93%) also indicated that entry qualifications for ODL programmes were reasonable as compared to conventional programmes. Only (7%) of respondents disagreed and indicated that the entry requirements for ODL programmes were as restrictive as what obtains at conventional institutions.

- **Affordability**

Affordability is not a key factor in attracting individuals to learning through ODL. Only 36% of respondents indicated that they chose ODL because the cost of study is cheaper than in conventional institutions. The majority of respondents (64%) actually disagreed that the cost of study in ODL is cheaper as compared to that in conventional Universities, (see table 2).

The fees payment plan has had a moderate effect in attracting students to ODL. About 54.5% of respondents were attracted to ZOU because of the convenience of a fees payment plan where they can make staggered payments. 45.5% of respondents were not attracted by the payment plan and view it as inadequate in solving their financial challenges related to the payment of school fees while at the same time they are expected to meet their other financial obligations, (see table 3).

Learners argued that the fees payment plan was frequently changed by the institution which made it difficult for them to plan ahead. Some of the respondents indicated that the student loan scheme was unfavorable for students given the high interest rates prevailing in Zimbabwe.

- **Convenience**

ODL probably is more lucrative because of its convenience. 98% of respondents indicated that they were attracted to ODL because it is a mode of education that allows them to learn while they attend to other responsibilities. The earlier findings of this study indicated that the majority of ODL students are married and employed at the same time. These and other responsibilities require a mode of learning that is sensitive and tailored to meet the requirements of married professionals, (see figure 7).

All respondents (100%) as employed professionals predictably indicated that they primarily chose to study through ODL because it allows them to study while on their jobs.

- **Flexibility**

Employed professionals may be moved occasionally as part of their work. Respondents (97%) indicated that they are attracted to ODL because their education is not adversely affected by temporary migration which takes place as a result of job transfers.

88% of respondents also identified the flexibility and convenience of ODL regarding to study time. 90% indicated that they chose ODL because of its flexibility on the speed required when pursuing their degree and diploma programmes. ODL learners thus need autonomy in choosing the number of modules to study per semester, (see figure 8).

The researcher engaged respondents with open-ended questions on the other factors that attract students to ODL, particularly at ZOU. Respondents made the following contributions;

- *Fees payment Plan*

Respondents argue that they have families and other responsibilities which make it virtually impossible for them to pay tuition fees as a once off payment in conventional universities. The fees payment plan allows ODL learners at ZOU to study while meeting other financial obligations and responsibilities.

80% of respondents said that they were however concerned because the Zimbabwe Open University frequently changes or alters the structure of the fees payment plan which make it impossible for them to plan for the long term.

- *Freedom during study*

73% of respondents indicated that ODL is more appealing because there is no discrimination. They cited conventional universities as not having suitable facilities for disabled individuals. Learners felt that ODL is more appealing to all races and vulnerable social groups since there is no daily interaction between individuals. Respondents also cited gender equality, respect and inclusiveness of ODL as major pull factors.

- *Personality and professional development*

40% of respondents on open ended responses alluded to the effectiveness of ODL in inculcating self discipline in learners. Respondents argued that ODL learners are responsible for balancing their study time, assignments, professional careers and other non academic responsibilities. This requires an aptitude of self organisation and maturity. They argue that ODL learners as a result develop faster in their social lives, academic advancement and professional careers.

Learner support services expected by ODL learners

Orientation on online learning services
The University should provide competence to students in the use of the internet and other media, preferably during orientation programs. The training should focus on enabling the student to communicate with other distance learners and tutors. The training should also focus on teaching the learner on how to access information through the internet, particularly accessing ZOU learning material.

Respondents indicated that distance learning requires collaborative work with other learners, thus the institution should establish a vehicle to organize online study groups through group-based technology such as computer conferencing. The respondents suggested that the institution could primarily facilitate the establishment of Facebook closed learner groups.

Library and Learning Resources
All respondents singled out access to the internet as an important element of learner support services for Distance Education thus they encouraged the institution to ensure the availability of computers and an uninterrupted internet service in all regions. Respondents encouraged the institution to ensure that students have access to and can effectively use electronic library resources through the institution's computer labs.

Student Services
Respondents indicated that ODL learners expect that ZOU provides access to a range of student services which include financial aid (Students loans were given as an example), academic advising and counseling.

Respondents (67%) said that most students on enrollment do not particularly know the background of their programmes and the career opportunities that they could pursue. They encouraged the institution to flight such information on the website so that learners could make informed choices prior to pursuing programmes.

One option that was suggested by respondents is "help desk" services that meet the needs of students in specific programmes. Other respondents cited this concept as "programme-specific academic counseling" by academic counselors at the Study Centres. At ZOU these could be conducted by programme leaders.

Social events
The majority of respondents advised that the University should facilitate social events such as sports more effectively. These respondents suggested that this could be advertised in the print media.

When asked whether they would encourage others to pursue their education through ODL at the Zimbabwe Open University, 84.1% of respondents were positive while only 15.9% disagreed, (see table 4).

Factors that discourage learners from studying through ODL at ZOU
Respondents were asked to indicate the factors which drive learners from ODL. The following responses were received from the study.

From **Table 5**, it can be ascertained that the following factors discourage learners to pursue their studies through ODL at ZOU.
- Limited contact time with tutors
- Nature of induction given to learners
- Accessibility of computers and internet
- Level of tuition fees
- Methods of paying tuition fees

CONCLUSIONS
From this research it can be concluded that that the ODL learner is an adult who is mainly motivated to advance his/her professional career. The learners have several responsibilities, they take care of their families, attend to their work related duties while at the same time pursuing their academic careers. They however face financial challenges as the majority of them are employed by the government and earn wages that range below to just above the poverty datum line.

The ODL learner is attracted by the accessibility of distance education as learning can be conducted online and through regional centers. ODL is more convenient as learners can pursue their academic careers while executing other endeavors. Furthermore ODL learners are attracted by the flexibility of distance education as they can study at their own pace and time. Learners are also allowed to choose courses that they are able to study per semester.

The learner support services required by the ODL learner include orientation on online services, learner interaction through social events, academic advice and counseling and online learner group services.

Several factors discourage learners from pursuing distance education with the Zimbabwe Open University. These include limited contact time with tutors, the nature of induction given to learners, inadequate and inaccessibility of computers and the internet, unaffordable levels of tuition fees, and inconsistent methods (schemes) of paying tuition fees.

The Zimbabwe Open University has not been able to effectively attract learners in the age ranges below 20 yrs & above 50 yrs. The institution has not carried out any study, particularly investigating the strategies to attract young adults from high school towards distance education. Attracting this age group is a strategic necessity for Higher and Tertiary Education Institutions including ODL institutions because there is a potentially huge market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having assessed the characteristics of the ODL student, noted the push and pull factors in ODL service delivery and noted the learner support services required by the ODL learner, this study makes the following recommendations.

Market penetration and age groups

It is recommended that the institution make concerted efforts to attract high school graduates (below 20 yrs) straight into distance education. ZOU thus need to undertake a field research to investigate the needs of this market segment. The issue could be their perception of ODL. The institution need to develop strategies to align its products and brand with this market segment which significantly prefers conventional over distance education.

Fees and the payment scheme

The fees charged by the Zimbabwe Open University are already sufficiently low. The institution however should maintain the staggered fees payment plan and use it more consistently as it enables learners to meet their other responsibilities while enabling them to pay fees as well.

Learner Support services

Having investigated the support services required by the ODL learner, the issues that attract and push learners from ZOU, the following measures are recommended as learner support services.

- It is recommended that ZOU increases the contact time between learners and tutors. It is advisable to benchmark ZOU contact hours with those of University of South Africa (UNISA), Open University Tanzania (OUT) and Open University of Malaysia (OUM).
- The nature of induction given to learners need to be re-adjusted to capture more information technology related aspects, especially on the accessibility of electronic library services. Learners also need to be equipped with skills and information on how to contact tutors and other learners pursuing the same programme.
- Improve the accessibility of computers and reliable internet connection across all Regional Centres.
- The institution should establish and facilitate platforms for online programme specific group studies through social networks while ensuring the security of learners'

information. ZOU should benchmark its online services with the Midlands State University at home and internationally with UNISA, OUT and OUM.

- The institution should enhance the function of the office of programme leaders to offer "help desk" services that meet the needs of students in specific programmes. Their duties could be expanded to include that of academic counseling.

- ZOU may consider having open days where University staff holds road shows to explain the University products to various stakeholders.

- The University can improve learner motivation through facilitation of social events such as sports more effectively.

- Students need to have access to other activities such as music, drama, educational activities and employment counseling in their leisure time. This study thus recommends the establishment of the ZOU Student Cultural and Educational Centers to support the students in their leisure time.

- There is need for further research so that the University is kept barest of the changing needs of students and the services that they expect from the ODL institution.

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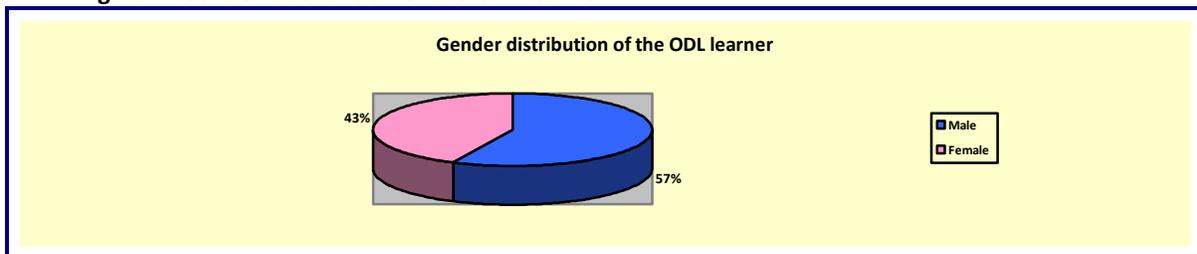
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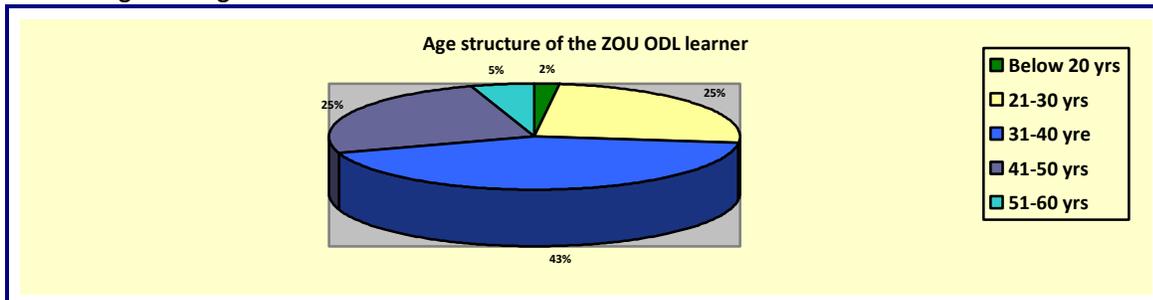
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List of figures

1   Figure 1: Gender distribution of the ODL learner

Gender distribution of the ODL learner

43%
57%
Male
Female

2   Figure 2: Age structure of the ODL learner

Age structure of the ZOU ODL learner

5%   2%
25%   25%
43%

Below 20 yrs
21-30 yrs
31-40 yre
41-50 yrs
51-60 yrs

3   Figure 3: Marital status of the ODL learner

Marital Status of the ODL learner

0% 9% 2%

89%

Legend: Married, Devorced, Single, Widowed
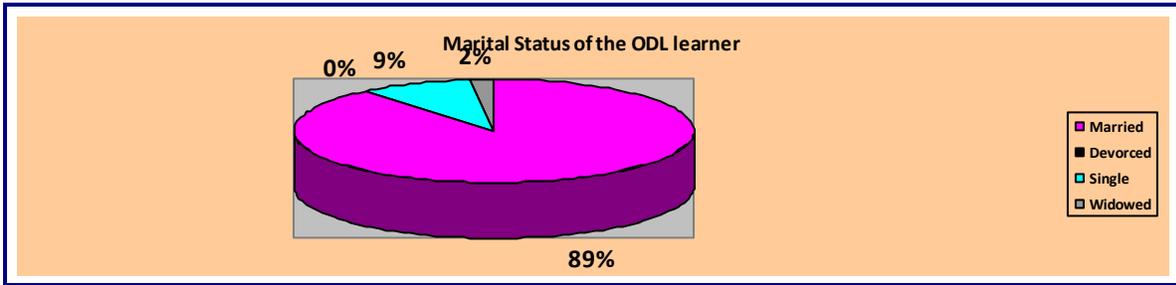
4   Figure 4: Employment sectors of the ODL learner

Employment sectors of the ODL learner

7% 7%

16%

70%

Legend: Public sector, Private sector, NGO, Unemployed
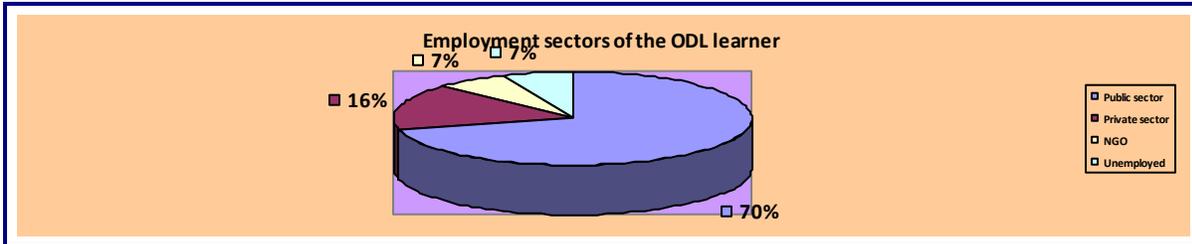
5   Figure 5: Average wage of the ODL learner

Average wage of the ODL learner

	Below $150	$151-$400	$401-$800	Above $800
	4%	41%	41%	14%

Legend: Below $150, $151-$400, $401-$800, Above $800

6   Figure 6.

Regional Centre is at a reasonable distance from home

9%

91%

Legend: Agree, Disagree

7   Figure 7.

ODL allows me to learn while attending to other responsibilities

2%

39%

59%

Legend: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree

8   Figure 8
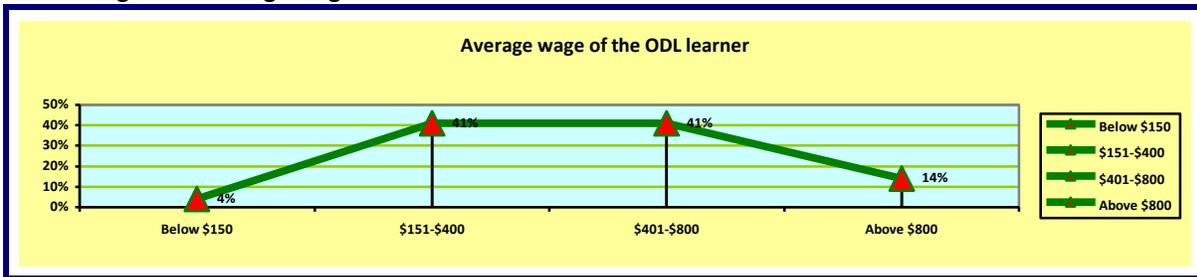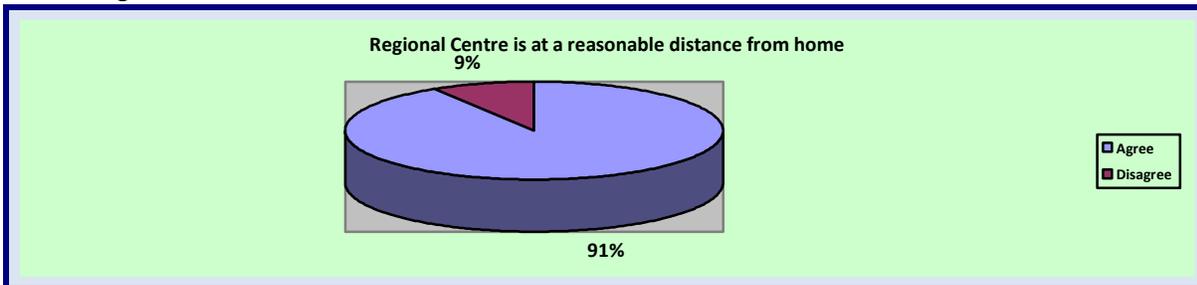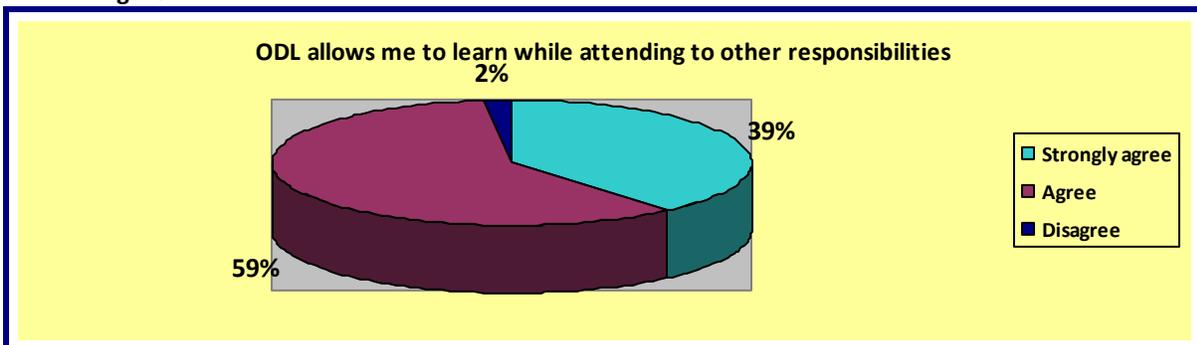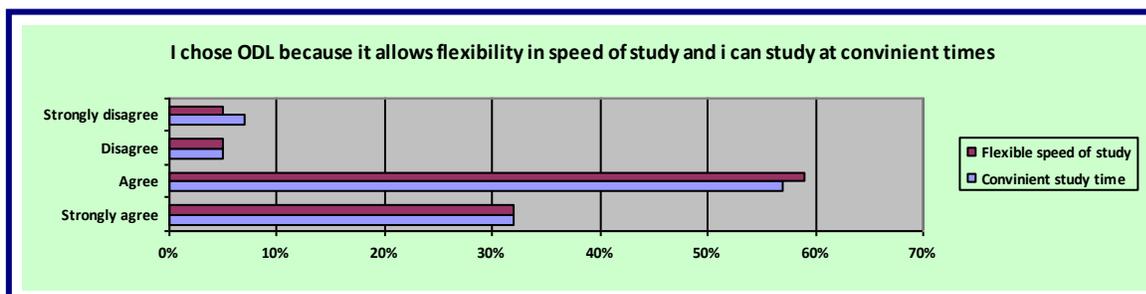
I chose ODL because it allows flexibility in speed of study and i can study at convinient times

1   Table 1: Access to the internet
I have easy access to the internet

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	10	22.7	22.7	22.7
	Agree	12	27.3	27.3	50.0
	Strongly disagree	7	15.9	15.9	65.9
	Disagree	15	34.1	34.1	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

2   Table 2: Cost of study is cheaper than in a conventional University

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	3	6.8	6.8	6.8
	Agree	13	29.5	29.5	36.4
	Strongly disagree	15	34.1	34.1	70.5
	Disagree	13	29.5	29.5	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

3   Table 3: Fees payment plan allows me to meet other obligations

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	4	9.1	9.1	9.1
	Agree	20	45.5	45.5	54.5
	Strongly disagree	13	29.5	29.5	84.1
	Disagree	7	15.9	15.9	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

4   Table 4: I would encourage others to study through ODL

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	27	61.4	61.4	61.4
	Agree	10	22.7	22.7	84.1
	Disagree	9	15.9	15.9	100

Total	44	100.0	100.0	

5   Table 5

The factors below discourage learners from studying through ODL at ZOU	Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Limited contact time with tutors	46%	21%	27%	7%
Time to spend with your family	25%	5%	55%	16%
Less time to spend with friends and relatives	21%	5%	61%	14%
Nature of induction given to students on ODL	39%	14%	41%	7%
The administration of assignments	18%	16%	57%	9%
The administration of examinations	9%	11%	61%	18%
Accessibility of computers and internet	36%	34%	23%	7%
The use of the module as your teacher	11%	25%	57%	7%
Levels of fees charged	43%	43%	14%	0%
Methods of paying fees	23%	55%	16%	9%
Commitments at work place	23%	16%	41%	21%