

## **An Analysis of Factors That Contribute To Low Student Success and Retention in Odl Institutions**

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**Abstract:** *This study aimed at analysing the factors that contribute to low student success and retention in open and distance learning (ODL) institutions. The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Mashonaland East Regional Centre was purposively selected for the study which adopted the case study design in order to provide a detailed empirical investigation of the problem of retention rates in ZOU. The study employed the qualitative research methodology. Data were gathered through focus group discussions, questionnaires and in-depth interviews to enable data triangulation. The target population was 650 students who all took part in the survey. These were drawn from all the four faculties of the University at the Mashonaland East Regional Centre. The study revealed that student enrolment statistics at the ZOU - Mashonaland East Regional Centre experienced the worst decline (40%) in 2009 between the first and second semester due to socio-economic and political challenges prevailing in the country. The rate of decline in enrolment varied according to programmes. Also the participation of women (44%) in distance education as compared to men (56%) at Mashonaland East Regional Centre was a cause for concern. Financial challenges caused by low salaries and unfriendly fees policy was cited by almost 92% of the respondents as the major cause of student dropout. Institutional – related factors such as tutoring, communication, library services and fees policy were said to be significantly contributing to student dropout. The study made a number of recommendations among which were that ZOU needs to improve the quality and effectiveness of student support services in the following areas: management of assignments, delivery of tutorials, distribution of study materials, and publication of examinations. Tutorial time per module should be increased (12 tutorial hours per module). ZOU should consider the advantages of the Block release method of delivery as opposed to tutorials. Student queries, of whatever nature, must be addressed promptly and effectively. It is also important for ZOU to create a billing system that will allow for some flexibility in fees payment. An example would be allowing students to set up a payment plan. ZOU must adopt policies and procedures that address the special needs of distance education students since distance education encompasses a broad range of age groups.*

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### **I. Background to the Study**

Mandela (1994) emphasized that education is the most powerful weapon which could be used to change the world. It is therefore imperative that the ODL mode of Higher Education embodies the critical factors that engender high student success and retention in order to advance the development of humanity. Student success and retention has become very essential in higher education throughout the world. The dwindling government support for Higher education has resulted in student fees being a major source of revenue and survival of most universities in Southern Africa and Zimbabwe. The more the students an institution attracts and retains, the more revenue it can generate. The World Bank (1994) revealed that governments throughout the world are struggling to fund higher education. Such a scenario may compromise the quality of education in terms of inadequate staffing, deteriorating infrastructure, high drop-out rates, declining research outputs and equity issues related to expansion. Thus universities are vigorously addressing factors that militate against student satisfaction in order to attract more students and consequently more revenue.

Bloom et al, (2006) observed that in South Africa 35% of first year students drop out after first year. Only 15% of students who enrolled completed their degrees in the designated time. The researcher further observed that the graduation rate in South Africa's 23 public universities at undergraduate level stands at 15%. The graduation rate for Masters' programs was 20% and 12% for Doctoral candidates respectively.

The foregoing analysis clearly makes student retention one of the critical issues facing Higher Education today in the Southern African Region and in Zimbabwe. Bean, (1990: 170) observed that for higher education institutions, this level of attrition represents a direct loss of tuition income. The fact that institutional revenue is now mostly being derived directly from tuition fees makes student retention a key survival factor for many universities. This is supported by (DeBerard, 2004: 66) who argues that "Each student that leaves before degree completion costs the college or university thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition fees, and alumni contributions". In addition, external entities and stakeholders (regulatory, legislative, advocacy) often use retention rates to scrutinize and criticize an institution.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

This study is anchored on the need to solve the perennial problem of low student success and retention in ODL institutions. The problem could thus be stated as follows: “What could be the factors that contribute to low student success and retention in ODL institutions?”

## **1.3 Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to analyse the factors that contribute to low student success and retention in ODL institutions.

## **1.4 Objectives of the study**

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To document student retention and graduation rates in ODL.
- To document factors that influence student success and retention in ODL.
- To make recommendations on how ODL institutions could improve student success and retention.

## **1.5 Research questions**

- What are the student retention and graduation rates in ODL?
- What are the factors that influence student success and retention in ODL?
- What strategies could be recommended to improve student success and retention in ODL?

## **1.6 Justification of the study**

The documentation of student success and retention will assist ODL institutions to understand the quality of service they offer to students. The study will provide a benchmark for other ODL institutions in neighbouring countries. In addition, the faculty will have a reference point in terms of what students expect in relation to the service offered. Management decision making will be enhanced on issues pertaining to student success and retention. The research will enable the identification of risky students and the necessary support required. The report will provide a concise document which can serve as a reference point for the institution and other stakeholders in ODL and Higher Education institutions in terms of best practice in student success and retention.

## **II. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1 Student-Environment Fit Theory (Student Satisfaction)**

The student environment fit theory states that, congruence between student expectations and institutional experiences increase student satisfaction. The theory proposes that to reduce the rate of drop outs and transfers institutions should attract students whose needs best fit what the individual academic institution offers. This theory proposes a model of retention that considers student values being congruent with the university and faculty culture.

### **2.2 Student Involvement Theory**

This theory was designed to identify factors in the college environment that significantly affect the student's persistence in college (Astin, 1984, p.302). This theory is based on promoting higher levels of interaction and involvement to produce greater levels of institutional commitment. Data collected by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, found that the three most important forms of student involvement were academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups. The study by HERI highlighted that there was a direct link between the quality and quantity of involvement, student performance and satisfaction. Positive interaction with student peers was found to bring about a sense of satisfaction and responsibility.

### **2.3 Interactionalist Model**

In this model, student background/pre-college traits and structural/organizational characteristics of institutions directly impact the college environment, (Tinto, Vincent, 1993). Student entry characteristics, initial commitment, academic and social integration affect subsequent commitments to the institution and the goal of graduation. The quality of student effort, student background/precollege traits, and interactions with agents of socialization directly influence learning and cognitive development. This model posts that residential facilities and the dominant peer group were strong influences on academic achievement. The effect of informal student/faculty interaction outside of the classroom was less strong, but nonetheless noticeable.

### III. Research Methodology

This research used an interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative research methodology was preferred, hence the use of the case study design. Primary data was generated through questionnaires, focus group discussions and structured interviews with staff working in Centres for Student Management, Faculty and other academics. Document analysis was used to establish the retention, drop out and graduation ratios. The target population was all students who came for services at the regional campus during the semester. All in all, there were 650 respondents to the survey. These were drawn from all the four faculties of the University.

### IV. Discussion Of Findings

#### 4.0 Data Presentation And Analysis

##### 4.1 Bio data for students

There were 650 respondents to the questionnaire survey. For the focus group, there were 7 male and 7 female student participants. From the 650 respondents, the majority of the responses, (63%) were male while (37%) were female. The dominant age group with (68.6%) was the (35-40) years age range. 77.2% of the students were married. A significant proportion of students (49.2%) resided outside the city where the Regional Campus is situated. 73.8% lived in rural and farming areas. This shows that the majority of the students who came for support services at the regional centre were mature and married adults staying in rural and farming areas.

##### 4.2 Student success and retention rates

The University has identified four principal rates in any Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution. These are important in that they enable the ODL institution to quantify its operations for benching purposes. The rates offer an easy and efficient tool with which to benchmark one comparable faculty's performance against that of another faculty, and against other institutions. These benchmarking initiatives may not be very accurate barometers of performance, due to a variety of inconsistencies like the timeframe enhancement strategies from better performing faculties and institutions. The four rates are discussed below.

##### 4.2.1 Throughput ratio

Throughput rate symbolizes the number of students who are enrolled in a programme, are actively engaged in their studies and complete the studies within a minimum or maximum time. The minimum completion period depicts the stated length of a programme, which is doubled to arrive at the maximum permissible period for a student to complete a programme.

**Table 1: Throughput ratios of faculties 1994-2010**

Faculty	4 year through put	8 year through put	Number of people who did not graduate	Grand total	Minimum throughput rate %	Maximum throughput rate%
Arts and Education	8819	3125	14978	26922	58.88	11.61
Commerce and Law	2436	2398	18455	23289	13.20	10.30
Science and Technology	1420	2396	7865	11681	18.05	20.51
Applied Social Sciences	2946	2890	10653	16489	27.65	17.53
Total	15 621	10 809	51 951	78 381	30.07	13.79
Average throughput ratio for the University						21.93

**Source: Academic Registry data**

The average throughput ratio illustrates that a lot more needs to be done to assist students so that they complete their studies within the minimum possible time. The few who defer their studies, for whatever reason, should be assisted to complete the studies with the maximum permissible time.

##### 4.2.2 Retention rate

The retention rate refers to the number of students who enroll in a programme in a particular year and are actively engaged in the teaching and learning and learning activity without discontinuing their studies in that year and proceed to the following year at the same institution. There seems to be a strong relationship between the retention rate and the throughput rate, with the latter encompassing a longer period during which a student is able to finish a programme.

The table below shows that of all the students who start a programme only 26.72% sail through within the stipulated time of four years for a Bachelor’s degree programme. This means 72.28% of the students take detours, some of which become permanent. Every effort should be explored to rapidly transform this unwelcome happenstance into more agreeable behavior. The desirable scenario would be where the retention rate was 72.28% and the percentage points of those who did not finish their studies within the minimum permissible time were 26.72%. The ODL constraints that befall student, who are also breadwinners in their own right, should not be accepted as an excuse but should be interrogated assiduously in order to devise methods to support students so that they complete their studies in the minimum possible time.

**Table 2: Retention Ratio 1994-2014**

Faculty	No. of students retained	No. of students who discontinued	Grand total	Retention rate (%)
Arts and Education	2 631	9 087	11 718	22
Commerce and Law	4 705	12 161	16 866	39
Science and Technology	10 338	16 923	27 261	38
Applied Social Sciences	3 518	19 942	23 460	15
Total	21 192	58 113	79 305	26.72

Source: Academic Registry data

#### 4.2.3 Pass rate

The pass rate depicts the number of students who succeed in an examination out of the total number of students who sit for the examination. The pass rate has no bearing on the retention rate or on the throughput rate in that its focus is on the students who sit for an examination and pass the examination. The relationship could be inferred to exist if the stay of the student is prolonged through failure in examination papers; a student who fails a number of examination papers is likely to stay longer than those who pass their papers at the first or second seating.

**Table 3: Pass Rate December 1994-2014**

Exam session	Faculty	Number of students who sat for the exam	Number of students who succeed	Pass rate %
DEC 2008	Applied Social Sciences	89 612	77 639	86.64
	Science and Technology	38 165	29 765	77.99
TO	Commerce and Law	77 673	55 147	71.00
	Arts and Education	65 186	56 846	87.21
DEC 2014	Total	270 636	219 397	81.06

Source: Academic Registry data

The table above shows that, on average 18.94% of the students who write examinations across faculties fail to pass and therefore, fail to proceed to the next stage. This is a respectable percentage which indicates that the university education is not a walk in the park students earn their qualifications. The Faculty of Arts and Education has the highest pass rate at 87.21% followed by the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences which has 88.64% and the Faculty of Science and Technology comes in at a distant 77.99%. The worst performing Faculty is that of Commerce and Law at 71%. These rates could be misleading if they were calculated using disparate figures and bases; unconfirmed reports seem to indicate that faculties viewed their pass rates to be based on different assignment and examination mark combinations. One or two faculties followed the 40/60% configuration, one faculty followed the 30/70% configuration and the last faculty followed the 20/80% configuration. The 20/80% configuration stands for a 20% assignment mark added to an 80% examination mark to give a result out of 100%. These configurations place undue difference on the pass rate.

#### 4.2.4 Attrition Rate

The attrition rate depicts the percentage of students who are enrolled in a programme but discontinue their studies at the same institution. The discontinuation is a result of many reasons, some of which include; deceasement of the student, prolonged illness, decision to discontinue studies, translocation to another country and many other reasons.

The rate at which students discontinue their studies is alarming and all avenues should be explored to find ways to make sure the rate is drastically reduced. The Faculty of Commerce and Law has the highest rate of students who discontinue their studies at 76%, followed by the faculty of Science and Technology at 64%. The Faculty of applied Social Science has an attrition rate of 61% and the Faculty of Arts and Education has the lowest discontinuation rate of 52%. The University should work hard through faculties instituting strategies that encourage students to continue with their studies right to the end, and within the prescribed completion timeframe.

**Table 3: Retention December 1994-2014**

Faculty	Number of student who completed their studies	Number of student who discontinued their studies	Total	Attrition rate %
Arts and Education	13 063	14 202	27 265	52
Science and Technology	4 221	7 498	11 917	64
Applied Social Sciences	6 517	10 355	16 872	61
Commerce and Law	5 543	17 927	23 470	76
Total	29 344	49 982	79 524	62.85

**Source: Academic Registry data**

The pass rate of the University is the only ratio that sends a smile to the face of the reader. It shows a lot of teaching and learning is taking place, even though room for improvement still exists. The throughput rate is divided into two parts and the average throughput rate is given. Both minimum and the maximum throughput rates are not satisfactory, more students should pass through the institution within the minimum time allowed for each programme. The institution should support students to the extent that they get motivated to complete their programmes of study within the minimum period of time that is permissible; the maximum time permissible should be a preserve of those experiencing special circumstance like prolonged illness. The retention rate has a direct influence on the throughput rate because the more the students who remain with the University the more the students who complete their studies within the stipulated time, *ceteris paribus*. The retention rate could be improved through the institution of drastic measures learner support; the University should fight tooth nail to improve the learning/teaching situation through a focused and competent student support system. A sequel to these ratios should be another paper on the same rations, but over a shorter period like the last five years, to make the ratios more contemporary and relevant in comparison with the current ratios.

#### **4.3 The decline in student enrolment based on gender between 2009 and 2013**

The decrease in male enrolment and increase in female enrolment could be attributed to higher female admission and higher female retention rate in 2013. From this data the researcher concluded that at the Mashonaland East Regional Centre, gender is a factor in the decline in student enrolment with more men than women dropping out. Several other studies have given statistical evidence to confirm women's high participation in DE programmes. Most of the women who access DE have been described to be in their adult stage, married, have dependants and are workers. In a study by Qureshi (2002) it was found that the DE format attracted more married participants than the on-campus format: 30.4% versus 12.6%, respectively. Gender studies on the participation of female students in Open and Distance Education programmes in developing countries such as Turkey, India, Australia, German and the USA show that more women than men enroll in distance education programmes. However, Studies by Cameron et al, (2001) show that participation rates for women in higher education are alarmingly low.

The gender imbalance at the ZOU should be understood in its socio-cultural context. Historically and traditionally, Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society in which men were considered as majors whilst women were treated as minors. However, attitudes towards the education of women are changing. There is no doubt that considering the socio-cultural characteristics of women, DE, by its unique nature creates an opportunity for women to pursue higher education. Studies elsewhere have shown that more women than men are motivated to enroll in distance education programmes. Research has provided statistical data to prove this point (Przymus, 2004); Plummer, 2002); Canevale, 2002; Evans, 1995). Plummer (2002) a Senior Researcher at the German Fern Universität, a Distance Teaching University, carried out cross-national comparative research on the situation of women and men in DE that examined the often neglected area of gender issues throughout the DE world. Her study identifies that a wide variety of evidence from different countries supports the conclusion that open and distance learning has the potential to provide equal opportunities in higher and continuing education.

She emphasize that DE per se is women-friendly since it does not require attendance in class at set times. However, the percentage of ZOU female students (44%) as compared to men (56%) in a country where women constitute 52% of the adult population is still a course for concern. This misnomer could be explained by the patriarchal cultural system in Zimbabwe which favours males at the expense of females.

#### **4.4 Student - related factors that have been responsible for the decline in student enrolment at Mash East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013**

The findings of this study show that age was not a factor responsible for student dropout. Both the young and the older student were at the risk of dropping out. Whilst Coggins (1988) argues that students who are younger are more likely to complete a distance education course, Holmberg (1989), on the other hand, argues that older mature, better-qualified students are self directed and are more likely to have the strong

motivation that is necessary to succeed at a distance. In the present study, the age of the ZOU student was not a significant factor in the decline of student enrolment.

#### **4.4.1 Marital Status, Family and Dependants**

Most of the ZOU dropouts (90%) were married with an average of three children and three dependants. This means most student dropouts in this study had family commitments that may have negatively affect their studies. Students with families often experience difficulties in balancing their academic demands with their family and social commitments. The stress of multiple roles has been mentioned by researchers as one of the major constraints that hinder students from persisting in a distance education program (Moore, 1975; and Thompson, 1984; as cited in Ojo and Olakulehin (2006). Adult learners assume multiple responsibilities at home, in society and in their workplaces. They spend a great deal of time and energy on fulfilling their family, social, and occupational responsibilities. This may drastically reduce the time and energy which could otherwise have been used for learning activities.

#### **4.4.2 Distance from the Local Regional Centre**

The majority of ZOU students (80%) who live in the rural areas still have to travel a mean distance of 100Km to come to their local Regional Centre for student support services such as guidance and counselling, registering, library services submission and collection of assignments, and writing examinations. This scenario could explain why distance is still a significant factor which could be partly responsible for student drop out at the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East region. The central administration of the ZOU is based at the National Centre in Harare, the capital city. The ZOU operates through ten Regional Centres and district centres located in each of the ten geo-political provinces of the country. The main objective of these Regional Centres and district learning centres is to mitigate distance between the learner and the institution by taking the university out into the community (Benza, 2001). Despite efforts by the university to bring education to every doorstep, the existing District Centres have not been very effective in the provision of student support services possibly contributing to the decline in student numbers.

#### **4.4.3 Inactive students' Academic Year of Suspension of Studies**

Most students dropped out of their studies in the first year according to the findings of this study. The first year therefore is very critical with regards to student retention. According to Tinto (1975), withdrawal process depends on how students interact with the social and academic (internal) environment of the institution. In an ODL context, researchers tend to place more emphasis on the influence of external environment, such as student's occupation and support from their family, while the concept of social integration into an ODL institution's cultural fabric, is given less weight (Kember, 1995). Students enrolled in ODL are typically adults, attend part-time, and may be full-time jobholders who are also shouldering family responsibilities (McGivney, 2004). For such students, factors such as 'lack of time,' 'poor guidance,' 'lack of feedback on assignments,' 'time management,' 'unrealistic expectations,' and so on often lead to withdrawal. Studies have shown that students form their feelings about an institution within the first week of enrolment. Therefore, Pennsylvania College of Technology attempts to retain students and aid in their transition to college within this first week of enrolment. Testing, advising, and scheduling all occur on the first day of school. In addition, ID cards, campus tours, fee payments, and other services are explained on the first day. College administrators also call students who do not attend orientation and ask if they wish to reschedule (Izuagie, 200). Tinto (1988) has argued that factors that affect distance education students can be divided into intrinsic (institutional – related) and extrinsic (student – related). Tinto goes on to say withdrawal process depends on how students interact with the social and academic (internal) environment of the institution.

### **4.5 Institutional–Related factors responsible for the decline in student enrolment at Mashonaland East Regional Centre between 2009 and 2013**

#### **4.5.1 Tutoring as a student support service**

In the present study about half of the students (56%) said tutoring was effective and 44% said it was not effective. As a result 60% of the respondents said they preferred Block release and the Lecture delivery method. Majoni and Chidhaka, (2005), in a study of students' views on tutorials reports that 60% of the students at the ZOU were facing transport problems when coming for weekend tutorials and as a result they were always late. In another study (unpublished) by (Kangai and Zikhali, 2007) attendance registers kept at Mashonaland East Regional Centre indicated that some tutorials were taking place where only 20 per cent of the students are able or want to attend. This has serious academic and financial implications. The main aim of tutoring is to provide the learner with effective academic support. In distance education tutoring complements the printed correspondence text. A tutor serves as the primary and sometimes the only instructional contact for the isolated

distance learner. The tutor guides, advises and sometimes coaches the learner. The tutor also assists the learner in removing obstacles to learning (Ndeya-Ndereya, Mhlanga and Chikuya, 2003). Students' dissatisfaction with tutorials is likely to lead students to withdrawal.

#### **4.5.2 Management of Assignments**

In this study, 50% of the respondents were of the opinion that the handling of assignments was good and effective. At ZOU, assignments form the course work for each student, hence they are highly valued. In distance education, assignments are a very critical component of the delivery mode. Poor management of assignments and study packs is likely to lead to withdrawal. Assignments are used as a teaching and learning instrument. They are used by both the tutor and the student to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching and learning that is taking place.

#### **4.5.3 Communication**

40% of respondents pointed out that communication between the Regional Centre and the students is not effective. The quality and effectiveness of distance education in general depends on appropriate information and communication technology (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010). ZOU faces communication challenges due to low levels of technological development. Although the majority of ZOU students (98%) own cell phones and only 10% have computers (Kangai and Bukaliya, 2010) access to information and communication technology is still very limited. The majority of students working and living in rural areas (80%) have no access to a computer. Poor Network for cell phones and poor postal services also negatively affect communication. As a result ZOU heavily relies on the traditional way of communication – use of the notice board. Although the local press is also used, many students who live in the rural areas have no access to newspapers. Thus serious communication challenges have negatively affected student retention. Several researchers have reported 'lack of guidance and information prior to registering and enrolment,' 'lack of support from faculty,' and difficulty 'contacting faculty' as factors contributing to withdrawal (Garland, 1993; and Tresman, 2002).

#### **4.5.4 Library Support Services**

52% of the students rated the ZOU Mashonaland East Regional library as being ineffective. The study helped to establish the potential, challenges and opportunities faced by the ZOU library in the provision of learner support services to distance education students. The challenge for the ZOU library is to remain relevant to the needs of distance education students in today's digital world. In distance education, libraries are expected to respond to the need of anytime, anywhere by providing materials at the student's individual location. Also in line with current findings, Dillon, Gunawardena, and Parker (1992) established that the majority of students (57.3 percent) indicated that success in the course required access to library materials. The implication is that poor library support services at the Mashonaland East Regional Centre have a negative effect on student enrolment.

#### **4.5.6 Financial Problems**

Data collected on students' employment and income, show that the majority of inactive students (86%) were civil servants and the remaining 14% were from the private sector. The average monthly incomes were less than USD500. On average ZOU students were paying fees amounting to USD520 per semester for undergraduate programmes and USD760 for post graduate programmes. Besides their college fees, ZOU students had other financial commitments to meet (food, clothes, children's school fees and the cost of travelling to attend tutorials). This means that the majority of ZOU students struggle to pay their college fees.

## **V. Conclusions**

- 5.1 Student enrolment statistics at the ZOU - Mashonaland East Regional Centre experienced the worst decline (40%) in 2009 between the first and second semester due to socio-economic and political challenges prevailing in the country then. From 2010 the enrolment has maintained a steady decline due to financial challenges faced by students as a result of depressed salaries and institutional – related factors such as of unfriendly management policies that have impacted negatively on accessibility, affordability, flexibility and cost effectiveness of Open and distance learning provision. The rate of decline in enrolment varied according to programmes.
- 5.2 The gender dimension of ODL shows that women are concentrated in the following programmes: education, counselling, psychology, geography, agric, BAECs and nursing science. Men dominate in commercial courses, for instance accounts, marketing, human resource MBA. MPHIL and DPHIL. Although gender inequity and inequality exist in student enrolment, there is a marked improvement from 37.49% in 2009 to 44% in 2013 in the participation of women in distance education. However, the

participant of women in distance education as compared to men (56%) at Mashonaland East Regional Centre still remains a cause for concern.

- 5.3 Financial challenges caused by low salaries and unfriendly fees policy was cited by almost 92% of the respondents as the major cause of student dropout.
- 5.4 Institutional – related factors such as tutoring, communication, library services and fees policy were said to be ineffective, thereby leading students to dropout.
- 5.5 Students preferred Block release and the Lecture method to Tutoring which they said was ineffective.

## **VI. Recommendations**

- **Improvement in the quality and effectiveness of student support:** ZOU needs to improve the quality and effectiveness of student support services in the following areas: management of assignments, delivery of tutorials, distribution of study materials, and publication of examinations.
- **Increased tutorial hours per module:** Tutorial time per module should be increased (12 tutorial hours per module). ZOU should consider the advantages of the Block release method of delivery as opposed to tutorials.
- Student queries, of whatever nature, must be addressed promptly and effectively.
- **Discuss Cost Payment Plans at the Beginning:** It is important for ZOU to create a billing system that will allow for some flexibility in fees payment. An example would be allowing students to set up a payment plan.
- **Offer credit for prior learning and ease transfer credit process:** ZOU must offer some type of credit for prior learning. This should be emphasized in all marketing materials. Given the concern about cost, transferring credit can provide an incentive to applicants because it will reduce the time and money it takes to complete a degree program; therefore, it is important that ZOU makes this process clear and easy to navigate by having this information available on their Web site and making sure this option is listed in their marketing materials.
- **Offer Evening and Online Courses:** It is important to realise that a large majority of ZOU students have multiple responsibilities outside the classroom, so evening, or Online Courses are a necessity and this may result in increased enrolment of students. It is also important to talk with students at the beginning of the program to set clear expectations regarding time management so that students will be able to create time for their studies.
- **Connect Faculty and Curriculum to the Workplace:** Faculty should integrate some of their class assignments into projects that students can apply to their area of interest or to their workplace as a way to motivate students to complete their programmes as they will be able to appreciate relevancy of the programmes they will be doing. It is also important that admissions counsellors have some career counselling skills and discuss with applicants how they can apply their classroom assignments to their workplace. ZOU can also help make inroads with the local community by helping to organize job fairs, work with local businesses to develop internship opportunities for students. This can bring visibility of ZOU and possibly attract more students.
- **Offer Orientation and Community Building:** Creating a sense of community is one way to combat the apprehension and let students know that they are not alone and that there are other learners with similar backgrounds in the program. This means planning personalized points of contact with advisors, conducting a new student orientation and letting students exchange a dialogue between one another to build relationships and help support one another. While distance education students may not be as focused on the social aspect of higher education as traditional college students, they still want to feel that they belong and that they have a support network through the process.
- **Adopt Flexible Leave Policies:** ZOU must adopt policies and procedures that address the special needs of distance education students. Distance education students represent a broad range of age groups; therefore, ZOU needs to be prepared to work with students who are having children, going through long-term illnesses, getting married, and experiencing other important life events. If students need to take a semester off, this process should be easy to understand and explained to students at the beginning of the program. Allowing students the ability to take time off their studies without penalty is key to student retention.
- **Recruit in Businesses and Community:** While high school visits make up the majority of recruiting efforts for many traditional college admissions, visits to local business leaders and attendance at community events is essential to recruiting distance education students. The key is to create diverse recruiting strategies. Career fairs, professional conferences, county fairs, chamber of commerce events and other



community events such as art fairs and festivals are all forums for recruiting which can translate in an increased enrolment. Establishing contact with human resource departments at local businesses, locating those businesses that offer tuition reimbursement, and reaching out to business leaders to serve on program development teams or as speakers at on-campus events, and inviting business leaders to ZOU events are all activities that will help to bring visibility to ZOU's programmes.

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