

Key Strategies for Sustaining Open and Distance Learning in Depressed Socio-Economic Environments

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ABSTRACT

Innovation is widely regarded as an imperative for the survival of higher educational institutions in the new millennium. This study investigated management actions and strategies which underpin sustainability of an educational phenomenon known worldwide as the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in a depressed socio-economic environment. The data to address the investigation was collected by means of a case study methodology. More precisely, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from two participants closely involved in the management of the ODL at one of regional campuses of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The managerial participants were, namely the Regional Director (RD), the chief executive officer at the Masvingo Regional Campus (MRC) of the ZOU and the Program Coordinator (PC) in charge of the Quality Assurance Unit.

The results of the study indicate that the durability and viability of the ODL is contingent, among other factors, on five broad categories of strategies, namely reconnaissance and idea generation; marketing; personnel selection; quality assurance and domain defense. These strategies entail, among other things, relentless environment reconnaissance, information gathering, market development, roadshows and social networking for the purpose of creating educational programmes that resonate with the stakeholder needs and concerns. Collectively, the management and programme strategies were found to constitute the bedrock of ODL durability and viability within the context of a chronically depressed socio-economic environment. In light of these findings, this study recommends three things within the context of managing higher education transformation and innovation in the new millennium. Firstly, policy decision makers should select and adopt quality tried and time-tested innovations for implementation in their respective contexts. Secondly, judicious selection and recruitment of innovative personnel with the right motivation, commitment, energy, knowledge and skills should be done to spearhead higher education transformation. Lastly, sustainable higher educational transformation and innovation should be on the development and implementation of quality and relevant programmes that resonate with the cultural, economic, developmental, political and social contexts.

Key words: *Success strategies; sustainable innovation; higher education; Zimbabwe*

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the concept of open and distance learning (ODL) embodied in open universities (OUs) has emerged as one of the most profound educational ideas shaping the higher education landscape in the third millennium (Daniel, 2006, 2008).

In both developed and developing countries open learning institutions are proliferating and they are proving to be viable alternatives to the conventional campus-based university education (Manjulika & Reddy, 2000). Driven by mass demand for university education and the decline in the world economy, OUs are increasingly gaining acceptance world-wide resulting in some mainstream universities adopting and incorporating some of the principles and practices of OUs in their programmes (Evans, 2000). Whilst Asia, Europe and North America have quickly embraced the concept of ODL in their university programmes, the African continent has not readily adopted the ODL concept. So far, only two universities on the African continent, namely the Tanzania Open University (TOU) and the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) have branded their institutions as open learning universities. Of these two open learning universities on the African continent, only the ZOU seems to be flourishing (Dzwimbo, 2000; Benza, 2000). After only two years of its launch in March 1999, the ZOU had become the biggest university in Zimbabwe in terms of student enrolment (Chombo, 2000; Dzwimbo, 2000).

Against a backdrop of a series of educational innovation failures in the post-independence period (Gatawa, 1998; Jansen, 1991, 1995, 1998; Swartz, 2001), the successful adaptation of the open learning concept in Zimbabwe defies logic in view of the fact that the ODL is heavily reliant upon a sophisticated technological support-infrastructure and to boot, a thriving economy (Evans, 2000; Daniel, 2000). The emergence of the ODL as an educational force and its phenomenal growth and expansion in Zimbabwe's educational provinces constitute an intriguing educational puzzle for several reasons. First, the literature suggests that successful implementation of the ODL is contingent upon sophisticated technological infrastructure and efficient logistical and administrative infrastructure (Daniel, 2000; Evans, 2000). Second, successful educational change and innovation is contingent, among other factors, upon a thriving economy and a stable socio-political environment (Fullan, 1991; 2001). These two factors were apparently non-existent during the period when the ODLM was launched in Zimbabwe (Mugadzaweta & Benza, 1999, Dzwimbo, 2000; Lumumba, 2006; Aina, 2010; Kurasha & Gwarinda, 2010). Against this background, this study sought to unravel, understand and explain why the ODLM bucked the trend in terms of surviving and growing phenomenally in a hostile environment.

The genesis of the ODL in Zimbabwe

The ODL formally emerged on the higher education landscape in Zimbabwe with the founding of the ZOU. The ZOU formally came into existence by an Act of Parliament on March 1, 1999. The reasons behind the establishment of the ZOU project are many and varied. However, the literature consulted seems to suggest that internal and external pressures might have given impetus to the adoption of the ODLM. Grindle and Thomas' (1991:96) concept of concerns influencing policy decisions and Little's (2008:30) concept of the state interests approach through which political elites seek to maintain social peace or power provide useful conceptual tools for unpacking the policy contexts surrounding the adoption and implementation of the ODLM in Zimbabwe.

Grindle and Thomas (1991: 96) identify four concerns influencing policy decisions in developing countries of which two are relevant to understanding policy choices available to policymakers in Zimbabwe. The two concerns are namely, (1) political stability and support and (2) international pressures. Policymakers in developing countries are extremely vulnerable to internal and international pressures for policy and institutional reforms. In the context of Zimbabwe the socio-economic imperatives of the new millennium, namely dwindling financial support for universities due to the declining national economy, electoral politics, political demands for equity and access to higher education, demographic changes and the forces of globalization appear as some of the factors that gave impetus to the establishment of the ZOU and new universities worldwide (Benza, 2000; Dzwimbo, 2000; Moja, 2004; Crosier, 2007; Malada & Nettswera, 2007).

In the same vein, Little's (2008) concept of state interests in respect of the maintenance of power and the pursuit of national development appears to apply in the Zimbabwean context for a number of reasons. First, some writers view the establishment of the ZOU as reflecting the inherent tensions between power elites and the academic community in respect of the control and content of the university curriculum. The former Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, had this to say with regard to the strategic and national importance of a university curriculum: "Higher education is too important a business to be left entirely to deans, professors, lecturers and university administrators" (Mugabe in Schlette, 1990: 77). This statement corroborates scholarly research study reports which indicated the contestation that ensued between power elites and academia over the content of university curricula in the post-colonial period (Lumumba, 2006; Aina, 2010). These studies reported that the adoption of the Bretton Woods Financial Institutions' prescriptions widely known as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the late 1980s and 1990s, precipitated a crisis in the governance of most African universities. Serious conflicts emerged between political elites on the one hand, and academics and students on the other (Lumumba, 2006; Aina, 2010). The conflicts arose due to national governments' withdrawal of financial support and other subsidies to universities which sparked riots and strikes in universities (Lumumba, 2006; Aina, 2010). Aina (2010) claims that this period gave birth to authoritarian politics, which ultimately led to the emergence of the developmental university, whose mission or agenda served state interests. Likewise, Chombo (2000:19), the then Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, had this to say on the same matter: "...it is my view that higher education has been too independent of other sectors because of an unchallenged belief that they exist better with no interference from the state". Chombo (2000) further expressed government misgivings of the traditional university system by highlighting its weaknesses in relation to national development agendas. He identified, among others, the rapidly changing environments and the demands of the third millennium, the current changes caused by emerging innovations in production, the relevancy and applicability of faculty generated academic knowledge and government interests as constituting compelling reasons for a paradigm shift in the current systems of university education (Chombo, 2000:20-23).

Still other writers situate the origins of the ZOU within the globalization discourse contexts that stressed the acquisition of technological innovation skills to cope with new challenges of the new era. Makhurane (2000: 69) puts it this way: "Survival in this global

village will depend on how we manage the technological change”. In this regard, technological innovativeness is regarded as central to socio-economic well-being in the new millennium. Similarly, Dzwimbo (2000), the inaugural Vice Chancellor of ZOU, links the establishment of the ZOU to socio-economic imperatives of the new millennium: “... the ZOU was established so that it could provide university education and training which is flexible, relevant, accessible and cost effective”. Dzwimbo (2000:97-99) identified some of the local and external pressures which drove the establishment of the ZOU. These pressures include: (1) new paradigms and needs in education and training with a focus on lifelong learning; (2) the inability of the state to provide adequate funding to institutions of higher learning for capital and recurrent expenditure; (3) external threats from well-established and funded universities from South Africa, Australia, Asia, Europe, North America, and (4) challenges in the political climate of Zimbabwe.

Another stream of thought traces the roots of the ODL within both transformational and developmental discourses of the post-independence period (Mugadzaweta & Benza, 1999). According to Mugadzaweta and Benza (1999), the establishment of the ZOU should be viewed as the culmination of an evolutionary process whereby the new state was seeking a practical solution to cope with the huge demand for university education that had arisen due to massive expansion of the secondary education sector. Many secondary school graduates who qualified for university enrolment could not do so because the only university then - the UZ, had no capacity to absorb them. Faced with this potential disgruntlement from frustrated prospective students, the government had to act. In a bid to resolve the problem, the state had commissioned a number of studies. Important ones include, the UZ feasibility study (1986), the Williams Commission (1988) and the Zimbabwe Second Year National Development Plan (1991), which culminated with the establishment of the University College of Distance Education (UCDE) in 1992 (Kurasha, 2003). The UCDE was attached to the UZ and it became the precursor to the ZOU. Similarly, the ZOU Strategic Plan (1998) led to the establishment of the ZOU in March 1999.

Another contextual factor that may have led to the adoption of ODL may be the psycho-social context of the adult learner (Mugadzaweta & Benza, 1999). Zimbabwe's independence had opened up new opportunities in industry which required mature learners to acquire new knowledge and skills and these could only be gained through the flexible lifelong learning approach to adult learning enshrined in the design of the ODL. In this regard, the ODL method could resonate well with the mature learner in respect of its flexible admission policies as well as customized learning packages. Further, the flexible admission policies to ZOU programmes meshed very well with the adult learners, most of whom did not possess the two advanced level passes of the Universities of Cambridge or London Examination Boards University respectively. Because of these comparative advantages, the ZOU became a university of choice for the mature learners (Mugadzaweta & Benza, 1999).

Building on Fullan's construct, the ODL in Zimbabwe might be regarded as (1) a product of internal contradictions; (2) a result of external pressures, and (3) the consequence of a natural disaster. Whilst the first two propositions constitute possible

sources of ideas for the adoption of the ODL as an educational innovation in Zimbabwe, the latter does not bear any promise in this regard because the ODL has been extensively used as a remedy for socio-political rather than natural disasters (Kinser, 2007; Daniel, 2007). In this study, Walker's (1990) concept of sets of actors influencing curriculum decisions and Fullan's (1991) notion of external and internal pressures for educational change and innovation were utilized as conceptual frames or constructs for gaining deeper understandings of both the policy and management interventions that have been utilized to sustain the ODL.

Other research studies on education policy reforms in higher education have been more specific as to the actual forces that drive higher education policy reforms and innovation. Generally, there is consensus in the literature that economic, political, cultural, technological, and demographic imperatives constitute the key drivers of reforms not only in higher education but across all sectors of the human endeavour (Sporn, 1999; Clark, 2005; Crossier, 2007; Kinser, 2007; Daniel, 1996, 1998, 2008; 2010; Torres, 2011; Little, Barber *et al.* 2013; White & Glickman, 2007; Little, 2008; Walker & Keefe, 2010; Harman & Treadgold, 2007). One would want to know the form and shape of the above imperatives for them to set in motion policy decisions which culminated in the establishment of the ZOU.

Sporn's (1999) studies have underscored the primacy of economic factors as key drivers of higher education reform in Europe and North American university contexts. The decline in the world economy, the forces of globalization and the emergence of the so-called knowledge economy have put so much pressure on institutions of higher education to reform (Sporn, 1999; Crosier, 2007). Could economic dynamics have influenced adoption of the ODL in Zimbabwe? Sporn (1999:15-19) went on to identify several adaptive strategies which European and North American universities developed in response to the socio-economic challenges of their environments. These adaptive strategies were, namely: transformed leadership; management and governance; market orientation in programme creation and development; the development and operationalization of fundraising systems, and the use of part-time faculty staff. The issue of economic imperatives as drivers of higher education reforms were found relevant in exploring the background to the establishment of the ODL for one important reason. The decade in which the ZOU was founded has been described in the literature as a period of economic and political turbulence for African countries and Zimbabwe in particular (Lumumba, 2006; Kurasha & Gwarinda, 2010; Aina, 2010).

Politics and politicking constitute integral aspects of educational reforms and discourse (Fullan, 1991; Elmore & Fuhrman, 1994; Aina, 2010). As Elmore and Fuhrman (1994: 5 – 6) put it: “We take as a given that curriculum will be heavily influenced by politics, because curriculum deals with a fundamental and deeply meaningful reality....”. Against this backdrop, the literature has indicated demographic changes and political imperatives as key influences spurring adoption of the ODL in Western countries (Perry, 1976; Daniel, 1998, 2000; Kinser, 2007; White and Glickman, 2007). In his memoirs, Walter Perry (1976), the inaugural Vice Chancellor of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) regarded by many as the genitor of Open Universities (OUs) locates the

establishment of the original UKOU within the realm of electoral politics. According to Perry (1976) the UKOU was mooted by the former British Labour Party Prime Minister Harold Wilson. As such, the UKOU articulated and epitomised the egalitarian values and principles embodied and projected in Labour Party politics.

Most commentators on socio-political developments in post-colonial Zimbabwe have reported on the contested nature of educational reforms (Maravanyika, 1990; Dzwimbo, 1991; Jansen, 1991; 1995; Gatawa, 1998). These writers have singularly highlighted the demise of educational policy reform initiatives due to resistance by vested interests, namely the religious lobby, power blocks or policy networks (Jansen, 1991; Dzwimbo, 1991; Moyo & Modiba, 2012). Against this backdrop, the survival and continued existence of the ODL as an education innovation in higher education constitute an educational puzzle in need of resolving.

Against this background, this study sought to understand and explain the major managerial strategies and variables which have enabled the ODL to defy the odds and remain viable in a chronically turbulent socio-economic environment. All these questions are crystallized in the three research questions of the study (see Page 15) and constituted the frame and focus of this study.

This study investigated key management strategies which have sustained the growth and expansion of the ODL despite chronic political and socio-economic upheavals that have characterized the Zimbabwean polity in the past decade (Kurasha and Gwarinda (2012). The next section presents the literature which provided the conceptual and theoretical frameworks which guided the study.

Conceptual frameworks and the literature

Macro-level arrangements for initiating and sustaining educational change and innovation

The research literature indicates that national governments the world over, utilize policy interventions as key instruments for initiating educational reforms (Walker, 1990, Fullan, 1991, 2001, 2007; Elmore & Fuhrman, 1994, 1999). Through policy decisions, governments may unfreeze or initiate the processes of change and innovation. Hall and Hord (1984: 289) had this to say on the matter:

The broadest and most encompassing interventions are policies. Policy decisions made by organizations or those that affect an organization from an external source can have a significant impact on a change effort. They can be used to initiate change (e.g., PL 94-142), to disrupt change that is already underway (e.g., a school body decision to remove financial support), or to advance a change effort (e.g., promotion of a key innovation advocate). In our field sites, policies clearly influenced use of the innovation and the design of the change process.

The concept of policy interventions appears to mask the vast powers invested in political elites and top level organizational hierarchies. Power elites as they were described by Little (2008) have access to state and institutional resources which they can use to institute large scale changes. Power elites possess legitimate or positional power which they can apply to engage in three activities in the innovation process, namely to initiate,

to disrupt and to direct or re-direct the change effort. In the context of this study, the role of power elites in conceptualizing, initiating and guiding the ODLM as an innovation were targeted for investigation. In the same vein, various aspects of policy level interventions have been identified in the literature. They include, among others, the following: (1) general strategies and large scale strategies (Chin & Benne, 1976, 1985; Van den Berg, 1980; Nicholls, 1983; Fullan, 1991, 2001); and (2) policy goals and instruments (Walker, 1990; Elmore & Fuhrman, 1994; Fok, Kennedy and Chan, 2008, 2010); change leaders or facilitators (Miles, *et al.*, 1988); prescriptive frameworks and tools (Howes & Quin, 1987; Dalziel & Schooner, 1988).

Fullan's (2001) studies have reported extensively on strategies used by the United States and the Canadian government in either introducing educational change or in improving educational provision. Fullan (2001) argues that governments have a legitimate role in educational reform because programs of equity and programme quality cannot be addressed at the local level. In view of this, he highlighted the heavy involvement of the United States Federal government in initiating educational change through the formulation of educational policies of which the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (1981) are well known. Fullan (2001) further noted that the United States Federal government spearheaded the creation of numerous foundations, projects and programmes some of which have been successful in changing educational practices in the United States. For example, Fullan (2001) argues that the National Diffusion Network (NDN) was effective in promoting the identification and adoption of educational programmes of proven merit. The success of the NDN was because it incorporated the principles of effective change, namely: "high-quality proven innovations, personal linkages through State facilitators, local needs identification and decision-making, access to expertise, ongoing support, *etc*". (Fullan, 1991:262). Further, Fullan (2001) proposed guidelines which governments should undertake to enhance the chances of real educational change. Those which coincide with the objectives of the study include: improving the capacities of implementers in terms of resources, skills and leadership; spending time interacting with implementers in respect of the meaning, expectations and needs in relation to local implementation; developing an explicit but flexible implementation plan to guide the process of bringing policy change into practice; developing knowledge and competence in the content of the change and in the change process; a focus on second-order change, and combine an appreciation of complexity of the change process and persistence of effort.

More recently, Fullan (2012) has identified a number of strategies that will ensure education reform succeed at system level. They include, among others, some of the following: a focus on a small number of ambitious goals and priorities; collective capacity building in terms of the skills and competencies of educators and others required for success; showing respect to implementers so as to elicit new effort and commitment, and relentless focused leadership at the centre. The concept of goals and priorities is a key issue articulated in ODLM philosophy and practice through institutional mission and vision statements (Kurasha, 2003, 2006). In this regard, I found it necessary to investigate whether the initiators of the ZOU adopted a policy vision and mission to guide and direct

ODLM programme delivery. The quality of the policy vision would undoubtedly elicit positive responses from students thereby ensuring longevity of the innovation.

Contemporary research in educational reform has now focused on “hard and soft” policy instruments in appreciating and understanding system wide reform strategies (Fok, Kennedy and Chan, 2010; McDonnell and Elmore, 1987; Chrispeels, 1997). Fok *et al.*, (2010) differentiate hard and soft policy instruments on the basis of their functions. Hard policies are embedded in legislation, institutional objectives, and commitments, and budgetary allocations whereas soft policies are constituted of codes, guidelines, and conventions which though not binding in nature exercise authority, through persuasion, benchmarking, and the setting of best practices rather than the law (Fok *et al.*, (2010:3). Fok *et al.*, (2010) assert that mandates, capacity building and inducements constitute some of the popular policy instruments in initiating and implementing large scale educational change.

Micro-level arrangements for managing sustainable educational change and innovation

The research literature indicates that innovation or invention is the bedrock of corporate survival in the competitive world of business (Tidd, Beasant and Parvitt, 2002, 2008; Sharratt, 1999). Tidd *et al.*, 2002 have this to say with regard to the centrality of innovation to corporate survival “Innovation is a core process within an organization associated with renewal, with refreshing what it offers and how it creates and delivers that offering “ ... innovation is a generic activity associated with survival and growth” (Tidd *et al.*, 2002:39). In the same vein, Sharratt (1999) perceives innovation as follows: “Organisations never want innovation to take place, but have it forced upon them” (Sharratt, 1999:125). Against the above backdrop, business organizations have developed a variety of success strategies for managing the innovation process. They entail some of the following actions at three phases of the innovation process, namely: idea conceptualization, product development and effective implementation phases (Daft 2007; Tidd *et al.* 2010; Furst- Bower and Baur, 2007; Kinser, 2007; Parker, 1978; Perry, 1976). During the initial or idea conceptualization or generation phase, successful innovation strategies would include four critical activities: (1) scanning the internal and external environment and processing signals about threats and opportunities; (2) idea prioritization to ensure that the best are chosen or development into new products and services; (3) understanding market dynamics, defining market place boundaries and market forecasting, and (4) mobilizing relevant knowledge (Goffin & Mitchell, 2010; Tidd *et al.*, 2010).

The four activities highlighted above corroborate Clark’s (2005) study of the survival tactics and strategies that were utilized by the Catholic University of Chile and Makerere University of Uganda. According to Clark (2005), three important developments, namely the introduction of demand driven academic courses, change in faculty attitudes and extensive decentralization constituted institutional pre-requisites for institutional revival. Although, marketization and commercialization strategies of the academy are strongly contested in higher education (Torres, 2011), ODL practitioners have no qualms about

adopting it (Dzwimbo, 2000). Other key strategies associated with innovation success in industry relate to top management support, the creation of internal and external linkages and pricing of the product too high a price would discourage consumers whereas too low a price may fail to make money for the company (Tidd *et al.*, 2010; Daft, 2007). I sought to establish to what extent these three issues were factored in by management at the MRC. Is there any evidence of top management support for the ODL at the MRC and how is this support manifested? What local and external linkages have been established and what roles do they play in sustaining the operations of the ODL? More importantly, the issue of pricing of the ODL programmes constituted another key issue in attracting students to the ZOU. Is there any strategic financial plan that gives the ZOU a comparative advantage in terms of the cost of their programmes? All these questions provided the means to elicit the data necessary to understand and explain the resilience of the ODL in an environment of chronic socio-economic turbulence in Zimbabwe.

Likewise, Parker (1978) presented a package of six strategies which organizations may utilize in the innovation process, and these are, namely, (1) Offensive Strategies; (2) Defensive Strategies; (3) Imitative Strategies; (4) Opportunist or Niche-strategies; (5) Traditional Strategies, and (6) Dependent Strategies. Three of these strategies, namely defensive, imitative and opportunistic were found pertinent to this study. Defensive strategies relate to a management philosophy that is anxious to avoid being first in the field but at the same time there is concern not to be left behind in the technological race. Such a strategy is premised on the realization that to be a follower is often a less risky process than to be a market leader. The notion of defensive action is of particular relevance in the ZOU context given the demise of a related teacher education programme offered through distance education which succumbed due to wide spread resistance by various stakeholders. This programme, the Zimbabwe Integrated Teacher Education Course (ZINTEC) had to be discontinued due to widespread resistance by bureaucrats and other stakeholders despite the fact that this programme had managed to fast-track the production of primary school teachers.

Research question

Which management and programme strategies ensure the sustainability and viability of the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in a chronically resource-depressed socio-economic environment in Zimbabwe?

Research objective

The main objective of this study was to understand and explain management tactics and programme strategies that are critical in sustaining the growth and durability of the ODL in a resource-depressed socio – economic environment in Zimbabwe.

Significance of study.

From a national developmental perspective, the economic and resource wastages associated with past educational innovation failures are indefensible considering the

parlous state of the fiscus in Zimbabwe. This study in innovation adaptation and management in an African context, will hopefully provide useful insights and strategies for designing and implementing durable educational reforms. Policymakers and educational innovators need up-to-date research based information essential for formulating good educational policies.

To the academia and educational researchers on the African continent, this study builds and extends on the work of such bodies like the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESTRIA) that has sought to articulate and define new roles for African universities. The role of the traditional university has increasingly been questioned by influential politicians and scholars (Chombo, 2000; Mugabe in Chombo, 2000; Moja, 2004; Olukoshi and Zeleza, 2004). In this regard, this study will add more grounded insights into successful innovation adaptation, development and management.

METHOD

Participants

The data to address the research question was collected from the Regional Director (RD) and the Program Coordinator (PC) of the Quality Assurance Unit at the Masvingo Regional Campus (MRC) of the Zimbabwe Open University. In ODL lore, the RD is the vital cog in managing the delivery of education services at local the local levels (Perry, 1976). Likewise, quality assurance has become a central concept in the design and delivery of ODLS worldwide (Kurasha, 2007, Daniel, 2008). In view of this, the RD and the PC were regarded as constituting the key leadership in sustaining the growth and expansion of the ODLS at the MRC in particular and the Masvingo Province in general. The data elicited from these two participants provided the data to address the research question (See tables 1 to 4)

Instruments

The data to address the question was collected by means of a questionnaire/activity checklist and semi-structured interviews with two strategic personnel at the MRC, namely the Regional Director (RD) and the Program Coordinator of the Quality Assurance Unit (HQAU). The questionnaire for the RD acted as an initial probe to elicit data in respect of administrative routines at the MRC which supported continuance of the ODL as a viable innovation within the Masvingo region (See table 1). Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was developed to collect data with regard to leadership actions and strategies that were deemed critical in sustaining the ODLS as an innovation at the MRC and within the Masvingo Province. The data elicited from the Programme Coordinator was intended to provide insights on program quality, design and delivery strategies which are currently in use to lure or entice adult learners to enroll with the ODLS. Overall, the data collected through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview was found adequate to address the research question.

Procedure

Table 1 summarizes the processes of data collection.

Table 1: Summary of data collection activities

Type of Data	Source of Evidence	Method	Instrument	Timeline
Questionnaire	Regional Director (Participant B)	Literature survey; Questionnaire	Questionnaire checklist	10/11/ 12 – 1/01/ 2013)
Interview	Programme Coordinator (Participant C); Regional Director	Interview	Structured interview schedule	February/ May 2013; March – October 2013.
Media	Local and national media	Newspaper analysis	Adapted media analysis tool	Ongoing (2011 – 2013)

The data were captured by means of a tape recorder and field notes using the instruments indicated in Table 1. Table 1 reveals that media data were collected by means of a content analysis tool on an on-going basis. The extant literature reveals that public relations and aggressive marketing constituted some of the key aspects of the ODL growth strategy (Perry, 1976). In view of this, the national and local media were closely monitored for the purpose of collecting data that would enable me to determine media strategies that were used to manage public perceptions of the ODL in Masvingo Province. Overall, data collection procedures followed a systematic and well-rehearsed data gathering plan. This plan ensured that the data collected were of quality and sufficient to address the research question of the study. Such an approach is consistent with best practice in qualitative research proposed by prominent case study researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994, 2003).

The results of the study are presented below.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

From the data collected by means of the aforementioned instruments, three broad categories of management strategies and innovative practices emerge as the anchorage of ODL viability and sustainability. They are:

1. Reconnaissance and idea generation strategies;
2. Micro- and macro-marketing of the ODL, and

3. Personnel selection strategies.

These three categories constitute the focus of discussion in the following sections below.

Reconnaissance and idea generation: the foundation of profitable programmes

The data presented in Table 2 below indicate that the MRC is not only a spearhead in ODL delivery but is a vital cog in the search, reconnaissance and generation of ideas which are crucial in developing popular and need-driven programmes. This data was collected by means of a questionnaire from Participant B, the Regional Director at the MRC. More precisely, one of the key functions of the MRC with regard to new programme creation and development revolves around reconnoitering and surveillance of the local environment for good ideas. The data in Table 2 below indicate some of the broad range of activities the MRC engages in to gather information essential to crafting programmes that resonate with the needs of the adult learners.

Table 2: Summary of questionnaire data on reconnaissance strategies at the MRC (See Appendix E)

PROGRAMME CREATION ACTIVITY	ABSENT	PRESENT
Scanning for opportunities in the environment		YES
Identifying market niches		YES
Monitoring the local environment		YES
Selecting study sites		YES
Conducting regular outreach campaigns		YES
Forging links with local organizations		YES
Creating links with international organizations		YES
Developing methods and means for understanding student needs		YES

The questionnaire data in Table 2 reveal two broad categories of strategies used to generate ideas and information for creating profitable ODL programmes. The first category of strategies relates to the routine or formal methods of information gathering roles attendant to the job descriptions of the RD and other designated personnel at the MRC. As indicated in Table 2, the formal methods of idea generation and information gathering are coordinated by two divisions of the MRC, namely the Marketing Committee and the Quality Assurance Unit. The Marketing Committee constitutes the hub of formal information gathering and ODL marketing at the MRC. Its current leader,

Mr Dumbu, is described as follows by the Regional Director: “...energetic and full of passion for marketing the ODL” (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013). Marketing surveys are conducted at various platforms such as agricultural shows, school events, road-shows, church gatherings and sports tournaments. The Masvingo Provincial Agricultural Show constitutes an important forum for conducting market surveys for the development of new ODLM programmes (Interview with Participant A, 21 August 2013). The collected information is subsequently transmitted to the relevant ZOU faculty which in turn conducts a national survey to establish the viability of the proposed new programmes. Only new programmes with the potential to remain profitable for at least between 10 to 15 years are developed and implemented as a way of offsetting the high production costs (Interview with the Regional Director, 21 August 2013).

The second category of strategy focuses information gathering on ODL instruction delivery processes. More specifically, information gathering is intended to improve course design elements and the tutorial delivery system. This function is spearheaded by the Quality Assurance Unit. Various types of survey instruments have been developed to collect information on specific aspects of the tutorial delivery system. They include instruments such as student satisfaction surveys, module evaluation and tutor evaluation forms that are used to collect information for the purpose of improving instructional delivery (Interview with Participant C, 24 June 2013). Tutor evaluation and student satisfaction surveys target tutorial staff at every tutorial session. According to Participant C, “In-effective tutors are discarded or staff-developed” (Interview with Participant C, 24 June 2013). Correspondingly, study materials, in particular modules are evaluated by students and “Those that do not meet student satisfaction are discarded and written again” (Interview with Participant C, 24 June 2013).

The other strategy for information gathering is informal or less structured. This strategy relates to the search for ideas with the potential for creating popular and high enrolment programmes. This strategy is centred around the “small-talk”. The “small-talk” approach entails engaging the ordinary people or the grassroots in conversations at public platforms such as newspaper stalls, church gatherings, taxi or bus termini for the purpose of identifying gaps in educational needs (Interview with Participant B, 19 August 2013). According to participant B, this strategy is intended to generate new ideas which have the potential to be transformed into viable and revenue generating programmes for the ZOU.

Another innovative strategy for idea and information generation resembles industrial espionage in its method. I prefer to call it the “embedded approach” in as far as it entails collecting insider information from potential rival institutions of the ZOU. Through the Regional Director’s involvement and participation in executive board meetings he has been able to identify good lecturers from rival universities whom he can hire to improve instructional delivery at the MRC. The Regional Director appears to be the main exponent of these two unorthodox approaches to information and idea generation. The Regional Director is actively involved as a board member in a wide range of groups from church groups (Zionist Christian Church), business entities (Econet), teacher associations (Zimbabwe Teachers’ Association) and related educational institutions (Great Zimbabwe University; Midlands State University; the Reformed Church University). Associating with three universities has provided the Regional Director with an opportunity to identify

and recruit experienced and highly skilled part-time lecturers for the MRC (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013). By participating in the decision-making processes of these organizations, the Regional Director undoubtedly gains information and intelligence with which to strategize and position ZOU programmes and other services.

Overall, reconnaissance, market surveys, chit-chats with ordinary people and institutional visibility constitute key management strategies for idea generation and information gathering at the MRC. In this regard, the MRC has proved an outpost of the ZOU in generating ideas and information fundamental to the creation and development of popular and profitable programmes which generate income for the ZOU. The next section examines programme marketing strategies as key to the growth and survival of the ODL in Masvingo Province.

Micro-marketing of the ODL

Marketing of the “ZOU brand” constitutes arguably the motive power behind the growth and expansion of the ODL within the Masvingo Province. The following quotation by the Regional Director (Participant B) sums up the marketing philosophy and strategy driving ODLM provision in Masvingo Province:

Our 2010- 2015 Strategic Plan aims to expand to the district and wards so that we can fulfil our goal of bringing education to the people’s door steps. We realized that Masvingo is an education industry and we therefore, opened offices in Chiredzi, Bikita, Rutenga and plans are underway to open in Gutu and Chivi respectively” (Participant B in The Masvingo Mirror, 22-28 March 2013).

The concept of viewing Masvingo Province as an ‘educational industry’ and ‘bringing university education to people’s door steps’ is an unprecedented innovation in the history of higher education in Zimbabwe. University education is accessible only in urban centres and by taking the ODL to remote rural areas the MRC might have scored a first in educational promotion. More significantly, the places mentioned above constitute some of the remotest districts in Masvingo Province. Viewed from a historical perspective, taking university education to “people’s door steps” has no precedents in Africa nor Zimbabwe in particular. However, this innovative practice is understandable when viewed from a survivalist perspective. Given a proliferation of new universities in Masvingo Province and the harsh economic climate in Zimbabwe, the MRC strategy of taking the university into the hinterland makes sense. Against this backdrop the following question arises: What other strategies are used to attract the mainstream student of the ZOU and to expand ODL programmes in Masvingo Province?

The data displayed in Table 3 below sum up the innovative marketing strategies that have been developed and implemented at the MRC for the purpose of expanding and sustaining ODL provision throughout the districts of the Masvingo Province.

Table 3: ODL marketing and domain defense strategies in Masvingo Province

MARKETING STRATEGY	COMMENTS
Admission requirements	“ZOU is open to students not staff” “What is flexible is that students study while at work”
Alignment of degree programmes to career advancement needs	“ODL is designed to dovetail with the needs of the worker”
Glossy and eye-catching materials	“The modules are even being used by conventional students secretly”
Purpose built study packages	“The matter is relevant and to the point”
Flexible study model	“Yes studying while at work”
Instructional methods which accommodate different learning styles	“ The ODL is centred on the learner methods, constructivist learning”
Multi-media technologies	“Certainly yes”
Personalized counselling services	“There are full time lecturers for that”
Media hype and publicity releases	“We put the notices in <i>The Mirror</i> ”
The notice board	“The library, sms are useful”
Flexible fees payment arrangements	“Yes certainly”
Cost-effective study packages	“ Study packages are effective not cost effective”
Supportive administrative structures	“Yes, there are regional centres”
Flexible timetables	“No, timetables are not flexible, students have to follow the university calendar”
Credible examination system	“ODL is the only system offering standardized where tutors do not even know what is in the exam. They do not even give study areas like conventional systems which confine students to study areas. This limits knowledge acquisition”
Self-directed study	“Yes, ODL has the learner and says stop teaching and let students learn. It has moved from the traditional teacher-centred pedagogy to learner- centred pedagogy”

The data displayed in Table 3 constitute a summary of the data collected in respect of ODL marketing strategies. This data indicate that the MRC has increasingly become a critical cog in the market development and domain defense strategies of ODL provision in Masvingo Province. The following were found to be the linchpin of ODL micro-marketing at the local provincial level: (1) alumni mobilization and testimonies; (2) admirable lifestyles of MRC staff; (3) savvy public relations; (4) outreach campaigns and road shows in the hinterland, and (5) institutional networking and grassroots engagement.

Alumni mobilization

A news headline story entitled: *Former student donates books to ZOU* had the following line: “A former student of the ZOU last week donated nursing books worth thousands of dollars to her former university” (Ndhlovu Rumbidzai, 2013, In *The Mirror* 27 September – 3 October). This story is typical of one of the strategies used by the MRC of the ZOU to market its products and services. Alumni testimonies constitute one of the principal strategies for promoting and marketing the ODL at the local level. According to participant B, distinguished and influential alumni of the ZOU may be requested to give testimonies in respect of the benefits they have gained through the ODL. Testimonials authenticate and validate the knowledge and skills gained through the ODL. The rationale for using testimonies is grounded, according to participant B, in andragogy – the principles of motivating and teaching the adult learner. Adult learners positively respond to programmes which address their practical concerns or issues. In this regard, ZOU programmes “...dovetail with the needs of the adult learner” (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013) hence their popularity among the adult learners.

Grassroots engagement strategies

Church and social gatherings provide staff at the MRC with opportunities to market the ODL programmes. According to the Regional Director, churches have proved fertile terrain for generating ideas to create and develop new programmes. Church members who have successfully graduated from the ZOU are mostly utilized as living examples of “ODL beneficitation...” (Interview with participant B, 21 August 2013). However flyers are also in use to provide detailed information about the programmes on offer. Other innovative marketing strategies entail mounting luncheons where influential persons are invited to address prospective students or customers. In addition, scheduled semester visits by the Vice Chancellor of the ZOU get widespread publicity in the local newspapers and these are intended to raise the visibility and public profile of the MRC as a people-focused university.

Outreach campaigns and road-shows

Each year, an ‘activity-based budget’ is drawn up by the Regional Director and set aside to fund the activities of the Marketing Committee which in turn prepares a marketing programme for the year. This budget represents “...a commitment and seriousness of purpose towards the fulfilment of the ZOU’s mandate to marginalized groups” (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013). In this context, out-reach campaigns and road shows are carried out to targeted populations in the province. Pamphlets, flyers and brochures constitute some of the instruments used to promote and market ODL programmes in the province. In addition, exhibits and informational stalls during the yearly agricultural

show in the province are utilized for disseminating information to prospective students and this has proved a draw card for the ODL in the province.

Multilateral networks

Expert opinions regard professional networks as a prerequisite in fostering successful educational change and innovation (Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves, 2012; Shirley, 2012). The management team at the MRC appears to have gone beyond professional networking in a bid to sustain the growth of the ODL. The data displayed in the Table 4 below reveal that the management at the MRC, specifically Participant B, has engaged and networked with every potential class, groups or institutions which can, to use Participant B's favourite phrase, "add value" to ODL products and services. This way, ODL provision continues to thrive and prosper due to the full exploitation of the "networked approach" to innovation management in a hostile environment.

Domain defense strategies

Ideological and pedagogic defense constitute a key plank for the ODL at the macro-level. In many respects, Mahoso's (2012, 2013) writings in the state media, epitomize ODL advocates' defense of the ODL space in the higher education landscape. As Council Chairman of the ZOU, Mahoso (2013:D2) defends the existence of the ODL in ideological and philosophical terms as follows: "Conventional education is a different phenomenon from ODL. The differences are not just in the new digital gadgets. They are philosophical, ideological and pedagogical". Situating ODL contestation within ideological or political discourse constitutes a powerful strategy for eliciting political support and goodwill given the polarized nature of the Zimbabwe polity. This form of defense of the ODL echoes Clark's (2005) proposition that attack is the best means of defense in the quest for market dominance and consolidation in higher education. Mahoso (2012) has strategically constructed and situated ODL defense within post-colonial struggles and nationalist development discourses. As a result, critics of the ODL have been largely ineffective in media debates with regard to the credibility and relevancy of the ODL in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, Mahoso's (2012, 2013) defense of the ODL have assumed two strands, namely attacking and projecting perceived opponents of the ODL as agents of imperialist forces on the one hand, while on the other hand, depicting the students of the ODL as victims of colonial injustices.

In contrast, Kurasha (2003) mounts her defense of the ODL from a different angle to that of Mahoso. Kurasha (2003) situates ODL provision within the problem-solving paradigm as opposed to the ideological stance adopted by Mahoso (2012). This is understandable since Kurasha is the current Vice Chancellor of ZOU. Kurasha (2003) identified three types of resistance to the ODL, namely competition from other universities; negative attitudes from prospective students; and resistance flowing from elitist cultures. In this regard, Kurasha (2003) proposed corresponding hands-on strategies for resolving each of these challenges. In respect of the resistance and competition from sister-universities Kurasha suggests forging of partnerships among universities. To dispel negative attitudes towards the ODL among students she proposes educating and persuading students to promote their own university since their negativity might subvert the credibility of their own qualifications. Lastly, Kurasha (2003) suggested the use of quality learning materials as a strategy for combating elitist educational cultures in Zimbabwe.

Personnel selection and management strategies at the MRC

The following question focused the investigation: Which human management strategies steer the growth and expansion of the ODL in Masvingo Province? To this end, Table 4 below displays the data in respect of the human factors which influence and shape the Regional Director’s vision and mission in respect of the ODL.

Table 4: Innovative leadership and missionary zeal

Leadership Aspect	Participant A’s narrative
Bio-profile	Started off as a secondary school teacher Obtained first degree through distance education with UNISA. Joined the ZOU 17 years ago. Was inducted into ODL at UNISA and the Open University. Recently attained professorship.
Managerial goals	“Promoting philosophy of open access in higher education through manpower development through” “Offering cost-effective and less disruptive training to workers” “ Delighting the customer” “Adding value to adult learners” “Promoting quality assurance in management of processes and tutorials” “Managing tutorial turnaround time”
Community networking	Vice Chairman of the Great Zimbabwe University Council; Board member of Masvingo Teachers’ College Council; Board member of Zion Christian Council; Board member of the Ken Mufuka Education Trust; Member of Masvingo Province Development Committee

From Table 4, two broad categories of factors might be inferred as constituting driving forces in Masvingo Province. These are: (1) leadership characteristics and action, and (2) management philosophy at the MRC. The Regional Director’s (Participant B) passion and commitment towards the ODL provide useful insights into the human factors which drive the innovation in Masvingo Province. The following all but sums up his vision for ODL provision:

ZOU is the university of the moment as it aims to bring education to the people's doorsteps by establishing offices at district and ward levels respectively (Participant B 2013, In The Masvingo Mirror, 12 April).

It was evident throughout the interviews and conversations that I had with the RD that he was driven and passionate about the ZOU as the “university of the moment” and the ODL as constituting an educational change force sweeping Masvingo Province. Rightly or wrongly, this view of the ODL has made him a strong advocate of the ODL. In my view this passion and commitment is elaborated and articulated in several management activities at the MRC. Firstly, the Regional Director’s management philosophy and conceptualization of duties and responsibilities at the MRC are pivotal in planting and growing the ODL in the province. His visualization of his main role as “Offering cost-effective and less disruptive training to workers” constitutes a strategic platform for designing and implementing work plans that resonate with students’ work commitments. As indicated earlier, he believes adult students prefer learning programmes which “dovetail” with their family and work commitments (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013). More importantly, the RD assumes that the provision of non-disruptive learning programmes aligns very well with the ZOU mandate as stipulated by government policy (Dzwimbo, 2000; Nherera, 2000). In this respect, the mesh of policy at the national or government level and at the MRC represents unusual policy coherence at the macro- and micro-levels.

Secondly, the persona of the Regional Director, in particular his knowledge of the local community appears to give him a comparative advantage in driving ODL growth in the province. Table 4 indicates webs of linkages, associations and partnerships created by the Regional Director for the purpose of advancing the ODL goal, namely increasing the uptake of diversified learning programmes that generate income for the ZOU. In this respect, the linkages range from indigenous church organizations (Zion Christian Church), private business entities (Econet Wireless), and development associations (Masvingo Provincial Development Committee). The linkage also include educational institutions (Great Zimbabwe University; Masvingo Teacher’s College) and staff associations (Zimbabwe Teachers’ Association). From a marketing perspective, these social networks and linkages provide a captive market for ODL products and services.

Staff incentives and motivation strategies

Team work and innovation leadership constitute critical factors in ensuring successful implementation of an innovation (Nickols, 2010). In this regard, the operating environment, in particular, faculty support systems and incentive regimes at the MRC

were investigated as a way of understanding and determining possible staff commitment and motivation towards implementing the ODL in Masvingo Province.

Table 5: Summary of faculty support and incentives at the MRC

TYPE OF STAFF SUPPORT OR INCENTIVE	NARRATION
Campus culture and atmosphere	“Very attractive, congenial atmosphere. Currently, we have attracted a visiting scholar from as far afield as KwaZulu-Natal University” “We have a research budget of about \$ 50 000 a year which support scholarly research and attendance to local and international conferences” “Our policy is to produce one book a year”
Tutorial incentives	“Certificates in tutorship”; “Invitation to graduation ceremonies” “Vice Chancellor’s commendation during semester visits” “Good financial rates for marking and tutorials”
Academic development	“Tutoring staff are supported in their doctoral studies” “Staff engage in collaborative research whereby each member contributes one book chapter per year” “Access to research fund is open to all members” “Access to a 24 hour internet service”
Skills development	“Technical training in journal literacy” “Computer software and packages training” “Staff workshops”
Affective development	“Staff seminars during weekends” “Alumni gatherings” “Sports tournaments”
Scholarly development	“Sponsorships to local and international seminars and conferences”

Table 5 indicates some of the strategic measures utilized to motivate staff at the MRC. These incentives appear designed and targeted towards influencing two aspects of staff concerns, namely academic development and psycho-social needs of MRC staff. The “incentive regime” in Participant B’s terminology can be categorized as: (1) affective motivation strategies which relate to the creation of a conducive working environment for teaching and tutorial staff; (2) academic development which relates to staff support in respect of research and the presentation of research papers at international conferences; and (3) skills development strategies which relate to the induction of new staff to ODL philosophy as well as refresher courses for other experienced staff.

Affective support strategies intended to develop team spirit at the MRC

It would appear that strategies for staff social bonding have been developed. In this respect, fully supported get - together meetings and of late, the inaugural Vice Chancellor's Sport Tournament which brings together ZOU alumni from all the ten provinces to Masvingo were organized. All these activities constitute "... a first" in Zimbabwe in terms of fostering student loyalty to their university (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013). Table 5 also indicates incentives provided to tutorial staff at the MRC. These include, among others, certificates of tutorship, invitations to graduation ceremonies, commendations from the Vice Chancellor and above all, "Good financial rates for marking and tutorials" (See Table 9). According to the Regional Director, these incentives, in particular personal invitations to ZOU graduation ceremonies "...is a recognition of tutors' immense contribution and value to the success of the ODL" (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013).

Academic development strategies at the MRC

Staff academic development appears to be a key strategy in authenticating ODL programmes at the MRC. Two of the participants involved in this study (Participant B and C) attained professorships during the course of this study whilst a significant number of core staff were reported to be in the process of attaining professorships (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013). What then could be the enabling factors behind these achievements? The data in the bottom half of Table 5 reveals a number of key incentives driving research productivity at the MRC. One of the key measures is the book publication policy in place. According to the Regional Director, the book policy stipulates that members publish a book each year and each member contributes a book chapter. More critically, an "activity budget" provides funds to support the studies of staff who wish to upgrade their academic qualifications. In this regard, the MRC has been successful in terms of the number of staff completing their doctoral studies and attaining professorships. However, the driver in promoting academic research is inextricably linked to the "energizing visits" the Vice Chancellor of the ZOU who was quoted as saying:

ZOU should be known for developing staff into a community of scholars and this is what we are thriving for so that at the end the university will have more professors than any other universities (Primrose Kurasha, 2013, In The Masvingo Mirror, 30 August-05 September).

Skill development strategies

Staff induction, refresher courses and staff development workshops constitute another set of strategies intended to develop competent staff committed to the values and principles of open learning (See Table 4.6). According to the Regional Director, regular workshops are conducted over free weekends whereby new and old staff members are equipped with "journal literacy" and computer skills. "Journal literacy" refers to the ability to interpret journal reports accurately. More importantly, new members are inducted into ODL philosophy and values at these workshops. Funding for the training, meals and teas is provided for by the MRC. According to Participant B, these regular workshops have not

only imparted academic skills and competencies but they have also fostered the spirit of teamwork among MRC staffers (Interview with Participant B, 21 August, 2013).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The management strategies reported above can be better understood and explained in terms of several constructs. Firstly, from a management theory perspective, John Adair's Action Centred Leadership Model (1973) can provide a useful prism for unpacking the leadership actions in driving and sustaining the ODL in Masvingo Province. The Action Centred Leadership Model is premised on the belief that effective leadership traits can be developed through training. In this regard, the actions and decisions of the top management can be viewed as outcomes of the training they received before assumption of their roles. For Participant B, this leadership training was received at UNISA and the UKOU respectively (Interview with Participant B, 21 August 2013). Similarly, it may be argued that Participant C's impact as the head of Quality Assurance Unit may reflect the quality of training he received through the induction programme at the MRC. It might therefore be argued that the growth and expansion of the ODL in Masvingo Province, when viewed from John Adair's Model is premised on the quality of the training received by the key personnel driving the innovation. Viewed this way, the training of personnel might therefore be regarded as prerequisites in managing durable innovations. However, Lundvall's (2005) Knowledge Taxonomy might also provide a useful lens for understanding the growth and expansion of the ODL. The Knowledge Taxonomy underscores the importance of different knowledge which the personnel driving the innovation should possess in order to navigate the treacherous waters of the innovation process. The results of this study indicate that Participant B as the RD at the MRC is very familiar with the operational and educational landscape in Masvingo Province. The results of the study indicate that prior to his appointment as RD, Participant B had developed extensive social networks and contacts which he now taps into to advance the cause of the ODL in Masvingo Province. Furthermore, Participant B's purported 'passion' for the ODL may be explained in terms of his personal experience and aggrandisement through distance education. More critically, as a resident of the Masvingo Province, Participant B seems to possess the know-who type of knowledge which according to Lundvall's (2005) construct is essential in entrenching an innovation.

The management strategies employed to sustain ODL growth may also be better understood and explained in terms of their historical antecedents. One key source of illumination is the UKOU. The struggles and strategies adopted by the UKOU to gain recognition and acceptance as a genuine university provide a useful template for understanding successful adaptation of the ODL system at the MRC. The strategies for survival employed by the UKOU are aptly captured in the memoirs of its founding Vice Chancellor Walter Perry but also to some extent in the writings of his successor at the UKOU, Sir John Daniel. Below I discuss the findings of this study in terms of their historical antecedents.

The footprints of the original UKOU model are evident at the MRC in terms of the following ODL management strategies: course creation and development; personnel selection decisions in respect of the calibre, values and beliefs which personnel should possess to drive the ODL; marketing and domain defense, and the decentralized regional

administrative structure. These resemblances are indicative of the influence the UKOU model in several ways. First, the UKOU played an incubatory role in the formation of the ZOU. Kurasha (2003) acknowledges that the initial ZOU staff were trained by resource persons seconded from the UKOU during its inception phase. Secondly, and more importantly, the current Regional Director of the MRC spent time understudying the UKOU (Interview with Participant B, 19 August 2013). Lastly, but more significantly, the establishment of the UKOU in 1969 is generally regarded as a catalyst in the development of open learning institutions worldwide (Evans & Nation, 1993). However, the programme management strategies currently in use at the MRC may also be viewed as local adaptations and modifications of the original UKOU model to the Zimbabwean value system, infrastructural capacities and contextual realities of the MRC in particular.

CONCLUSION

Three management strategies were identified as constituting the pivots of ODL growth and expansion at the MRC. These are: constant environmental reconnaissance and intelligence gathering; aggressive innovation marketing and personnel selection and induction. It was observed that historically and conceptually these strategies had their antecedents in the original UKOU model. However, from one perspective, the success of current management strategies in nurturing the ODL in Masvingo Province should be seen as a unique case in balancing or maintaining the equilibrium among the practical interests and concerns of three constituencies the ODL, namely adult learners, staff at the MRC and employers (government and private). The management of the interests of these groups may be regarded as the foundation of the growth and expansion of the ODL in Masvingo Province.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, only energetic or and committed persons should be appointed or selected as innovation leaders. Further, the personnel selected to lead or manage innovations should be adequately trained and staff developed to offset the confusion and frustrations attendant to the innovation process. The results of this study indicate that the RD's early experiences with distance education and his attachment to the UKOU provided him with the necessary knowledge base and competencies to guide and promote the growth of the ODL with greater efficiency and effectiveness. In this regard, only persons imbued with values and beliefs consistent with the innovation should be appointed to lead educational change.

Second, successful innovation adaptation is contingent upon the quality of the innovation being implemented. In view of this, policy elites and other high level decision-makers or innovation adopters or initiators should make prudent and judicious choices in respect of educational innovations they adopt. In view of this, it is recommended that policy elites should give serious thought and consideration to the nature, type and relevancy of innovations they adopt.

Third, innovation leaders should be vested with adequate power, authority and creative space to enable them to adapt innovations to varying socio-economic and political contexts. Effective innovation leaders require authority and space to innovate.

Finally, incentives and motivational regimes for the implementing staff constitute the bedrock of a durable innovation. These may be non-monetary incentives which include, among others, an enabling academic culture or conducive working environment.

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