

An Analysis of Challenges Faced by Students Learning in Virtual and Open Distance Learning System: A Case of Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE)

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Abstract

After realizing that the traditional modes of tuition in Zimbabwe's andragogy had either gone obsolete or over-crowded, BUSE, ventured into a 'virtualised' model of the open and distance learning as a way of out-doing other competing universities. However, as the programme was rolled out, there came a myriad of challenges affecting the students ranging from financial, personal commitment, time, stereotypes, and social and work pressures. These constraints have to some extent negatively affected both the delivery of the programme and the pass rate of the students. The paper therefore seeks to make an analysis of challenges faced by students who are in the Virtual and Open Distance Learning (VODL) at BUSE based on a research that is being conducted at the seven centres country-wide. (149)

Key words: Students, VODL, and Andragogy

Introduction

According to Das et al (2009), half of the students enrolled in higher education in the developing world are receiving it through the open and distance learning mode.

This has been influenced by a growing desire by the majority of people to acquire education from the few learning institutions that are offering higher education in a flexible manner. Open and Distance Learning is a relatively recent mode of tuition in Zimbabwe whereby there is limited contact between the student and the lecturer while at the same time the former is afforded ample independence, autonomy and flexibility during the studies.

The Virtual and Open Distance Learning (V.O.D.L) programme emerged as an institutionally born strategy to satisfy the training needs of the prospective Science Educators who are already employed or wish to be employed as school teachers. The current training policies and economic challenges on access to Higher Education and delivery systems in the country appear to deter many prospective Science Educators from training at Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) and any other conventional institution of Higher Learning in Zimbabwe and elsewhere.

The high rate of brain drain mainly of Science Educators, low science trainee teachers' enrolment in colleges and universities as well as economic challenges, currently being experienced following the 2003-2009 economic crises, has created a critical shortage in the Zimbabwean schools. The programme is also in pursuance of achieving the Millennium Development Goal number 2, which calls for Universal Education for all by 2015, by training the science teachers who, in turn, will facilitate in the teaching and learning processes for the children.

The V.O.D.L programme targets relief science teachers for the Diploma in Science Education programme, Certificate and Diploma in Education holders for the Degree programmes and any persons with specified qualifications who are not necessarily employed as teachers. The V.O.D.L Programme is a way of bringing the university to the doorstep of the student. The study therefore seeks to understand open and distance learning in relation to the VODL and in particular paying a closer look at the challenges that are confronting both the programme and the students. It may not be necessary to understand the challenges alone without putting forward possible corrective measures. Therefore, the study will also make some recommendations on how the programme could be improved both on the part of the students' benefits and on the university side.

Methodology

This paper is an extract from a research that was conducted at the VODL centres and at BUSE with the purpose of analysing some of the challenges that face the students who are enrolled in this programme.

From 2011 to 2012, the research was focused on the seven VODL centres but with the closure of two of the centres, the research will progress on the five centres; Chindunduma High School, St Alberts High School all in Mashonaland Central province, Mutare Teachers' College in Manicaland Province, Mzingwane High School in Matebeleland South Province and Fatima High School in Matebeleland North province.

During the research, interviews and questionnaires were employed to gather the required data from the 70 sampled students and 10 members of staff. Precisely, there were 10 questionnaires that were randomly administered at each centre while 5 respondents were set to be interviewed at each of the centres during the same period. However, out of all the targeted 25 interviewees, 20 were successful constituting 80% response evenly distributed throughout all the centres. The other 20% failed largely due to pressing commitments on the part of the sampled respondents.

Regarding questionnaires, there was a 100% response rate as respondents were asked to complete during set period after which, researchers followed up collecting. Both interviews and questionnaires deliberately sought to answer the following questions; how they viewed VODL in relation to its effectiveness and relevance, how they were coping with the requirements around tuition fees and other social responsibilities, how they were managing to comprehend all the given information within the set time and what they felt were their major challenges in the studies.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the Equivalency theory of Open and Distance Learning by Keegan (1995). Basically the theory equates tuition to the effect of real time television systems whereby a student is electronically linked to the lecturer at various locations.

The theory argues that distance education should be developed on a concept of equivalency to learning experiences. The theory will help us analyse whether the virtual component is being achieved in VODL and also establish how the aforementioned challenges are coming about and possibly how best they can be attended to.

Background

The concept of university Open and Distance Learning in Zimbabwe was introduced by the University of Zimbabwe as a way of accommodating a wider catchment area of students following a realisation that the only university in Zimbabwe then, University of Zimbabwe could no-longer cope up with pressure and the government's deliberate policy of allowing more students into university.

Resultantly, the government established a Commission of Inquiry into the Establishment of a Second University or Campus. The Commission chaired by Peter Williams of the Commonwealth Education secretariat was put in place in 1989 and subsequently recommended the establishment of a conventional university in Bulawayo while plans were underway to set-up an ODL unit at the University of Zimbabwe called UZ-Centre for Distance Education (UZ-CDE), Williams Commission Report (1989).

However, prior to the creation of the UZ-CDE, there had already been other ODL colleges of the likes of Government Correspondence School, Zimbabwe Distance Education College, Central Africa Correspondence College and the Rapid Results College. Within the government, the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare was already upgrading its rural staff through distance learning while the Ministry of Education was upgrading secondary school teachers through the Zimbabwe Integrated Education Curriculum (ZINTEC) (ibid).

Open and Distance Learning

Open and Distance Learning is a mode of tuition whereby there is no daily contact between the learner and the lecturer and yet there is equally effective exchange of knowledge. This modus of tuition is preferred by the working people for it allows for greater autonomy, independence and flexibility on the part of the learner. According to Ridge and Waghid (2000), distance education has developed in three main phases; the first generation, second generation and third generation. The first generation is one that is usually called the correspondence study or the single medium distance education characterised by study materials that are mailed to students with guides on how to answer some questions and assignments before they are sent back for marking.

The second generation or simply multi-media distance education is known for its greater range of 'one-way' media especially the print, television, and cassettes and some 'two-way' communication with correspondence tutors and face-to-face tutorials. According to these scholars, the traditional Open Universities, ZOU included were established based on these generational paradigms. The third generation or the telematic system emerged in the 1990s courtesy of electronic information technologies like the telecommunications, computer and audio-video conferencing facilities. With the passage of time and the emergence of new technology, the means are increasingly being found to bridge the physical separation in distance education between lecturers and students.

However, very few universities in the developing world and especially Zimbabwe are able to create the opportunities for interaction that telematic tuition gives.

In ODL, dispersed centres are created for administration purposes and amongst others are expected to offer the following services: student registration, library services, communication, assignment administration and tutorial services and marketing, (Ncube 2007). The quality of service offered at an ODL centre depends on various factors amongst them; how well a centre is being managed, how well the welfare of the staff is being catered for by the university at large and the centre's accessibility to the majority of the students. It must also be borne in mind that the registration process is the first contact between the institution and the student. Therefore, his/her first experience may determine the kind of relationship that will be created between the two. To ensure maximum student retention, centres must adopt an approach whereby it understands, empathise, personalize and manage the needs of the student as failure to retain attracted and registered students is a waste of resources on the part of the university.

Quality Control

In Zimbabwe's education sector, the quality control and assurance aspect is managed by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) which is a statutory body that exists through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25: 08) of 2006, (GoZ² 2006). Quality control refers to the operational techniques and activities employed to fulfil requirements for quality (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2007). The mandate of ZIMCHE is basically, according to Section 5(1) to;

- Promote and coordinate education provision by institutions of higher learning.
- Acts as a regulator in maintaining standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research in institutions of higher education.
- Design institutional quality assurance systems and

- Accredite institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) pointed out that external quality control systems are not necessarily effective for internal improvement purposes. Therefore there is need for individual institutions to design their own quality assurance and quality control strategies guided by own values, expectations, and professional accountability. There is therefore a need to develop quality assurance mechanisms that ensure consistent delivery of products and services to students, staff and the intended market at large. From the aforementioned mandate of ZIMCHE, the university through VODL has also made sure that the required quality of tuition is maintained at all the centres through the enforcement of various facilities.

There is a peer and student evaluation that is mandatory at all centres and for every lecturer. These are meant to highlight areas that need future attention by whoever is being evaluated. Evaluation is never meant to witch-hunt or to fix for a previous dispute but to improve one's performance. It was emphasised to students that the Lecturer and Course Evaluation was an important tool meant to ensure that students get the best service from their lecturers and so it was important that they completed these as objectively as possible.

There is also the provision of the Gender Policy which also regulates the conduct by members of staff towards students. The University Ordinance also to some extent, help regulate the conduct by both students and staff members while they are still either in the registers or employment of the university respectively. The quality of VODL tuition is also monitored and maintained by the use of work plans and regular meetings at both departmental and faculty levels.

Virtual and Open Distance Learning in Zimbabwe

The strategy of the VODL programme is unique in as far as open and distance learning is concerned. Andragogy involves a variety of tuition modes which various institutions have adopted as a means of meeting their visions and missions. Zimbabwe has been flooded with universities that are into conventional tuition. While universities offering conventional tuition were all over in Zimbabwe, the fees were deterrent to most prospective students. Besides, there were also some employed people who wanted to further their studies but could not secure study leaves or had other commitments while others simply did not want to be in college in advanced ages.

These needed to enrol with a distance or a block release programme. VODL comes in to offer university quality formal teachers' diploma training at a central institution for three-week duration. Tuition is supposed to be technology-based.

An average VODL semester is an equivalence of two blocks and the period in between and that translates to about 4-5 months to allow a 48-hour lecturer-student contact time.

Each course is run during the two blocks with an average of 3 assignments and an in-class test and practicals (in the case of practical courses) before an examination is written. There is also a component for the trained teachers who require an Honours Science teaching degree to enrol. VODL is about the systematic blending of conventional techniques, block release systems, open and distance learning principles and telematic tuition concepts. These are meant to cater for the needs of the differently-abled learners from different backgrounds.

Since its inception in 2010, the programme has shrunk by an average 6% particularly from 2010 to 2011 where enrolment decreased from 1 638 to 1 545. However, the shrinkage is attributed to the general economic and social trends that characterise the Zimbabweans' ways of life where others find other jobs, get married or fail to raise the required instalments of fees. The programme was initially launched in one province of Mashonaland Central as a pilot programme in 2010 before it was expanded to the Matebeleland provinces and Manicaland province in 2011.

The student response and enrolment was encouraging given the fact that the target group was from the lowest echelons of the society, needed to travel from very remote and distant areas and that the programme was new. Below are statistics of the enrolled students per province as at 2011 December block.

Fig 1

PROVINCE	2010	DIFFERENCE	2011	TOTAL
Mashonaland entral	899	+183	1 082	1 082
Manicaland	166	-20	146	146
Matebeleland North	191	-30	161	161
Matebeleland South	182	-16	156	156
TOTAL	1 638	-93	1 545	1 545

Strengths of Virtual and Open Distance Learning

Unlike any other university institution in Zimbabwe, the VODL has been observed to be moving along its own line where no-one has dared travelling. This is so given the fact that it is the only programme that has fused block release concept with the distance and open learning concept but all under a virtualised approach. This uniqueness of the programme has given it an advantage over other available tuition systems. Besides, there are also other advantages that VODL has over other institutions. The cost structures in open and distance learning are quite different from cost structures in conventional types of education.

This is usually so because capital investments usually substitute for high recurrent costs, making economies of scale a decisive factor. The fact that VODL centres are almost replicas of a formal campus with all the facilities and the administration staff makes them more ideal and yet cheaper on the part of the students. The costs of open and distance learning vary a great deal according to the use of learning materials, media and technologies, and types and organization of student support services. However, with the VODL programme, there are no additional staff who are specifically employed to provide tuition during VODL blocks.

Instead, the same staff from the conventional faculties is assigned with the tasks. This also serves as an advantage as the same lecturers will be experienced in the same courses that they take in the conventional programme. The cost-efficiency aspect of open and distance learning systems is determined by the following amongst others: the number of learners enrolled; the size of the curriculum; the number of years over which courses are offered without change; containment of course development costs; sharing course development costs; technology choice and the level of student support availed, Rumble (1997).

VODL also offers an opportunity to combine education with work and family life unlike other modes of tuition. Besides, it provides a speedy and efficient training for key target groups who will be practicing as well. These would have been recruited by the District Education Officers in their respective districts of work. With a pending Memorandum of Understanding between VODL and Ministry of Education, all graduates are set to be guaranteed of immediate absorption into employment by the latter amongst several other benefits.

Unlike any other tuition modes at Bindura University or any other institution, the VODL programme is designed in a flexible and student-friendly in a way that students are allowed to pay their tuition fees in instalments. This has been received well by the students who, from their meagre salaries are able to pay in manageable terms. The fact that Bindura University is focused on training science teachers and specifically equipped to deliver that service makes it a specialist when it comes to the production of quality science teachers. The staff is primarily experienced in training quality science teachers for any level.

VODL centres are equipped with modern technology and appropriate computers so that the virtual aspect of the programme is achieved. However, the institution is presently engaged in a massive capitalisation programme that will see the entire programme going 'virtual' as propounded by Bates (1995) in his definition of technologised learning. All these efforts and achievements by VODL are necessitated by the financial and policy support that the chancery has rendered.

According to the VODL official¹, the university is geared to install state-of-the art learning facilities at all of its centres as a way of easing knowledge acquisition by students from any point of the globe. It is expected that by the end of 2013, all the academic material will be on-line and other resources related to the computerization of the programme are beginning to be rolled out.

Weaknesses of the VODL

The programme has to some extent managed to establish itself on the ground and during the process building itself good reputation. However, during a critical analysis of the programme, it was observed that it has some weaknesses that have worked to its disadvantage during the period that it has been operationalised. The fact that the programme is new has naturally made it difficult to attract the numbers originally expected as some people were sceptical about its credibility. This doubt comes against a backdrop of the shoddy tuition and failures that other ODL institutions have allegedly had on the ground.

VODL's vision and objectives were clear during its inception that it sought to avail virtualised tuition to the disadvantaged segment of the society. To achieve that, the programme requires resources both human and financial. It has since managed to mobilise the human resource part of it albeit inadequate.

However, with the state of the national economy still to improve, the university has also faced some challenges trying to mobilise the required financial resources to appropriately and adequately equip the VODL programme. Lack of financial resources has ultimately affected all the other initiatives by the programme including ensuring maximum internet connectivity at the centres.

The other downside of the VODL programme is that during the period of the tuition block, there will be several other national activities and holidays that interfere and interrupt the smooth flow of the programme. Besides, the same university will be also offering block release tuition back at the main campus.

These activities tend to heavily affect the flow of the tuition process and create an extra cost to the students. Some of the students fail to return to the centres once they break for these national holidays that come in between the blocks owing to financial constraints. Internally, the moral of the staff involved was also to some extent affected when most of the leadership positions were given to lecturers from the Geography Department. Apparently, the former interim Programme Director had been from the Geography Department and so had prioritised his colleagues at the detriment of the whole programme.

Having talked about the general shortfalls around VODL, the programme was facing various challenges that were gradually eating into its reputation and enrolment. Fatima High School centre had a total of 161 students who returned at the centre during the December 2011/January 2012 block, a decrease from the previous enrolment of 193. The drop-out rate is 16.2% of the student population. Chindunduma High School centre had 66 Part 1 students and 291 Part II students giving a total of 357 students. On the Part II students, there was a drop out of 12 students which translates to 4%.

St Alberts centre had a total of 388 students who reported at the centre during the December 2011 block, of which 105 were first years and 283 were second years. The percentage drop out for the diploma program was 14.2% while for the degree program was 6.7%. Mzingwane High School centre had 165 students in December 2011 from the initial total of 182 marking a drop-out rate of 14.3 %, (Dodo 2012).

Noted Challenges Faced by Students

During the research, a sample of students from respective centres was interviewed over challenges that they believed negatively affected their tuition. The responses varied from one centre to the other. However, there were some common aspects that touched on all the students. In this presentation, these challenges have been laid out focusing each centre separately before those common issues are presented at the end.

The reasons for the dropouts according to fellow students included the following;

- Financial constraints: Out of the 50 questionnaires, 35 (70%) indicated that the fact that most of the students were drawn from the temporary teacher category meant that their income was low and bound to face serious financial problems. The other 30% indicated that it simply required proper forward planning. These temporary teachers earned an average of US\$220 per month and expected to fend for their families while still required to pay their monthly instalments of tuition fees.
- National army recruited some students: There were 16 (32%) questionnaires and 3 (15%) interviewees who cited parallel recruitment by the Zimbabwe National Army. Like it has been alluded above, any job that comes the students' way is an opportunity for employment. As such, when the Zimbabwe National Army went on its recruitment drive between August and November 2011, some of the students joined.
- Students who were sceptical about the programme opted out: out of the 20 interviewees, 13 (65%) pointed out that the mere scepticism that was in the minds of some students forced them to drop-out as they felt that the programme could not shape their fate. Apparently, this is the first group in this programme and therefore, there is no reference point on the success of the programme.
- Social problems like nursing ill relatives at home: 33 (66%) questionnaires and 7 (35%) interviewees noted that most of VODL students are drawn from the rural set-ups where modern social amenities are unavailable. As a result, some of the students were caught up in this dilemma of having to nurse their ill relatives or simply taking care of the minors left behind after the death of their parents due to the Aids scourge. This dilemma mostly affected female students.
- Four (8%) questionnaires and 11 (55%) interviewees raised a challenge about student pregnancy which they said is motivated by scepticism around the programme.

While some students were dropping out, there were other challenges that those who soldiered on faced as students. During the research, several of such hurdles were highlighted as follows:

- Abused by staff: 4 (8%) questionnaires and 2 (10%) interviews indicated that some students are exposed to serious physical or sexual abuse by some members of staff. The need to pass by students exposes them into this dilemma of having to give in to unjustified demands for sexual favours by some staff members. While this was noted in male staff, there were also cases where female staff members also lured some male students into sexual encounters.

Besides, some members of staff were engaged into informal trade activities with students so much so that the latter were indirectly forced to buy whatever wares the former were selling as a way of winning favours with the staff members.

- Peer pressure: 29 (58%) questionnaires and 11 (55%) interviewees also indicated that they faced a problem of trying to resist social pressures that their fellow students were imposing on them. Such pressures came in the form of either taking alcohol or having to engage in another love and subsequently sexual relationship at the centre when the permanent partner is back home.
- Knowledge acquisition pressure: 46 (92%) questionnaires and 18 (90%) interviewees indicated that they were finding it difficult to grasp all the courses under such pressure. This must be taken in light of the fact that some of these students come from that bracket of students who would have either failed during their high school era or would have dropped out due to truancy or some other misconduct. Therefore, their ability to master is questionable.
- Some registered students were not given their university identity documents/cards thus limiting their access to the university library facilities. This was raised by 2 (10%) interviewees.
- Poor accommodation for the students at some centres forcing them to either share single beds or squat in some inhabitable structures. This was raised by 2 (10%) interviewees.
- Five questionnaires (10%) felt the quality of some of the lecturers was not up to the mark. These sentiments were expressed in reference to some of the lecturers who are engaged from high schools to take up Ordinary level bridging courses like mathematics. Students felt that these did not have the university flair that is characteristic of university lecturers. However, the other 44 (88%) questionnaires felt that the quality of lecturers was good while 1 (2%) did not respond.
- Seven questionnaires (14%) and 2 interviewees (10%) cited a problem of stereotyping in the community. Eight students (40%) raised concerns over ill-qualified and inexperienced centre administrators.
- Forty-three questionnaires and 9 interviewees raised concern over the need to endure either rushed lectures or a 16-hour learning day.
- Twenty three questionnaires (46%) and 8 interviewees (40%) indicated that most of the VODL students are family people who have to struggle to balance their college work, family and work expectations. Some of the students come from remote areas where internet connectivity is almost non-existent. Therefore, their access to reading materials and or other information from VODL is limited. Their practice in the use of computers is also limited.
- Thirty eight questionnaires (76%) and 12 interviewees (60%) did express their concern at the non-existence or poor marketing efforts by VODL of its programme and the employment opportunities thereto. Students felt that it was going to be difficult for them to use their qualifications out on the market as most people were not yet aware of the VODL programme.

Noted Challenges Faced by VODL Centres

VODL centres have their fair share of problems that naturally affect their output quality and the morale of both lecturers and students. These problems vary with centres depending on the authorities responsible for the centres, the cost of living in that area, the leadership competency by some lecturers appointed to run centres and to some extent, the backgrounds of the students themselves. From the research, both students and members of staff raised the following as some of the most prominent challenges faced at the centres.

- Class sizes for courses in education, agriculture, biology, Citizenship and geography were too large. This spelt problems when it came to marking and conducting practical lessons. It also reduced the effectiveness of the lecturers. This challenge was noted by all the 10 lecturer respondents and 56% of the student respondents.
- Teaching media needs to be improved for large classes. 4 lecturer respondents (40%) suggested that at least four LCD projectors per centre are required to improve the situation.
- Six lecturer respondents (60%) also noted that lists of reading material have to be prepared early enough by the departments and forwarded to the library. The challenge is that the Library fails to mobilise the required material as there will not have been proper communication.
- Handbooks or modules for students should be expedited as students appreciated these materials so much. This was raised by 14 student interviewees (70%).
- All the lecturer respondents cited poor accommodation for lecturers. Lecturers put up in hostels owing to shortage or non-availability of proper facilities.
- The 4 lecturer respondents from the Matebeleland region noted that generally life is expensive in Matebeleland region compared to any other part of the country for they base their transactions on the South African Rand. As a result, staff members who are deployed in that region end up subsidizing the university thus affecting their morale and execution of duty.
- Student/teacher ratio should improve to cater for quality tuition and reduce over-workload on lecturers.
- All the student respondents noted that the school authorities at which centres are located have developed a tendency of increasing their boarding fees each block thus making it difficult for the students to meet their dues. A number of students are finding it difficult to pay for their residential fees.
- Some lecturers go to the centres without the full grasp of the work they are supposed to be doing. This is according to 19 questionnaires (38%) and 3 interviewees (15%). This negatively affects the students' learning zeal and puts the name of the university into disrepute.
- Overall, because of resource inadequacy (time, financial and material), there were conflicts between members of staff and students and amongst the staff and students themselves respectively.

Discussion

The responses by all the respondents did point towards both challenges and successes that have been so far registered in the programme. It was basically observed that the issue about lack of marketing on the part of VODL administrators was likely to affect the impact of the products on the market thereby disadvantaging the graduates.

Though there are some efforts in marketing BUSE as a university and VODL as a department, this may not be enough given the fact that it is a new programme that requires wide exposure to the people. Closely akin to the above is the problem of efficiency, equity, quality and benchmarking of the ODL system.

The problem is evident all-over as evidenced by the low acceptability of students from ODL system in conventional universities, internship placements and employment market. Most temporary teachers in Zimbabwe are people on the job market who at the end of the day take any job that comes their way. As a result, when they find other jobs or places at other conventional colleges, they simply opt out largely because of the scepticism that is in the people's minds on ODL. This fear and scepticism has been created from other ODL institutions' performance where even the government no-longer trusts the products.

On the question about relevance and effectiveness, it has been noted that the programme is very relevant as it seeks to fill the gap that was created over a period but mainly during the economic crisis era of 2000 up to 2009. The graduates from this VODL programme are expected to specialise in science areas of study considering the fact that BUSE is a pure science education university. However, there were also concerns about knowledge acquisition pressure whereby 92% of the questionnaires and 90% of the interviewees pointed out that such pressure on the part of the students may be hazardous. In andragogy, this is not ideal for effective tuition given other social and economic challenges.

It was also established that a sizeable number (exact figure not established) of female students had dropped out either to get married or to give birth. This is one of the problems that affect the development of women as they are also expected to engage in national reproduction duties.

There were also students who managed to establish that some centre administrators were ordinary lecturers largely drawn from the Geography department and were not subjected to any form of leadership development programmes to prepare them for such management tasks. Resultantly, they lacked in various areas.

Generally, VODL has not really and up-to-the-mark virtualised its systems as expected. This has worked to the disadvantage of the students who continue to lag behind technology-wise. While it is in its plans to computerise its systems and upload its modules, it is still a long way to achieve that goal given the pace at which work on the ground is moving.

While there are already some resource-influenced conflicts at all the centres, the challenge is likely to develop further unless BUSE rectifies.

Recommendations

It must be appreciated that the programme has improved over the period that it has been operational on the ground. However, whenever there is a new programme that involves such huge enrolment, there are bound to be challenges of various magnitudes. It is therefore the scope of this paper to possibly make the following recommendations for consideration. These have been developed from the responses and contributions that were gathered from both the students and lecturers in an on-going research.

- From a health perspective, there should be health services provision or some contingency to cater for health problems of students during their stay at VODL centres as the coordinators run into problems when there is a health problem of a student.

- The unavailability of electricity at most of the centres resulted in loss of tuition time, practice in computer courses and the use of projectors by lecturers. There is therefore the need for stand-by electricity generators at each centre to ensure continuity.
- VODL encourage students to engage in diversified researches by way of availing promotional facilities.
- VODL through the university provide for a stop-order facility whereby students who are temporary teachers have their tuition fees' instalments directly deducted from their salaries. This will also guarantee these students employment contracts with the Ministry of Education. At the end of the day, it is the VODL that retains its enrolment levels till the programme builds reputation on the ground.
- In the wake of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals which emphasise the need for education for sustainable development, there is now a need for innovative methodologies and programmes in ODL that meet the community and market expectations and standards.
- It is also recommended that VODL introduces information communication technology in the learner support and administration services. This will reduce the need to travel long distances to fulfil any university requirements. The same facilities will also avail printing and photocopying facilities to both the students and lecturers as this is a problem at the centres.
- There may also be need to introduce new programmes outside of education to cater for other disciplines.
- It is recommended that staff development workshops be continually held. This follows a realisation that some of the staff members lacked that flair expected of lecturers to manage the programme without immediate departmental supervision.
- BUSE's provision of enough and relevant resources in the programme will to some extent go a long way in solving an imminent conflict that has a capacity to tarnish the reputation of the Virtual and Open Distance Learning programme.

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¹ Interview conducted with a VODL official in January 2012.

² Government of Zimbabwe.

The author should specify the main scope of the paper in the introduction.

For what population? The whole world?

Unclear. Explain it better and connect it further with this theory

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Should be named the sample which this strengths were argued.

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Connect it with the second reason

There is no need to divide these two groups of reasons. I recommend to connect them and to make some general categories, like: lack of technology, lack of time, personal problems, lack of university service...

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The thing that is recommended is the key advantage of VODL. If the author wants to recommend that VODL should be improved by ICT, it should be specified how.

References need to be corrected according to the Educational Research and Reviews Guidelines