

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) graduates and the job market: A case study on the employability of ZOU media graduates (Harare Regional Centre)

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Abstract: *The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) introduced the Media Studies programme in 1999. The programme has grown over the years and many prominent journalists have passed through the Department. Initially the programme targeted practising journalists with certificates, diplomas as well as those who went through the cadetship system, but later the program opened up to everyone even the unemployed. Since 2000 more institutions also started offering training in Media Studies and Journalism thereby increasing the number of media job seekers. With only one television station, only three radio stations and a stagnant print media this study focused on the employment patterns of students who went through media studies programme at ZOU from 2010-2014. The purpose of the study was to get feedback from these graduates on their current employment, their views on the syllabus they went through and what they think may have been missing in their programme which may need to be adjusted to better prepare future students for the job market. Scholars on ODL such as Belawati and Wardani (2010) have pointed out this system of education are efficient and that employers have started to consider graduates from ODL as equally qualified. This study will use the qualitative methodology and the case study design. The respondents will be purposively selected. The main instruments of data collection will be questionnaire and interviews. These will be administered to a sample of students. The findings will go a long way in improving the quality of journalism training offered by ZOU.*

Keywords: *Open and distance learning, media studies, journalism training, and tracer studies*

I. Introduction

Tracer studies have been carried out by many institutions as a way of tracing what their graduates are doing after leaving their educational institution. Many studies on such activities have been done and tracer studies have been found to be very reliable in determining the life and movement of graduates of a particular institution. This has also been used as a method of evaluating the quality of studies being offered and the former students can highlight certain observed pros and cons so as to improve the system. According to Mercado (2010) the most important objective of university education is employment. He added that when most parents send their children to university, their hope is that after graduating they will get a decent and stable job. This is very true for most Zimbabwean parents since it is taken as an important legacy a parent can give a child.

At the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Harare Region is the biggest campus since it is located in the capital city. During the period under study, the region has graduated over 500 students under the media studies programme alone. According to Shongwe and Ocholla, (2011) most universities keep a database of those who graduated, but nothing on their whereabouts after the day of graduating. In Zimbabwe because of the increase in the number of universities offering media studies it has become relevant to see how this programme is performing by checking on what the graduates are doing after graduating. This will assist in seeing how relevant the programme is; help with curriculum reviews and the general networking with former students. This is crucial feedback needed by any programme which is focussed and forward looking in terms of meeting the demands of the 'real world' (Shongwe and Ocholla, 2011).

This study is aimed at tracing graduates from the Department of Media Studies and Journalism- Harare Region from 2010-2014 so as find out what they are doing, where they are and how to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Background

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) as an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) University introduced the Media Studies programme in 1999 under the department of Arts, in the faculty of Arts and Education. In 2010 the department was split into three that is; Departments of Languages and Literature, Religious Studies and Theology and Media Studies and Journalism. The new Department of Media Studies and

Journalism incorporated the journalism component which was not there before. Since then the programme has grown over the years and many prominent journalists have passed through the Department. Initially the programme targeted working journalists and other media related personnel but later opened up to everyone even those who were coming from the high school.

The ODL system was introduced by the Zimbabwean Government around the 90s as a way of giving a learning opportunity to a majority of people who had been disadvantaged by the colonial system. The government had realised that, like according to authors Abu Baker et al, (2009), who affirm that;

the purpose of education is to enable society to have a command of knowledge, skills and values for achieving a country's vision of attaining the status of a fully developed nation in terms of economic development, social justice, spiritual, moral and ethical strength. They go on to add that education helps a society to unite and to become liberal and democratic.

ZOU was established as a state university to deal with the colonial system's many bottlenecks which prohibited many people from furthering their education as they looked for jobs to either fend for themselves or support the young brothers and sisters in the large families. Many people in the past went to school up to 'O' level when universities recruited people with 'A' Levels. So ZOU was introduced to cater for people with 'O' level passes.

The ODL as a system is new in Zimbabwe and initially many people shunned it and saw it as inferior since they were used to the conventional mode. Later on through awareness programmes and experiences from the students themselves more people starting joining and studied through ODL.

Since 2000 more institutions also started offering training in Media Studies and Journalism thereby increasing the number of media job seekers. With only one television station, only three radio stations and a stagnant print media this study will focus on the employment patterns of students who went through media studies programme at ZOU from 2010-2014. The study would look at where the graduates are, what they are doing and also hear their views on the curriculum they went through. This study would check whether there is a mismatch between what the university is producing and what the economy needs.

Statement of the Problem

ZOU is an ODL institution and the ODL concept is new in Zimbabwe. The study is centred on seeing how students who studied through ODL are performing on the job market. Many people have been working in the media field without the requisite skills. The few with diploma were failing to leave work to further their studies because of family commitments.

ZOU Quality Mission

To promote, enhance and provide world class quality delivery and standards for the Zimbabwe Open University in line with the Vision of the University.

ZOU Mission Statement

The Zimbabwe Open University exists to empower people through lifelong learning thereby enabling them to realize their full potential in an affordable and flexible manner while executing their endeavours.

ZOU Vision

To become a World Class Open and Distance Learning University

ZOU Core Values

Dedication to highest levels of excellence
Creation of an innovative culture
Promotion of integrity
Adherence to highest levels of ethical standards
Delighting Stakeholders

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

- Establish the current employment trends of ZOU media studies graduates from Harare Region.
- Track the whereabouts of former media studies students.
- assess the media studies curriculum so as to improve it, employment trends and how gained skills match the employment market.

Research Questions

The paper will answer to the following questions:

- Are media studies graduates being employed and how many?
- Where are these former students employed?
- What comments can be made on the curriculum they used and what should be done to improve the skills and make ZOU graduates more employable?

Significance Of The Study:

This study is very important for the following reasons:

- It will help the department assess the curriculum and know what the graduates are doing.
- Other institutions can compare what the department is offering and what the job market demands.
- Assist improves services provided by the department.

II. Review Of Related Literature

According to Schomburg (1996) tracer studies are an important tool for institutional development especially in this globalised world. It has become apparent that universities interact with its former students so as to get feedback used to improve on services offered. It is crucial to know the whereabouts of the graduates, their employment positions, their working conditions and allow them to do a retrospective assessment of their course of study which can be used in enriching the curriculum, teaching, research, extension, and networking. (www.mak.ac.ug). The report produced by the Asian Institute of Technology also pointed that a tracer study helps to measure the “extent of professional and academic careers pursued by the graduates after gaining knowledge and skill through academic institutions” (www.ait.ac.th).

Tracer or follow-up (Shongwe and Ocholla 2011) are common with many institutions of higher learning. The researchers have for example pointed at many such studies done in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) in African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa and many others. They noted that such studies like the one carried out by Mammo (2007) in Ethiopia showed that some programmes can change while others remain the same which increases dissatisfaction among students (Shongwe and Ocholla 2011).

Shongwe and Ocholla (2011) conducted a tracer study on the LIS graduates from the university of Zululand. The two researchers wanted to establish where the graduates where, what they were doing and what interventions could be made to improve on future graduates. Their study showed that most of their graduates had been employed for more than two years. They noted that graduates from their university were marketable although the main employer was the government and not the private sector. It was noted that the graduates were not happy with the curriculum which led it to be reviewed.

The South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide) (2011) cited in Rupande (2015) said, tracer studies are now commonly used by institutions to ‘determine the impact of their services on former learners or clients’. Rupande argues that ‘tracer studies encompass a wide range of diverse efforts which can provide intellectual building blocks for newer undertakings, if we can only learn to build on the old while attempting the new’. The researcher added that institutions of higher learning use tracer studies to monitor and assess their performance from the calibre of graduates they produce and how they are absorbed by the job market. Such studies are good to track former students so as to assess the relevance of the different programmes offered by institutions of higher learning (Rupande, 2015).

Mwilima (2010) carried out an assessment on the employability of media studies graduates at the University of Namibia. He also wanted to look at the employment patterns of these graduates. The study showed that 75% of the 24 graduates were employed with 21% in professional training and 13% furthered their studies (Mwilima, 2010). The graduates highlighted that the programme had little practical content, lacked lecturers, had bad teaching methods and lack of resources among many others.

Latif and Bahroom (2010) conducted a tracer study on the quality of Open and Distance education of the Open University of Malaysia (OUM). The researchers noted that the graduates were satisfied with the curriculum, assessment system, teaching staff and knowledge skills whilst they were moderately satisfied with the facilities and career guidance. This study also showed that the overall mean satisfaction score for this study was higher than the previous years which showed that the system was always improving and people understood the concept of ODL.

From this study it was interesting to note that 78% of the graduates were willing to attend additional training after graduating which showed how OUM had managed to instil a culture of lifelong learning.

Cortado’s (2010) findings from a tracer study of Mass Communication graduates of Centro Escolar University in the Philippines noted that the majority of the graduates are employed, ... and hold media-related positions as well as other related positions in organisations. Those not working in media related fields cited too much competition as the foremost reason why they had to seek other jobs.

III. Methodology

A survey of Media Studies graduates was conducted between January and February 2015. The researcher wanted to investigate the various jobs held by the region's former students and the challenges faced by these graduates of the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at ZOU's Harare Region between 2010 and 2014. Since the researcher was targeting many people a survey method was picked so as to reach even those far away. The study initially targeted 300 former students but because of the short time used the researcher opted for purposive sampling based on the students who had e-mail addresses in the regional office's database.

The researcher managed to get e-mail addresses of 105 graduates for this study. A questionnaire was distributed to the 105 graduates. The questionnaire used during the study had open and closed questions and was e-mailed the same day to all the 105 graduates.

There was a very slow response rate which could be a result of some people having changed their old e-mail addresses they used in college. It was decided to follow some using the telephone numbers given in the database and then use the snowball technique basing on the help by the surveyed students. The snowball made it possible to trace two graduates now working in Johannesburg, South Africa. The data collection took five weeks. At the end 55 questionnaires were returned.

IV. Results

The majority of the respondents are full-time employed after successfully completing their B.A. Media Studies (BAMS) (48), 4 are freelancing journalists and 3 are doing administration work. It was also interesting to note that 49% of the graduates had done other professional studies before their studies with the university.

The public sector is the main employer of Media Studies graduates. Thirty-four of the forty-eight graduates are working in the public media which is predominant in the country and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Services as well as Media related departments in other Ministries. Five are employed by the Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) sector and four are with other state owned institutions. Three are working in the private media and two in public relations or corporate communications sector.

Sectors where BAMS students are employed

N=55

Sector	Frequency
Private media	3
Public media	26
Government Ministries	8
NGO	5
Parastatals	4
Public relations/corporate communications	2
Administration (public sector)	3
Freelancing	4

Almost all the graduates who are employed have been in their jobs for more than four years and some are even ten years into their employment.

As is the trend in the country, ninety percent of the graduates indicated that they applied for their current jobs after seeing an advertisement in the local newspapers. Eight percent indicated that they were referred by relatives and the remainder did not indicate how they got employed.

Major Activities: All graduates except for 3 are doing media work. The titles and duties being done varies from one organisation to the other but the common titles are Reporters, Editors, Producers, Public Relations Officers or Executives, Corporate communications Officers, Proof Readers and Information Officers. Since graduating some have managed to change their jobs. Many also want to change their jobs. The main reason stated is that they now "seek a challenging job that suit my qualifications" pointed out one of the graduates.

V. Recommendations For Programme Improvement

Since one of the major aim of this study was to give the former students a chance to make recommendations to the department, all participants gave their views. They recommended the following;

Issue	Status
Introduce practicals in radio, TV and print	Desktop Publishing and News writing introduced
Need for internship	introduced
Tours to media houses	Not yet
Introduce own radio, TV stations and newspaper or magazine	Not yet
Interaction with media organisations	Not yet
More practical and hands on	Not yet
Computer Skills	introduced
Need for ZOU premises for tutorials	Not yet

The study covered the period up to 2010 but some of the issues raised have already been introduced and already form part of the current curriculum.

Acquired Skills

The graduates are happy that they acquired very good skills which they are using in their places of employment. On seeking training upon joining a new organisation after graduating, the majority 87% did not need any training and 12% only sought less help from superiors on issues to deal with organisational policies. The training programmes attended were mainly to deal with refresher courses or new things being introduced and everyone had to attend. Most of the former students felt that they were well equipped to do their work efficiently and effectively. Only one percent was trained when they joined a new organisation since they were taking over a senior position.

Studies with ZOU

All the graduates chose to study with ZOU because the colonial education system had sidelined them and they could not manage to go to conventional universities. The majority of these former students were working and had families so they could not afford to leave their jobs. ZOU is decentralised to all provinces so this university was close to their homes and 90% chose ZOU because the programme was affordable. Others highlighted that the university afforded them the opportunity to further their studies whilst remaining at work. The graduates pointed out these strengths in the programme: a) well written modules which are now being used by all universities in the country and beyond; b) Tutorials held are very informative and the tutors are good and experienced; c) very interesting courses being offered which covers a broad spectrum; d) theory is detailed and well articulated; e) tutor student relationship and range of courses offered.

Weaknesses of the programme

Certain weaknesses were noted by the graduates such as: a) unavailability of some tutors for tutorials; b) lack of practical sessions; c) lack of computers; d) lack of extra curriculum activities and e) lack of work placement. These weaknesses are being handled so as to do away with them. Computer laboratories have already been introduced, tutors are recruited every semester and the programme is reviewed continuously. Other issues raised by the graduates were that tutorial venues should be central or near city centre, venues must be clean and that more time was needed for tutor- student interaction. Some 5% indicated the need for interaction with former students who will provide information of what is prevailing in industry.

Relevance of the study

It was noted that the majority of the graduates said the programme was relevant and were happy that their studies had these particulars; a) enhanced their academic knowledge; b) improved problem solving skill; c) improved research skills; d) improved learning efficiency and e) improved communication skills. Generally the respondents were satisfied as shown by the ratings which were either good or very good.

SN	Particulars	Very high	High	Fairly high	Not high	No response
1.	Range of courses offered	50	5	0	0	0
2.	Number of optional courses	0	0	15	38	2
3.	Relevance of the programme to your professional requirements	52	3	0	0	0
4.	Extra curriculum activities	0	0	0	51	4
5.	Problem solving	42	8	5	0	0
6.	Inter-disciplinary learning	39	11	5	0	0
7.	Internship	0	0	0	55	0
8.	Tutorial/learning environment	42	9	4	0	0
9.	Quality of delivery	47	6	1	0	1
10.	Tutor-student relationship	35	13	6	0	1
11.	Library/Laboratory	0	36	17	2	0

VI. Conclusion

The study shows that the graduates are doing something after graduating. Only four are not formally employed but freelancing and three are totally not working in a media related environment. With the number that is employed shows that the employers are happy with the qualification as they expect the graduates to bring in new skills and knowledge to the organisation. The former students suggested that the programme put on board more practical courses and that the field of study incorporate a journalism component.

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