Employee Diversity as an ODL strategy for global competitiveness.

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Abstract: *Employee diversity is increasingly becoming an important strategy for organisational effectiveness in the era of globalization. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, by their very nature, appeal to life-long learners in various global markets. A workforce representing various nationalities, cultures, religious affiliations, values and beliefs is increasingly being recognized as a critical strategic tool for global competitiveness. The purpose of this study, therefore, seeks to assess employee diversity at the Zimbabwe Open University. This research used a descriptive survey design. Structured interviews were carried out with the Human Resources personnel and other ZOU employees. The study concluded that the levels of diversity at ZOU are still very minimal in certain aspects such as race, religion, ethnicity and nationality but the University has complied with minimum employee diversity requirements of providing equal employment opportunities to its entire staff. The study recommends that the University should increase racial diversity among its staff in order to appeal to students from other races and nationalities. In this way, the University will be better placed to compete at global level.*
Keywords: *Diversity management, Employee diversity, Equal employment opportunity*

Diversity Management
Diversity management is the planning and implementation of organizational systems and practices to create greater inclusion of employees from various backgrounds and creating an environment where differences are valued, (Cox and Blake, 1991).

Employee diversity
Diversity is generally defined as acknowledging, understanding, accepting, valuing, and celebrating differences among people with respect to age, class, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, geographic location, marital status and sex (Esty, et al., 1995)

Equal Employment Opportunity
Equal Employment Opportunity refers to a variety of laws that prohibit discrimination in employment practices on the basis of national origin, race, religion, gender, physical ability and age.

I.   Introduction
In an era of increased globalization, a workforce representing various nationalities, cultures, religious affiliations, values and beliefs is now a basic requirement for organisational success. Employee diversity benefits organisations through increasing creativity and innovation, global market insight, stronger customer loyalty, improved employee recruitment and retention and reduced discrimination lawsuits. These factors are critical in terms of increasing productivity and organisational competitiveness.

Organisations that do not appreciate employee diversity may find it difficult to attract and retain loyal customers, employees, and business partners who promote organisational growth. An organization's success and competitiveness depends, among several other factors, on its ability to embrace employee diversity, Thomas and Ely (1996).

II.   Statement of the Problem
An ODL institution caters for students from different nationalities, races and religious backgrounds. It is therefore important that such diversity be reflected within and among its employees. There is no study that has been carried out to assess employee diversity in ODL institutions in Zimbabwe. This study, therefore seeks to assess employee diversity in the ODL institution and more specifically at the Zimbabwe Open University.

III.   Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to assess employee diversity in the ODL institution.

IV.   Objectives of the study

The study was guided by the following objectives:
- To assess the level of employee diversity at ZOU.
- To recommend action required to assist ZOU to improve employee diversity.

4.1 Key Research Questions
The study sought to address the following questions:
- What are the levels of employee diversity at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- What strategies could be recommended to improve employee diversity at the Zimbabwe Open University?

V.   Justification of the study

There is no known study on employee diversity in the ODL institutions in Zimbabwe. There is also need to expand the body of knowledge on employee diversity in the ODL institutions. This study will enable management to have an appreciation and a clearer understanding of the advantages of fostering employee diversity in the institution. In addition, this study would assist in formulating strategies which ensures that ODL institutions realise full benefits of employee diversity. Lastly, this research will enable ZOU and other ODL institutions to improve in managing employee diversity which could in turn result in recruitment and retention of high caliber staff, reduced discrimination costs, increased productivity and increased market share.

VI.   Review of related Literature

The following theoretical models explore more closely the issue of employee diversity in organisations.
The Learning and effectiveness paradigm, (Thomas 2003)
This is a new paradigm which values fairness for all. While acknowledging organisational differences, this paradigm also acknowledges differences among employees so that the organization will learn and grow from the internalized differences. The most powerful point in this paradigm is that progress is measured by the power of the minority groups to influence the policies and operations of the organisation.
The issue of geographical distance matters in this paradigm. Thomas (2003) applied this paradigm to American companies, thus the paradigm is prone to Western bias as it was not tried and tested on African organisations. Therefore, there is a lack of new knowledge specifically on the benefits of fostering employee diversity in an African ODL institution.

Inclusion model
Miller (1998: 151) describes inclusion as the extent to which diverse individuals "are allowed to participate and are enabled to contribute fully. Ferdman (2008: 176) defines a culture of inclusion as existing when "people of all social identity groups have the opportunity to be present, to have their voices heard and appreciated, and to engage in core activities on behalf of the collective." The definition of inclusion depicts diverse individuals' experience as having the potential to be positive when they feel a sense of belonging and feel valued for the characteristics on which they are unique. Mor-Barak, & Cherin, (1998) states that the inclusion model encompasses practices such as sharing information, equal employment opportunity, equal access to resources and participation in decision making and all this is supposed to lead to job satisfaction, employee wellbeing, and organizational effectiveness.

Though the inclusion model has positive consequences for individuals and organizations, very little information is known about how or why this occurs. Even though the diversity research literature is vast, much research is still needed to understand how organizations can create inclusive environments that provide opportunities for diverse employees who work together in a global competitive economy.

VII.   Research Methodology

This study sought to assess employee diversity in the ODL institution. The research adopted a descriptive survey design which falls within the qualitative research paradigm. This paper therefore used an interpretivist philosophy. Borg and Gall (1996) argue that a descriptive survey is most effective in describing and explaining a prevailing phenomenon. Data collection was through document survey analysis of University documents such as the ZOU Human Resources Manual, the ZOU Act, The Labour Act of Zimbabwe [*Chapter28:01*], and a sample of 100 files of ZOU employees was randomly selected. The sample is representative as it reflects the characteristics of the target population. Data collection was also conducted through structured interviews with Human Resources personnel. Purposive sampling was employed to select (five) 5 human resources staff members out of a total of nineteen (19) staff members in the Human Resources Department. The researcher targeted employees who were knowledgeable of the required information.

7.1 Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse data. Quantitative data was organized into categories and quantified into percentages and presented in pie charts. A qualitative analysis of statements and comments made during interviews was also made.

7.2 Limitations of the study

A limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size. For this reason, the research findings cannot be generalized to the broader community basing on this study alone. This study only provides preliminary information for a larger study.

VIII. Discussion of findings

The study revealed that the competitiveness of the ODL institution depends to a larger extent on its ability to embrace employee diversity. This has been evidenced by the following observations at the Zimbabwe Open University.

8.1 Attraction and retention of high quality staff

The ZOU Act requires the Zimbabwe Open University to provide equal opportunities to all interested applicants. The Human Resources personnel revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University's commitment to employee diversity has enabled it to recruit from diverse employees who are most likely to be the best and the brightest in the labor market. The human resources documentary evidence states that ZOU has managed to recruit and retain fourteen (14) professors, thirty four (34) PhD holders and one hundred and seventy four (174) Masters Degree holders by the 1st of October 2013. In an increasingly competitive economy where employee talent is crucial, recruiting from the most diverse candidates is very necessary to succeed in the market. However, staff attraction and retention may also be due to competitive remuneration, the ZOU allowance and other factors. The diagram below (fig 1.1) proves that Professors, PhD and Masters holders at ZOU are not a homogeneous group but are comprised of a balanced proportion of male and female staff. However the major drawback is that the staff composition only represented gender diversity and does not represent diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, religion and nationality. This level of diversity does not help the institution to appeal to international markets where issues of race and rationality are critical in attracting customers.

Fig 1.1 Staff academic qualification
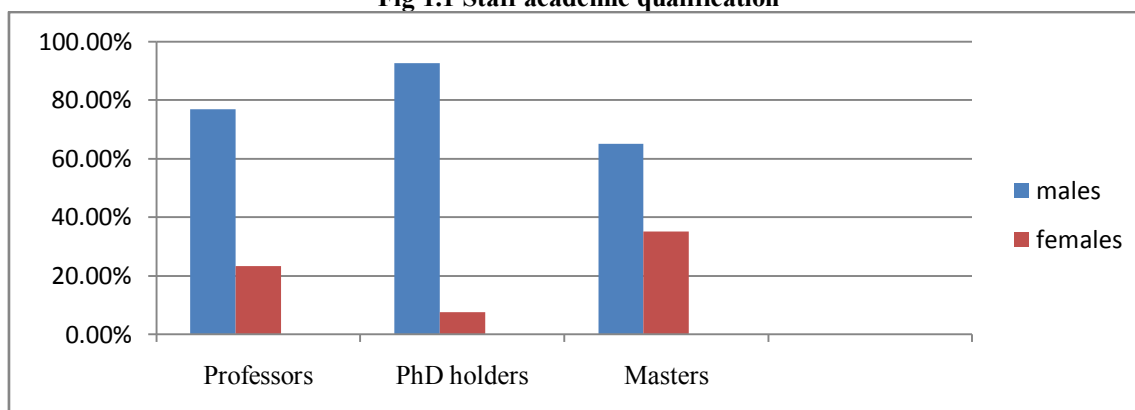
8.2 Gender diversity at ZOU

Further investigations on gender clearly outlined gender composition of ZOU staff, managers and ZOU students. The Zimbabwe Open University is reasonably moving towards increasing gender balance in its recruitment system. The Vice Chancellor of ZOU is a female, this shows that the institution is gender sensitive and has confidence in females filling the highest office of the University. The human resources employee personal files revealed that the University has 60.59% male staff vs. 39.41% female staff, 76% male managers vs. 24% female managers. Gender patterns for ZOU employees may be reflected in the ZOU student statistics where male students are (51.18%) vs. (48.82%) female students. The institution's Human Resources Strategic Plan clearly emphasizes equal employment opportunity for both females and males. However, human resources personnel indicated that though the University has not yet fully achieved its set goal, the presence of female managers indicate that female employees' interests and rights were being represented at all levels of the University. Figure 1:3 below clearly shows gender composition at ZOU.

Fig 1:2 Gender demographics at ZOU
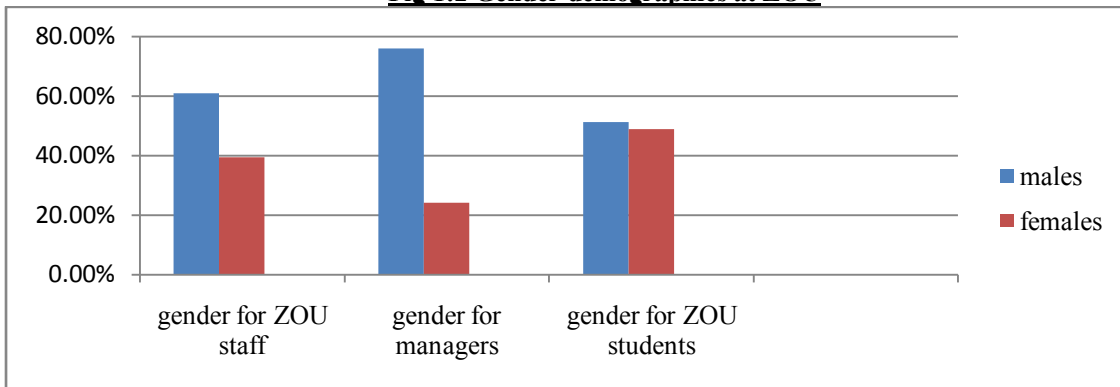
8.3 Improved corporate image and reputation.

Interviews with the human resources personnel revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University has become an employer of choice for local people. The institution has become an employer with a good reputation and a strong employment brand, and such a positive image has been able to attract a wider pool of candidates for recruitment. For instance, the human resources personnel revealed that the institution managed to attract senior academic staff from other renowned tertiary institutions from Zimbabwe and South Africa. Most world job seekers are drawn to oragnisations with diverse workforces because it is evident that such companies do not practice employee discrimination. Before applying for a job in an organisation, interested employees may want to know if the employer treats its staff fairly regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. The study further revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University has been able to retain existing talent because of high employee morale resulting from employee diversity. This is supported by human resources documentary evidence which indicated that staff attrition rate was 1.8% by 2013 as compared to 88% in 2008. This study could not conclusively establish that the improved corporate image and brand was solely a result of diversity since other factors like conditions of service and related perks play an important role.

8.4 Enhancing effective succession planning

Fig 1.3 Age diversity
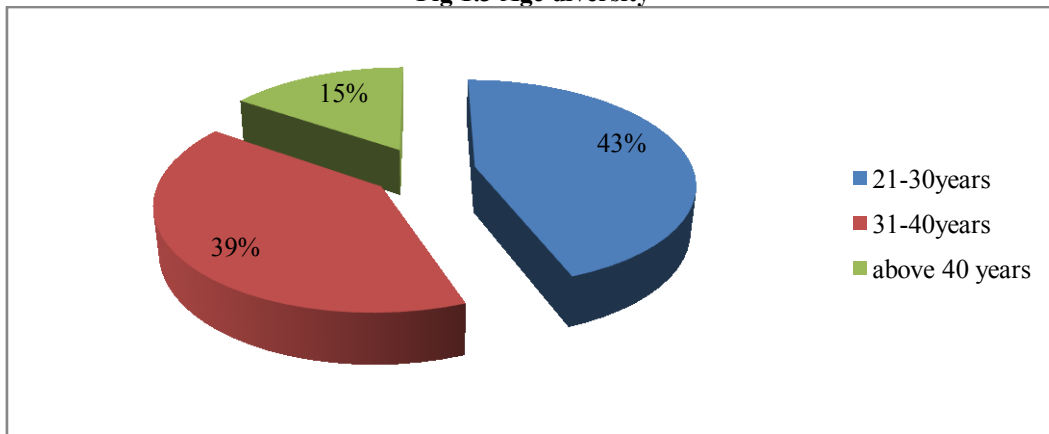
The study highlighted that an age diverse workforce at ZOU enabled the institution to effectively handle succession planning and creating professional environments that are rich with experience and maturity as well as youthful exuberance. Organisations that employ workers in wide ranges of age have the advantage of creating a dynamic, multi-generational workforce with a diverse range of skills that are beneficial to the institution. A workforce heavily composed only of people in a particular age demographic runs the risk of becoming obsolete. D. Ndudzo, (2012) in a paper titled, "An assessment of factors that influence the attraction and retention of Senior Academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University", highlights age diversity at ZOU as follows, 43% of ZOU employees are between 21-30years, 39% of ZOU employees are between 31-40 years, 15% of ZOU employees are above 40 years. The human resources personnel revealed that traditionally, older employees train younger professionals to adapt to the culture of an organisation. In a workforce dominated only by young professionals, there is no opportunity for generational mentoring. In a workforce dominated only by old employees, workers eventually retire from the company, leaving behind few individuals who are familiar with the company's history. This shows that the institution is rising to the challenge of an ageing population, and that it recognises that age discrimination is a social injustice and bad for business success.

8.5 Technological orientation

A workforce composed of different age demographics creates an environment where each generation brings different skills and talents to the table. Interviews with Human Resources personnel indicated that, young employees at ZOU seem to have a strong grasp on the use of high-tech business mediums such as social networking and online product demonstrations. It seems that mature professionals at ZOU often have exceptional interpersonal skills and perform well in environments where traditional interpersonal communication is used. While all age demographics must embrace technology in the professional world to communicate and effectively reach customers, a workforce dominated by techno-centric employees has a definite advantage over companies that employ only mature workers without such skills. Just as younger generations are credited with having good working knowledge of business technology, more mature members of a workforce have the advantage of traditional business skills. This diversity gives businesses the advantage of being able to communicate and deal with customers across all age spectrums.

8.6 Enhances creativity and innovation in organisations

Employers value the different approaches diverse employees bring to the organisation. McInnes (1999) notes that organisations with diverse workforces possess a competitive advantage over organisations with homogeneous workforces because they can meet changes in customer preferences and quickly formulate solutions to challenges and adapt to changes in the market. Bringing together workers with different qualifications, backgrounds, and experiences are all key to effective problem-solving on the job. The Human Resources personnel indicated that the University is not rewarding innovativeness among its employees. This is supported by a research by D. Ndudzo (2013) titled; "The major beliefs and assumptions of ZOU middle management about corporate effectiveness in the ODL institution". This paper highlighted that 36% of ZOU employees were of the view that the ZOU culture was "command and control" and therefore hindered innovativeness. The paper recommended that senior management should foster a culture of openness and inclusiveness throughout the organisational structure. The fact that the institution is not rewarding innovativeness among its employees may result in the University not fully utilizing employee innovativeness which could be realized from its diversified workforce.

8.7 Avoiding the costs of discrimination

The Human Resources personnel revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University has benefited a lot from employee diversity as the institution has not encountered any discrimination lawsuits. Organisations that practice discrimination might incur costs directly due to legal penalties. Wrench (2007: 19) points out that in the United States of America, the pressure for equal employment opportunity and affirmative action programmes may have been one of the reasons fostering the continuation of employee diversity management in many organisations. Effective employee diversity initiatives may 'assist in the reduction and prevention of costly lawsuits relating to race discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination lawsuits' (Wentling and Rivas 1997: 21). The University of Illinois has a long and proud legacy of commitment to the principles of equality and equal opportunity for all students, faculty, staff and visitors. The University is deeply committed to providing its faculty, staff, students and visitors with a working and learning environment that is diverse, inclusive, and respectful. To this end, the University did not incur any form of discrimination or harassment lawsuits because the University policy promoted employee diversity among its employees and students.

8.8 Racial diversity

In a study conducted by researchers from the University of Illinois in 2009, both racial and gender diversity were found to positively influence market share. There are various races in Zimbabwe which include Blacks, Whites, Coloureds, Chinese and Indians. Human resources personnel revealed ZOU employees are all blacks except only one (1) who is Indian. The other minority races are not represented at all at the Zimbabwe Open University. The University should emphasize on recruiting employees from various races because certain people appeal to their races when it comes to student recruitment. The research highlighted that all students at the Zimbabwe Open University are blacks, which shows that the institution is not working hard in recruiting from other races.

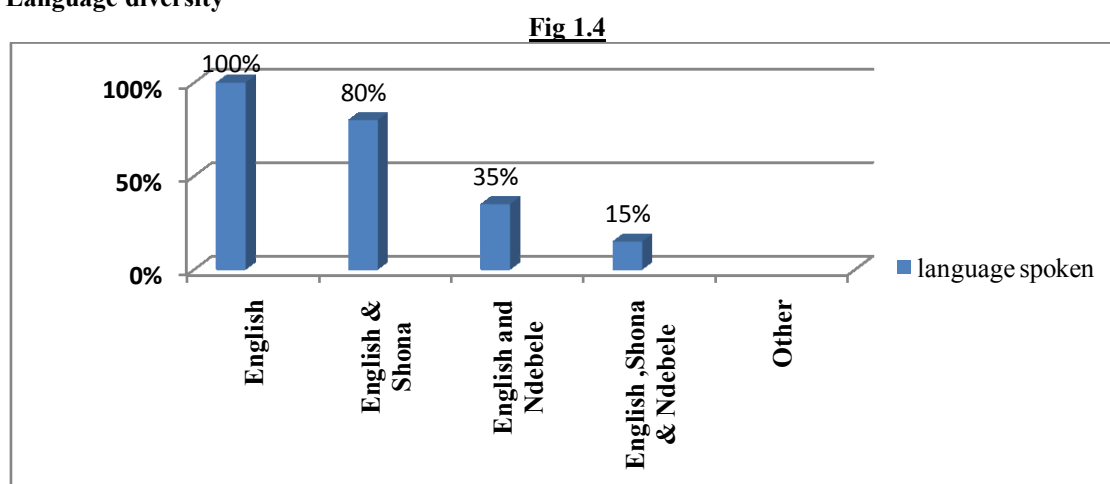**8.9 Language diversity**

Fig 1.4

Figure 1:4 above illustrates the number of languages spoken by ZOU employees. Zimbabwe has 16 official languages. English, Shona and Ndebele are the most widely spoken languages in the country. English is traditionally used for official business at ZOU and serves as a common language for most Zimbabweans. This has assisted in appealing to international students who use English as their official language. The Virtual Region at ZOU indicated that the institution currently has sixty five (65) international students as at 15 October 2013. The University has also attracted Zimbabwean students from all the ten Regional Centres of the country. The Zimbabwe Open University has benefitted a lot from language diversity as employees who speak diverse local languages have appealed to various students who speak similar languages. According to McInnes (1999) an organisation with employees acquainted with different languages and cultures find it easier to communicate with representatives from a wide spectrum of customers. Therefore, the University should also emphasize on training its employees foreign languages such as Chinese, Portuguese, Indian, etc so as to increase global market reach.

IX.   Conclusion

The research concluded that, the diversity levels at the Zimbabwe Open University are still insignificant in areas of race, religion, nationality and ethnicity. The institution has however played a pivotal role in addressing employee diversity in terms of gender, age, educational qualifications and language. To this end the University has realised some benefits from employee diversity in-terms of improving corporate image which led to increased recruitment of high quality staff and increased student enrollment, avoiding discrimination lawsuits and ensuring effective succession planning. However, the study highlighted that if the institution develops effective and efficient diversity management strategies and make diversity management as part of its business strategy it would be able to succeed in increasing competitiveness in the global market. It is hoped that well crafted diversity policies with clear aims and objectives can offer the ODL institution a cost effective approach to attract high quality staff, increasing global market reach and competitiveness and promoting innovativeness. It is also hoped that a diversity policy of this kind may also broaden the potential customer base of the Zimbabwe Open University.

X.   Recommendations

Basing on the findings of this study the following recommendations were suggested:

- The University should design and implement diversity policies / programs that precisely target important events for individual employees in-terms of race, nationality, religion, etc. These may include religious holidays, public holidays, etc. The workplace diversity policy should aim to create a culture that promotes a supportive, flexible and fair workplace in which differences between employees are respected and viewed as an organisational asset.
- Given that most employees at ZOU are blacks, the institution's recruitment policy should also target recruiting employees from other races. There could be a deliberate quarter system aligned to preferred markets.
- The University should assist employees to learn and be sensitive to cross-cultural differences. This will assist employees to work effectively with other staff and students from different nationalities.
- The University should increase the proportion of women across all managerial levels in order to further improve gender balance.
- The Institution should offer foreign language training to its employees, e.g. Chinese, French, Portuguese. This would enhance effective communication with potential foreign students.

- The University should recruit from agencies who appeal to several but specific global and different races.
- The institution should offer courses that appeal to several races and geographic markets.
- Since at ZOU the module is the teacher modules could be written in other languages in order to appeal to different markets.
- The study also recommends further research regarding diversity as a strategy to enhance global competitiveness.

We believe that the above recommendations can be adopted by other organisations to successfully address their own specific employee diversity needs.

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