

Engaging alumni in collaborative partnership for improved service delivery in Open and Distance Learning: The Zimbabwe Open University experience: Masvingo Region

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Abstract

Whilst the use of alumni in improving service delivery could be well advanced or widely practiced in many institutions of higher learning in many developed countries, at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), this notion is just beginning to take shape or has not been effectively explored to the point where we can talk of substantial benefits accruing from it. This study explored how the ZOU could possibly mobilize and effectively engage its alumni in collaborative partnership for improved service delivery at the institution. A descriptive survey design was used with questionnaires and interviews as data gathering instruments. A random sample of 40 alumni members (25 females and 15 males) participated in the study. Results showed that whilst Masvingo Region has established a District Chapter of the Alumni Association, and some significant progress has been made to make this association a vibrant stakeholder of the University, more still needs to be done. A more coherent and more coordinated approach by all stakeholders is required. Some basic logistics in terms of constitution making, registration and accounting procedures, some work plans and activities need to be put in place. The study concluded that once a full-fledged alumni association is in place, service delivery, in terms of motivation of students, provision of learning materials such as e-learning technologies, knowledge building through networking, and fundraising projects for capacity building, will be realized. The study recommended that the earlier logistics for the Alumni Association are put in place, the better for Masvingo Region and the University as a whole.

Key words: alumni, Open and Distance Learning, service delivery, collaborative partnerships, logistics

1. Introduction:

Since decades and all over the world, societies of former students have been existing in order to assist universities with a number of service delivery activities. Whilst the use of alumni in improving service delivery could be well advanced or widely practiced in conventional institutions of higher learning in many developed countries, (Singer and Hughey, 2002), in developing countries, particularly at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), this notion is just beginning to take shape or has not been extensively explored to the point where we can talk of substantial benefits accruing from it. For this reason, the study explored how, the ZOU, as a distance learning institution, could possibly mobilize and effectively engage its alumni in collaborative partnership for improved service delivery at the institution.

To understand the notion of alumni more fully, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English language (2000) defines 'alumni' as all graduates or former students of a school, college, or university. According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, (2011), the word 'alumni' is a plural of *alumnus*, which basically refers to a male graduate of an institution. The female graduate is called *alumna* and its plural is *alumnae*. However, the term 'alumni' is used to refer to a group of students that contain both genders. *Alumnus* or *alumna* is derived from the Latin word 'alere' which means to nourish. Thus, when these former students or graduates come together for the purposes of establishing strong relationships with their former universities, they become known as 'Alumni Associations' of those universities (Singer and Hughey, 2002; Christensen, 2010),

In developed countries, the history of alumni associations dates back as far as the establishment of the respective educational institutions. In many cases, these associations started as loosely organized and then later developed

constitutions that formed the basis for Alumni Association Chapters. For example, in the United States of America, the first graduating class of Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College organized an Alumni Association in 1825, but began to participate more actively into the affairs of the college by 1924. In the state of Pennsylvania, the Pen State Alumni Association was established in 1820, with chapters first established in 1898 in Pittsburg.. In developing countries, we take note of the Open and Distance learning institutions such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) whose alumni associations started as Alumni Foundations. Unisa Foundation started in 1966 and later developed into an Alumni Association which is now a platform for alumni to actively participate in the activities of the University in order to contribute to its long term success and sustainability. Likewise, ZOU, since its inception in 1999, has been chaining out graduates who are now former students or alumni. However, like other universities, ZOU Alumni Association also started loosely organized until the end of 2010 when the department of Centre for Student Management and ZOU Senior Management visited Regions to regularize, formalize and constitute the Alumni Chapters so that these activities were properly coordinated.

2. The ZOU Context

ZOU, as an ODL institution, has ten regional centres, with one centre located in each of the ten provinces of the country. As such, ZOU has what are called Regional Chapters of Alumni Associations and each chapter is known by the name of the region in which it is situated. For example in Masvingo Province, there is Masvingo Regional Chapter. Each chapter retains its status as long as that chapter:

- a) has a membership of at least (10) alumni of the university who meet the criteria for membership as stipulated in Article iv of the ZOU Alumni Constitution (ZOU Alumni Constitution),
- b) agrees to be bound by the provisions of this constitution and
- c) adopts and operates under the statutes of the university. The Regional Executive Committees of the Alumni Association report to the National Executive Committee.

Many universities have liaison offices that coordinate activities of the Alumni Association or that provide ties between the university and the Alumni Association members,. Similarly, the ZOU Alumni Associations in Regional Centres are coordinated by the office of the Students Advisor who reports to the Regional Director and to Director, Center for Student Management at the National Centre or Head Office.

3. Theoretical framework

The paper draws its theoretical framework from a general understanding of what a collaborative partnership is all about. Nethingo classifications (2011) and Satiel (2002) describe collaborative partnership as a partnership between two or more people that gives structure and organization for purposes of planning a common goal. This means in all institutions, the common goal is to improve service delivery in all spheres and in this case quality service delivery is measured by how successful both university and alumni members have gone in achieving their goals.

4. Statement of the problem

The engagement and involvement of Alumni Associations in University activities play a crucial role in improving service delivery for both the institutions and alumni members, more so in developed countries where alumni associations have been established for a long time. At the ZOU, the notion of alumni associations is just beginning to take shape or has not been extensively explored to the point where we can talk of substantial benefits accruing from it. This study therefore sought to find out how the ZOU, an Open and Distance Learning institution (ODL), in a developing country, can effectively engage its alumni in a collaborative partnership for improved service delivery at the institution.

5. Research Questions

The study sought to find answers to the under listed research questions.

- What are the current activities of the ZOU Alumni Association in relation to the institution and its students?
- How does the institution benefit from alumni associations?

- How does alumni association members benefit from being in partnership with the university.
- What factors prohibit positive alumni activities in the university?
- What are the expectations of alumni members about their university?
- How best can logistical arrangements be shaped so that partnership between alumni association and the university improve quality service delivery for both parties?

6. Purpose of the study

- The study was carried out specifically to explore how the ZOU can mobilize and effectively engage its alumni in collaborative partnership for improved service delivery at the institution.
- To find out what services alumni can offer for the benefit of students.
- To find out the major challenges which are retarding the wheel of progress of alumni contributions.
- To suggest ways by which such collaborative partnership can accrue maximum benefits for both alumni association and University and its students.

7. Methodology

The focus of this study was to find out how the ZOU can best engage its alumni in collaborative partnership for improved service delivery. Therefore, a random sampling technique was adopted to select 40 alumni members, 25 females and 15 males from a list of 120 registered ZOU Alumni members during the second semester of 2010. Members were drawn from a cross-section of alumni members from Masvingo district.

The study also adopted a qualitative survey that used both an open-ended questionnaire and an interview to collect data related to activities, expectations, benefits and prohibitive factors militating against purposeful engagement of the Alumni Associations. A pilot study on 5 alumni members was initially used to validate questionnaire items and the responses for this pilot study were not used in the final analysis.

Data were qualitatively analyzed with responses categorized into themes.

8. Brief Literature Review

The aim of the research was to establish the nature of the partnership between alumni associations and their institutions with the understanding that the engagement should benefit both the institutions and the alumni members. Sources reviewed were mostly drawn from Western countries with the argument that an alumni is alumni, whether from a conventional institution or from a distance education institution. The only difference could be that alumni in distance education institutions may have less commitment and less associateship among themselves in terms of collegiationship, room-mate or team-mate relationship characteristic of the conventional students because of the distance that exist between them and the institutions, and the less time of contact they experience among themselves during their period of study. Nevertheless, examples taken from Western conventional institutions may still give insight into activities of the alumni and the nature of the partnership within their institutions and the same framework and activities can be juxtaposed and applied to the distance education institutions such as the ZOU. Let us now begin by exploring literature that examines the role and value of alumni to their institutions.

8.1 The Value of Alumni Association

Once the Alumni Association has been established, the collaborative partnership that is created has tremendous value to both the institution and alumni members. Many institutions of higher learning have realized this value and the role played by Alumni Association in improving service delivery. At California State University, the role of the Alumni Association is to provide support and assistance to students and students organizations to enhance the quality of student life on campus. According to Indiana University North West (2009), the purpose of the Students Alumni Association is to provide a means for interaction and understanding between current students and the university and to engage students to work with alumni, developing loyalty and support of the university, as well as making students realize their potential role as alumni. As Stichtenth (2005) points out, alumni associations can take fundamental but valuable steps in helping their universities become stronger. This they do by placing students at the centre of everything. When students enjoy a more rewarding experience, they become committed alumni in future. Thus, this collaborative partnership between institutions and their alumni associations ensures that both parties enjoy mutual benefits from each other.

Importance of Alumni to institutions

Talking about the importance of alumni to institutions, Segree (2010) had this to say:

It has been said that even if the walls of the institution go away, the one constant that remains is the alumni.

This means the value of alumni transcends just giving to their institutions. As such, alumni are natural ambassadors and brokers for the institution, generating vital on-going resources for the improvement of service delivery (Segree, 2010; Ellee, 2010.)

The following are some of the benefits that alumni associations give to the students and their institutions as suggested by Segree 2010; Ellee 2010, Lee, 2006, and also by the University of Adelaide Alumni Relations Strategic Plan 2007 – 2011. As such, members of the alumni associations can-

- host students for externships, that is, they invite a student to join their business companies for externships which typically spans one to four weeks
- be career advisors and educational counsellors that support networking and give opportunity for students to be connected to their prospective employers.
- act as educational advisors that work with Office of Admission to recruit students for the freshman class.
- support entrepreneurial initiatives by providing advice and resources for students.
- provide fundraising services for the institution to ensure success since the alumni form the core of the university's philanthropic and volunteer network .
- offer professional training sessions
- provide career functions periodically to keep members informed of interesting business developments.
- increase the profile of the university both locally and globally as a leader in teaching and research.
- enrol and support the student experience.
- seek feedback and advice to develop more effective mutually beneficial relationships with industry, government and the wider community and to ensure relevance of curriculum and research.
- hold regular meetings with university authorities for the benefit of students
- publish alumni directories, magazines and newsletters

Thus, the engagement of alumni in university activities is crucial to the health and strength of the universities. Literature also provides that these activities are initiated at institution sponsored gatherings coined "Home Coming Days" in many institutions across America and Europe. Cook (2005) describes 'home coming' as a well planned university sponsored annual alumni event centered on a football game, contest or dedication to some building. Literary, it means a return of a group of people, usually on a special occasion, to a place formerly regarded as home. Similarly, ZOU has what it calls the ZOU Day, which is supposed to be an annual event meant to celebrate the day when ZOU was incepted and inaugurated as an Open and Distance, Learning Institution. Thus, it is on such events when the institutions provide opportunities for alumni to gather socially and hear speakers from the campus and to maintain mutually beneficial contact with the university.

8.2 Benefits of Alumni Association members

Whilst institutions benefit tremendously from the contributions of Alumni Associations, the alumni members also benefit from this collaborative, mutual engagement. Thus, in any partnership, as Stichenoth (2005) observes, people need to answer the question, "What's in it for me?" This means, to make an investment, people must see sufficient benefit that they stand to gain from their partners. Indeed alumni have many expectations about their institutions. The University of Adelaide Alumni Relations Strategic Plan 2007 – 2011 stipulates that members of the alumni associations can benefit:

- by taking advantage of opportunities for career development through lifelong learning, that is, post graduate studies, short courses offered by Professional and Continuing Education;
- by having access to business networks, mentoring programmes and employment opportunities.
- by being given recognition, promotion and chance to utilize their professional skills, experience, status and knowledge.

- by having access to a global alumni community where membership provides unique benefits and services.

8.3 The New York University offers the following benefits:

- Educational travel programmes
- Lifetime emailing forwarding
- Membership into certain organizations
- Access to university – wide alumni services and benefits including limited access to other institutions' libraries.
- Connection to form group schemes and discount clubs
- Participation in numerous university events, both on campus and across the country.

9. Findings

The thrust of the study was to find out how best alumni members may be engaged in collaborative partnerships to improve service delivery of the institution and students. To this effect, participants were asked to list down activities they were doing for the purpose of assisting the institution and current students. The following issues were raised and categorized into the following themes:

- Participating in major university events such as the ZOU Day and Orientation Day
- Involved in marketing the university
- Involved in recruitment of students
- Involved in career advisement
- Involved in fundraising activities, that is, making donations in cash or kind
- looking for donors to provide services such as installing internet wireless connectivity at the region
- unlocking their own resources such as books, computers and internet services for access by students
- networking with local agricultural and mining companies e.g. Hippo Valley Sugar Estates and the Platinum Mining Company to make donations
- holding meetings with current students and university management for purposes of clarifying issues

In view of these responses, indeed the ZOU, represented by Masvingo Regional Campus, hold annual home coming days, which they call ZOU Day. On this day, the university commemorates the inception of the university as the ZOU, formerly Centre for Distance Education of the University of Zimbabwe. All ZOU graduates of Masvingo Region are invited. The ZOU Day celebrations of the March, 2010 were the most memorable of which in attendance were distinguished alumni members such as the Governor and Resident Minister, former City Treasurer, Church Leaders, Members of Parliament and local chiefs, Police Commissioner, attorneys and academics, Vice Chancellor of sister university and Principals of local colleges. Major stakeholders represented by captains of industries, and the Mayor of Masvingo City, also attended.

On such days, the alumni unlock resources and make many donations and pledges. Donations presented on the March, 2011 ZOU Day celebrations included cash to purchase laptops, computers and printers for students, books for the campus library, a generator since Masvingo city, like any other town of Zimbabwe, is affected by electricity power outages and load shedding. A vehicle was also pledged. These distinguished alumni guests also made presentations marked by key note address and Guest of Honour speech to inspire students to succeed and to become strong alumni associations in future.

When interviewed to say what they most cherish on such days, the majority of the study participants indicated that they value the interaction they experience as former graduates of the university as they get introduced to those that graduated before and after them. They also learn and get connected to some business opportunities and above all, they get to know about the needs of the current students and those of the university. Of late, five members of the Regional Campus Academic Staff, who are alumni of ZOU, mobilized funds to have the Region connected to internet wireless for the benefit of both staff and students. That is a big achievement in terms of Information Technology advancement is concerned.

Thus, these findings in the study reveal that such events marked by get-together celebrations such as the ZOU Day, are important events which meaningfully engage both the alumni and the institution for the benefit of the students.

Apart from making contribution on such events, findings in the study also reveal that alumni of the ZOU participate in marketing of the university and also in the process, recruiting students for the university. Yes, this is true because during these days, when many colleges and universities are mushrooming and competing for the human resource, it requires that robust and competitive marketing skills are put in place and there is no better way of doing that than engaging and using the experiences of the alumni

Another important finding in the study is that participants said they unlock their resources such as books, computers and internet services for the benefit of the students. ZOU as a distance and learning institution means that its students are separated from the institution by distance and geographical dispersion. This means students may find it difficult and costly to travel to the Regional centre for access to internet, computers and other reading materials. Therefore, the university has to rely on the alumni and it encourages the students to network with the alumni in their communities for purposes of sharing these resources and this goes a long way in improving service to the students.

The study also found out that the alumni act as career advisors. Of course students benefit a great deal in accessing preadmission information about ZOU degree programmes and their relevance to industry and job market. This is again an area where alumni are found important to prospective distance learners.

9.1 Benefits for Alumni members

As alluded to earlier on, people want to know what they benefit from any partnership. Stichtenoth (2005) says they often ask the question ‘what’s in it for me? Thus, the study asked the participants what they benefitted from the partnership with the university. The following were themes that emerged:

- Recognition by being invited to participate at important functions such the ZOU Day and Orientation Days.
- Given first preferences in the choice of post-graduate programmes.
- Being university ambassadors at functions outside the university.
- Getting promoted at their workplaces because of the ZOU graduate certificate
- Being research champions because of the ZOU ODL mode based on the constructivist approach.

When interviewed to find out whether they were satisfied by these benefits, the general feeling was that they were, but more is to be done. The following is what they said should be done at least for now by the university and their Alumni Association to improve the relationship:

- Forming group schemes or alumni club programmes that provide discount services.
- Given research exposure by being invited to present research papers at International Conferences under the auspices of the ZOU
- To be connected to some business ventures with other Alumni members.
- To be given preferences for employment opportunities arising in the university.

Indeed, what the participants expressed was realistic and within reach. As a matter of fact, other institutions in developed countries such as the New York University offer a variety of unique services. For example, New York University offers educational travel programmes for its alumni and Princeton University and the University of Chicago offer Alumni awards to those that have made outstanding contributions to the institutions and public service.

When further probed through interviewing to indicate other engagements tools and activities that they expect to be put in place to realize service provision goals, participants indicated the following:

- That they would want to publish their monthly or quarterly magazine which informs them about the on goings of the association.

- Increase their advisory capacity by lobbying the university to incorporate one or two members of the Alumni into the University Council.
- Introduce other fundraising activities such as golf tournament. (The Region is very close to a golf course), raffle prizes, dinner dances etc.
- Organize workshop seminars, public lectures and symposiums for purpose of public awareness of the ZOU.
- Revise alumni chapter constitutions for the purposes of redirecting, refocusing and repositioning the association to achieve its intended goals.
- Organize Regional graduation ceremonies to initiate new graduates into the Alumni Association

The above sentiments expressed by the participants are quite meaningful and realistic. Publishing monthly or quarterly magazines empowers everyone concerned with the information about the university. Sharing of information provokes thought and provides impetus for future development. Being creative in introducing new fund raising activities such as holding golf tournaments or organizing raffle or dinner dances, also increases enthusiasm and motivation on the part of the potential donors. If members of the alumni are incorporated into the University Council, perhaps it makes them feel involved in, and consulted about, issues related with the university and therefore become part and parcel of the decision making process. This facilitates contribution they are to provide for the university. In the same vein, the constitutions are the legal tools that guide and bind all activities of the Alumni Association and therefore it sounds reasonable that they are revised and amended from time to time to suit the conditions prevailing at the time.

9.2 Challenges:

Finally participants were asked to indicate what they could consider as challenges retarding the wheel of progress. The following were their responses:

- No money to pay for annual membership fees.
- Lack of strong leadership
- Lack of finances to run the association.
- Lack of empowerment.
- Lack of coordination.

The biggest challenge that the alumni members are facing is what they expressed as “no money to pay for membership fees”. This might appear naïve, but to a large extent, members say it is real because most of the ZOU alumni are civil servants who receive relatively low salaries when compared with other sectors of the economy. This means when members fail to raise subscription fees, then they cease to be members and this affects the financial base of the Association. Thus, by the time of data gathering, the Region had a very small number of active contributing members.

Again, during the time of data gathering, the issue of whether the control of resources mobilized by Regional alumni chapter should be centralized (i.e. controlled by University National Administration) or decentralized (i.e. controlled by Regional Administrators), was raised. However, by the time of concluding this write up, the issue had been discussed and consensus was reached to the effect that all resources mobilized and funds raised were going to be centrally managed with all monies raised deposited into the University account.

Participants also felt that the members of the Alumni Association need strong coordination. Coordination of activities of the alumni requires strong leadership and a solid work plan that is monitored and evaluated. It appears after a major get-together event at the University, alumni activities appear to relapse into a period of inactivity and without proper coordination. This slows down progress of service delivery.

9.3 Possible Solutions

Participants were also asked to suggest solutions to some problems and suggest the way forward. The following were the responses:

- Participants felt that there should be aggressive and robust recruitment strategies to increase alumni membership. Large membership of the Alumni Association would also mean that resource mobilization for improving service delivery would be strengthened. There was also a general feeling that some alumni association members needed motivation through increased interaction and awareness campaigns. Furthermore, some logistical arrangements in terms of strong leadership, reliable and valid constitution and reliable information and communication technology systems, should be put in place to facilitate the achievement of educational goals.
- Finally, participants raised issues of accountability and transparency and that these should be prioritized at every stratum of the Association. This will increase confidence and facilitate fulfillment of expectations by members of the Alumni Association.

10. Conclusion

The study provided insight into how best the ZOU can engage its alumni in collaborative partnership to improve service delivery. Findings of the study have clearly articulated the nature of the partnership that should exist between the University and its Alumni Association members in that there should be a mutual relationship for mutual benefits. This means, the implementation of the strategies on both sides of the partnership must consider the benefits for both alumni and the university. If that is achieved, then service delivery to improve the image of the university and the general academic and social environment of students will tremendously be facilitated.

11. Recommendations

In light of the findings, the study recommended that in order to maintain a viable and collaborative partnership between the university and the alumni, there should be a mutual relationship that should see both parties benefitting from the activities of each other.

The alumni association should devise recruitment strategies that are aimed at increasing the membership. A huge membership would ensure a stronger base for resource mobilization that can provide a meaningful contribution to the service delivery processes at the University.

In addition, the Alumni Association should come up with more creative and more enterprising activities that initiate and motivate members to continue working for the institution in a bid to improve service delivery. In return, the University should acknowledge the contribution by alumni by offering more attractive packages that benefit the alumni. It is not beyond reach of the institutions such as the ZOU to extend winning awards to those that would have made a huge impact in the provision of service delivery. This has proved to have worked in many conventional institutions of the Western world.

Finally, both the Alumni Association and the University should agree on constitutional arrangements that are not prohibitive. For example, association membership subscriptions should be pegged at affordable fees by all members to ensure survival of the association. If annual subscriptions are too high to the extent that members fail to pay, it stifles progress and stalls development for both the Alumni Association and the institution.

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