

Graduate Employment Challenges in Zimbabwe: A Case of Zimbabwe Open University Graduates

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Abstract

Zimbabwe Open University has churned a very high percentage of graduates since its inception in 1994 through its Distance and Open learning Programmes. This has encouraged many people to continue to study at their own pace. Given the depressed and shrinking nature of the Zimbabwean labour market from 1999-2011, the institution has thus produced more graduates than can be absorbed by Zimbabwe's labour market since not all of the graduates find employment in their respective fields of qualifications. This study adopted a mixed methods approach utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analyses procedures. Its goal was to establish the extent to which graduates from the Open University find employment in their fields of specialization. The study revealed that many graduates who undertook studies anticipating employment in their field of specialization are failing to do so as most of the employers are hesitant to employ people who are highly qualified, when the economy is shrinking and undergoing a depression. As a consequence, some of the graduates end up taking up any jobs that they can find, while others have emigrated to the Diaspora to seek employment. The study thus recommends a link between degree programmes and the labour market situation obtaining in the economy so as to avoid a mismatch between the two. It also recommends a needs assessment programme by the universities and employers in a bid to synchronize programmes offered by the universities with the labour market.

Keywords: Graduate unemployment, Open University, Labour Market, economic depression

1 Introduction and rationale of study

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) the spectre of mass unemployment & chronic underemployment among the educated graduate increasingly dominates policy discussion on education and employment and the overall development prospects of the continent (see, for example, the recently published Report of the Africa Commission 2005) Graduate employability is a multifaceted phenomenon in which graduate unemployment is unemployment among people within an academic degree (Lindberg 2007; Mariwo 2008). Work often generates ambivalent feelings on the one hand and requires effort and is associated with lack of freedom and negative feelings. On the other hand, work gives energy, enables development and generates positive feelings. Accordingly, it seems that work could lead to illness as well as health (Schaufeli & Bakker 2001; Turner, Barling & Zacharate 2002).The number of graduates and their employability are often used as evaluative indicators when considering the balance between graduates and labor market (Jongbloed and Vosseensteyn 2001). Accordingly, when reviewed from this point of view, poor rates of graduates' employability and even a prolongation of studies may be interpreted as indicators of inefficiency in the way the system functions (Lindberg 2007).The question that then arises is which systems in the Zimbabwean context maybe inefficient and how can they be improved? This study contends that informed social dialogue amongst the government, employers, the universities and graduates could help promote relevant employability conditions on the job market for graduates. Zimbabwe Open University graduates are being challenged in their quest to fulfill their career wellness by not finding employment within their areas of specialization. It is in this light that this study wishes to explore and unmask the factors that militate against the employability of Open University graduates in Zimbabwe. The study also wishes to examine possible ways for mitigating the crisis of unemployment which continues to dog Open University graduates and to send de-motivating signals to other aspiring students.

1.1 Problem statement

Graduate unemployment has become prevalent across the world (Papola 2008). Yet more and more people are embarking on distance education in the hope that the qualifications they acquire will lead to either employment or a change in career, getting them a job or enable them to change careers. ZOU has experienced phenomenal growth in enrolments since it opened its doors in 1992.Graduate unemployment is unemployment among people with an academic degree (Roberts & Davenport 2002).It is against this backdrop that this study explores the extent to which ZOU graduates find appropriate employment in their fields of specialization.

1.1.1Research questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following main research question: To what extent do Open University graduates in Zimbabwe find appropriate employment in their areas of specialization upon graduation or completion of their degrees?

Sub questions

- What factors contribute to the employment/unemployment of graduates of Open Universities?
- How do Open University graduates' perceive their qualifications in relation to job opportunities in their areas of specialization in the labour market?
- How can Open University graduates be assisted to find appropriate employment in their areas of specialization upon graduation?

1.1.2 Aims and objective of the study

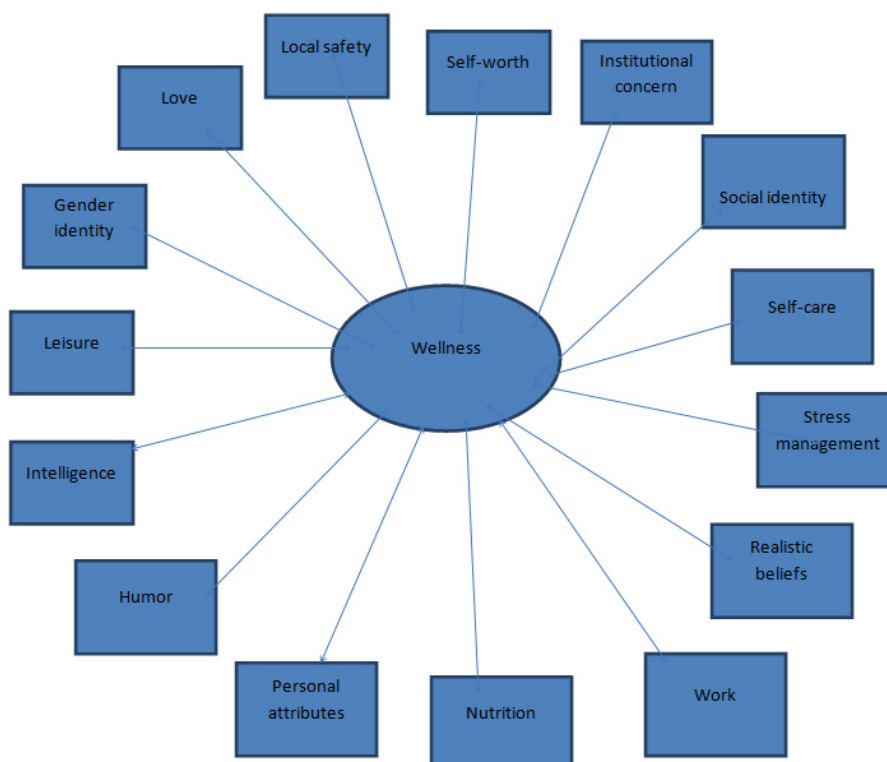
The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which Open University graduates find employment in their fields of specialization upon completion of their degree programmes. Pursuant to this goal the following objectives guided the study:

- To find out the extent to which Open University graduates are absorbed in their fields of specialization
- to examine the factors that contribute to the employment/unemployment of Open University graduates in their fields of specialization
- to examine strategies through which open university graduates could be assisted to find employment in their fields of specialization
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1.1.3 Theoretical-Conceptual framework for the study

The outline of a theoretical framework is necessary to understand how the novice researcher chooses to view a specific situation according to certain philosophical principles, policies, theories and models (Leatham 2005). Along with contextual knowledge, these views can enrich insights into the circumstances under inquiry. Therefore, the contextual framework of this analysis draws from Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs which has been used as a lens to demonstrate the different aspects that people need to have satisfied and accomplished in order to move on to the next step. Eventually when all the steps have been completed, 'self-actualization' is made in which one will be genuinely happy in oneself. Maslow's basic position is that as one becomes more self-actualized and self-transcendent, one becomes more wide (develops wisdom) and automatically knows what to do in a wide variety of situations (Daniels 2001). The diagram (figure 1) below illustrates areas in which one perceives as a rite of passage into attainment of self-actualization after having attained higher level of education.

Figure 1: Wellness Model



(Adapted from Ray 2006)

1.1.4 Research design adopted for the study

In terms of the design or the plan of how to proceed in determining the nature of the relationship between variables (Bless & Higson-Smith 1995), the study adopted a mixed method approach, whereby both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized to gather and analyze the data. The use of the mixed method design in this study is premised on the philosophy that in real life, human sciences research uses both quantitative and qualitative methodology- sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously (Fouche & Delpont 2002). The research follows a mixed methods approach by implementing both qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to explore and describe challenges bedeviling Open University graduates in Zimbabwe. The justification for adopting the mixed method approach was drawn from Clark & Creswell' (2008) contention that a mixed method design is ideally useful to capture the best of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The approach also has the advantage of ensuring data triangulation since it is expected to enable the researchers to observe Open University graduates' unemployment crisis from different angles or to acquire multiple measures of the same phenomena by applying different methods of data collection and analysis (Maree 2010). The above implies that the data gathered will ontologically have both objective and subjective realities as derived from the quantitative and qualitative methods respectively (Ivankova, Creswell & Clark2010). These approaches are also expected to go a long way in buttressing or improving the validity and reliability of the data, since they epistemologically complement each other in such a study (Lincoln & Guba 2002). The methodology also generates thick descriptions (Geertz, 1993) that contribute to an in-depth understanding of the problem being investigated.

The Graduate Labor Market: Recently Changing Demands & Employment Problems

Unemployment among the educated is widely regarded as a "time bomb", which poses a major threat to the political and social stability of most countries in Africa (Sammarrai & Bennell 2003), and not Zimbabwe only. Nonetheless, very little hard evidence is ever presented to support these claims of widespread and growing open unemployment among these graduates. Part of the problem is that measuring unemployment is not easy, especially in low-income countries where, in the absence of state income benefits even those without wage employment have to find something to do in order to survive (Samarrai, Samer, Bennell, & Paul 2006). Many of the graduates have skills which are not in higher demand in the labor market as a result of systemic factors in the economy. Thus a certain part of the labour force does not get employment due to their "employability". As part of the problem of employment has always been the result of a mismatch between qualitative aspects of the supply and demand of labour: demand has remained unfulfilled due to non-availability of workers with the requisite skills and graduates have remained unemployed or underemployed as they have been perceived as having skills which are not in higher demand in the labor market. This mismatch seems to have grown in recent years due to fast changes in production technology and structures to which the skill supply mechanisms and institutions have not been quick enough to respond (Brennan, 2004). On the other hand, many organizations have implemented practices that attempt to reduce costs and increase productivity, which often leads to a mentality that favor profitability over the welfare of people (Turner, Barling & Zacharatos 2002). Subsequently, leading to burnout amongst employees due to workload, insufficient reward, absence of fairness, breakdown of community, value conflict as well as lack of control when individual has little control over the work they do. This will usually be due to both rigid policies and tight monitoring, or because of chaotic job conditions. Discussing from the policy making point of view, graduate employability is ultimately a question of how many graduates there should be and which positions in the labor market they will occupy. When examining the trade-off between the number of graduates and the quality of employment they are able to find on the labour market (i.e. the balance between the supply of graduates and the demand for them), the length of the transition should be taken into account as a kind of intervening factor(Lindberg2007).Zimbabwe is facing very serious economic crises; international migration among the graduates is increasing very rapidly. These clearly represent a major loss of skilled personnel

1.1.5 Research Instruments and sample of study

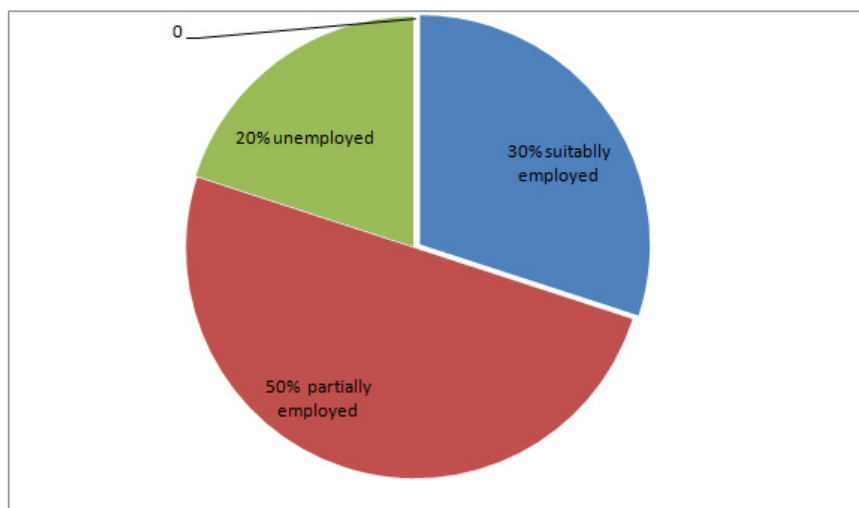
Data for this study was gathered through the use of questionnaires and interviews. Tracing the current employability of Open University graduates was done over a period of six months. University graduates who reside in the vicinity of urban and peri-urban centre were interviewed through individual face-to-face interview sessions. The starting point was to interview these graduates as they visited Masvingo Regional Offices. The second stage of the tracing and interviewing process was to visit some of these graduates at their respective residences. Postal questionnaires were sent to participants resident in remote rural areas for them to complete and return. The questionnaire solicited data on personal background, further education, current workplace and conditions of service, comments on job market for graduates and areas where they thought needed changes as a way forward to identified problems. Comments on the current job market for graduates within their area of specialization were also sort. Suggestions on ways in which the government could assist to promote maximum graduate employability in respective areas were also a critical area captured by the closed and open ended questions contained in the both the interview guide and questionnaire for Open University graduates. Through

questionnaires and interviews, the study utilized a sample size of 50 participants drawn from the faculties of Social Sciences and Science which comprised the departments of Counseling, Psychology, Special Education, Physical Education, Geography and Nursing Science, who graduated between 3 and 5 years ago. This means that the sample of conveniently and purposively selected since it consisted of former Open University students located in areas within easy reach.

Analysis and Discussion questionnaire results

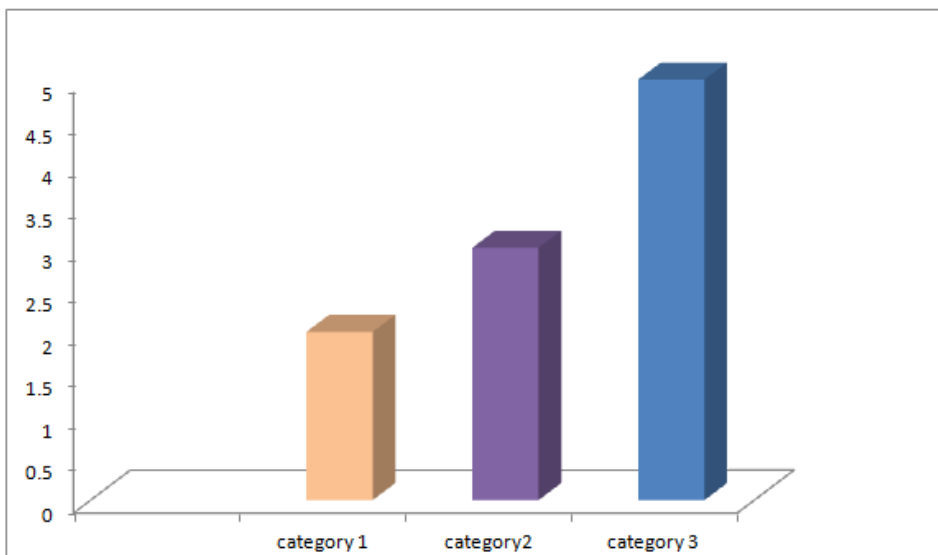
An analysis of the questionnaire results revealed that of the 50 respondents 30% had since found suitable employment in their areas of specialization. A further 50% were found to be partial employment which meant that their qualifications were not fully recognized. The remaining 20% were still unemployed for periods ranging from six months to a year after completion of their studies.

Figure 2: Extent of Utilization of area of study in one' current work place



The first research question sought to find what the respondents perceived to be the major causes of unemployment in their fields of specialization as perceived by the respondents. The findings are summarized in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Factors contributing to unemployment as perceived by Open University graduates



Key: Category 1- The geographical/catchment
 Category 2- Favouritism in the employment system
 Category 3- Fear of remunerating graduates
 Category 4- Limited jobs in the job market

The findings confirm earlier findings by Samarraï, Samer, Bennell, & Paul (2006) and Papola(2008) that graduate unemployment is largely a result of limited job opportunities in specialized fields. In the Zimbabwean

context, this scenario is exacerbated by the recent economic meltdown which drastically reduced social spending on education and health (Luebker 2008). Another factor identified as contributing to high unemployment among respondents was the perceived high remuneration that the graduates now attracted by virtue of their qualifications. Many, 20% felt that prospective employers preferred to employ under-qualified people in order to under pay them. In most cases these specialist jobs are performed by unqualified people who are appointed within the organizations. However, the other remaining percentage of the respondents felt that favouritism was prevalent in the job market since employers were perceived as underrating graduates' performance.

Table 2: Graduate current employment versus remuneration

Remuneration category	Percentage
Very satisfactory	4%
Satisfactory	6%
Below Expectation	30%
Grossly Below Expectation	60%
Total Percentage	100%

The quantitative analysis above: figure 1.1, table 1 and table 2 clear indicate that a number of factors contribute to the graduate unemployment crisis. From the pie chart, it is evident that while 50% of the participants are partially employed, only 30% are equitably employed and 20% are completely unemployed. Among the factors contributing to the graduate unemployment crisis are the fears of employers to remunerate graduates, who often desire higher remuneration compared to non-graduates even if they might be doing the same duties, the geographical locations of some potential employers, which might not be ideal for some potential employees particularly married women, limited opportunities on the job market, nepotism or favouritism on the labour market, which results in some potential employees being disadvantaged despite having the relevant qualifications. The above findings seem to complement the interview results analysed and described below. The following are some of the excerpts from interview respondents:

Interviewer: *What degree programme did you study at the Open University and what profession did you have in mind?*

Respondent 1: *Well, I studied Psychology hoping to join the field of Psychology but I am realizing that the field is difficult to penetrate.*

Interviewer: *Do you think pursuing a degree was the best option for you?*

Respondent2: *I am beginning to realize that many companies prefer diploma holders to degreed personnel. My friends who ended at diploma level have all gotten jobs while I am still roaming the street unemployed.*

Interviewer: *what do you think are some of the factors that are leading you not to get a job when you have such a good qualification?*

Respondent 3 : *As you might be aware of, our economy has literally collapsed due to the political situation obtaining in the country, which has scared away potential investors. There is no employment creation at all except for those in the civil service who are being paid peanuts for their services since Zimbabwe does not have its own currency. The only sector that is productive is the mineral industry, which is extracting Diamond, platinum and gold. Otherwise our only option is to join the great trek to the diaspora to look for jobs.*

Interviewer: *When you studied for your degree at the Open University did you have information on the field you intend joining?*

Respondent 5 : *Not really, it is my sister and friends who advised me that if I pursue a professional qualification such as counselling, I would join Non-governmental organizations, which remunerate their employees well but I have since realized that entry into these NGOs is not a stroll in the park since they prefer diploma holders to us with degrees.*

Interviewer: *Why do you not create your own employment instead of having an employee mentality, which does not seem to help at all?*

Respondent 6: *The greatest challenge in that regard is capital. If you do not have capital it will be difficult for you to start up any project. The economy has literally collapsed and not many income generating projects seem viable. This is the predicament in which I find myself in.*

1.1.6 Analysis and Discussion of results

Since the primary aim of this study was to investigate the extent of unemployment among Open University graduates using a mixed methods approach, data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. While interview data were analyzed qualitatively by the use of interpretations and negotiations of meanings derived from participants' responses to face-to-face interview questions, questionnaire data had to be analyzed quantitatively through the use of statistical tools namely the pie chart, bar graph and summary tables as shown in the subsequent sections of the data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings. The findings of both the questionnaire and interview data highlight the enormous challenges Open University graduates face on the Zimbabwean occupational landscape due to unemployment. A common finding of both questionnaire and interview results is that prolonged individual unemployability is due to the fact that people often lack the

relevant information about which skills are needed and rewarded most on the labour market. Such results have confirmed Tchibozo' (2002) contention that having little knowledge about the functioning and demands of the labour market system can prolong one's unemployment period leading to frustrations, stress and poor wellness in the victims.

Results of the interviews showed that among the participants' greatest employment challenges are lack of capital to create their own employment and become masters of their own destiny. The fact that the Zimbabwean economy has literally shrunk was also cited by participants as one of the impediments to their employability. Other factors cited include lack of relevant knowledge or information on the labour market situation, the influence of older siblings, peer pressure and the unavailability of jobs in an economy that has literally collapsed due to the political tensions obtaining in the country, which has scared away investors and potential job creators.

1.1.7 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that the majority of the respondents (70%) who had completed their studies had found either suitable employment or were in partial employment. Limited job opportunities in the specialist fields were identified as the major cause of unemployment among graduates. It also concluded that of those employed 40% indicated that they were dissatisfied with the remuneration as they considered it to be below expectation.

1.1.8 Recommendations

In the light of the above findings the study recommends that:

- The university undertakes a needs assessment to determine courses which are marketable in the labor market, in turn, employer involvement in the needs assessment will better inform university of their needs and work with them to develop even more employable graduates who can add value even earlier in their careers.
- The government needs to expand job opportunities in the specialist fields and to remunerate them accordingly.
- The university and government should liaise in terms of course designs and expectations on the labor market. Thus there is need for a close partnership between businesses (employers) and the university so demand can be more informed and supply better geared to the needs of high value-adding sectors of economy which will secure our future prosperity.
- The university should assist students through raising their awareness on what employers seek in graduates, thus helping them acquire skills throughout the university career. This will enable them to be more proactive in their use of career services.
- Employer organizations need to work in partnership with the university to ensure their degree programmes and the overall student learning experience meets the needs of the labor market.

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