The Effects of Block Release Programmes on Zimbabwe Open University Student Enrollment in Mashonaland East between 2009 and 2013

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Abstract:
Student retention has become a major cause of concern in Open and Distance Learning institutions. The proliferation of partial distance learning programmes, the so called block release or visiting educational programmes by conventional universities has had a negative effect on many Open and Distance learning institutions in terms of student enrolment. Open and Distance learning institutions niche of working student population has been invaded by conventional universities, thereby increasing competition for students. Many conventional universities are now offering dual mode of education –the conventional and distance. For Open and Distance learning institutions to remain afloat in terms of student retention and attraction, innovative and effective means of attracting and retaining students have to be found or else many of them will close shop. The population of this descriptive survey study consisted of all the inactive students, who were selected using a stratified random sampling method. The data collection tools employed were questionnaires and interviews. The study unearthed that many students prefer lecturing method to tutoring which is done in most Open and Distance learning institutions. Another point raised by the participants was that they find it difficult to plan and implement an effective study programme; hence their chances of failing in Open and Distance learning programmes are higher than when they are engaged in block release programmes. The other major point which came out of the study was that indeed block release programmes had a negative effect on the student enrolment of Open and Distance learning institutions. The study recommended that Open and Distance learning institutions should increase more contact hours with students and should adopt lecturing method and drop the tutoring method which is unpopular. Orientation programmes involving study skills and time management should be carried out from time to time with students engaged in open and distance learning.

1. Introduction

Low student retention has given rise to a great deal of speculation, discussion and argument within the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), much of which has, unfortunately been ill informed or dismissive. The few research studies at ZOU have concentrated on other aspects and none have attempted to find out reasons why the intake of new students is on a downward trend and the students are continuing to drop out of various programmes. (Benza, 2001; Izuagie, 2001, Sukati and Chandriaiah, 2005 and Majoni and Chidhakwa, 2005).The researcher however noted that some of the students who dropped out at Mashonaland East Regional centre joined other universities on block release programmes. The study collected information on the effects of block release programmes on the student population of Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region between 2008 and 2013.

1.1. Background of the Study

ZOU is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, established to cater for a substantial component of people who, by design or unintentionally, could not be accommodated in conventional universities, by offering them the opportunity to study in their homes and in their workplaces through distance education. The ZOU started as a Centre for Distance Education in 1993 housed in the Department of Education at the University of Zimbabwe, offering only one programme, the Bachelor of Education degree in Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies with initial enrolment of 624 students. In 1995, the Centre for Distance Education was transformed into a College of Distance Education. On 1 March 1999 an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20), transformed the College of Education into a fully fledged university - Zimbabwe Open University - with its own Charter and Vice Chancellor. The Zimbabwe Open University operates through a National Centre based in Harare, the capital city and has established

eleven Regional Centres that act as local administrative centers for the central administration. The Regional Centres are located in each of the ten geo-political provinces of the country in order for the university to reach every potential student throughout the country (Benza, 2001) *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning Vol. 1.* (See Table 1.1).

Zimbabwe Open University Regional Centres:

      Regional Centre ……………………………   …….. Town
1. Harare/Chitungwiza Regional Centre............................. Harare
2. Mashonaland East Regional Centre........................... Marondera
3. Mashonaland West Regional Centre.............................. Chinhoyi
4. Mashonaland Central Regional Centre.......................... Bindura
5. Manicaland Regional Centre.. Mutare
6. Matebeleland Regional Centre...................................... Gwanda
7. Matebeleland North Regional Office.............................. Bulawayo
8. Bulawayo Regional Centre.. Bulawayo
9. Midlands Reginal Centre... Gweru
10. Masvingo Regional Office .... Masvingo
11. Virtual Region..National Centre (Harare)

ODL is now considered as a reputable method of education as evidenced by the establishment of numerous ODL institutions worldwide and increasing enrolment of students in these institutions. Whilst other ODL institutions are enjoying a phenomenal growth, competing with traditional universities in attracting new students, Zimbabwe Open University is currently facing two serious challenges that threaten its very existence: (1) failure to attract new students and (2) a high student dropout rate. The review of recent studies at the ZOU (Benza, 2001; Izuagie, 2001; Moyo, 2001; Mercer and Peit, 2001; Mugridge 2001; Sukati and Chandriaiah, 2005 and Majoni and Chidhakwa, 2005), reflect that local researches have concentrated on descriptions and evaluations of current distance education delivery systems and none has focused on issues of student drop out.

YEAR	1999	2000	2001	2002
Total Student Enrolment	14313	16995	23161	17770

Table 1: Total number of students enrolled during 1999 to 2002
Source: ZOU Statistics 2010-2013

When Zimbabwe Open University was established, its student enrolment raised from14313 up to 23161, when it was the then largest University in Zimbabwe. However, since 2001, the student population at the Zimbabwe Open University has been going down. In 2007 the student enrolment figure stood at 16000 and by 2013 the figure had dwindled to a paltry 7000 students, reflecting a (43.75%) decrease. These trends are very disturbing as they are threatening the very existence of this once great University. It is also important to note that the establishment of both private and public universities which subsequently introduced block release programmes, entered directly into the Zimbabwe Open University's niche of students who work and learn. The general student population decline of Zimbabwe Open University incidentally coincided with the period when a number of state and private universities were being established, and this directly or indirectly affected the number of students at Zimbabwe Open University. The following table shows the period in which a number of state universities were established.

Name of University	Year of Establishment
National University of Science and Technology	1991
Midlands State University	2000
Great Zimbabwe University	2000
Chinhoyi University of Technology	2001
Bindura University of Science Education	2001
Harare Institute of Technology	2005
Lupane State University	2005

Table 2: Universities and the respective years of establishment
Source: University websites

The establishment of these universities was accompanied by the establishment of various distance education programmes under different names such as block release, visiting or weekend classes. The researcher wanted to find out if the establishment of these block release programmes had an effect on the student enrollment and student retention at the Zimbabwe Open University. Several other factors could explain why the student population at Zimbabwe Open University is continuing to drop at an alarming rate. Some of the possible reasons that can explain the negative scenario of student population at the Zimbabwe Open University could be lack of finances to pay for fees, inadequate support in terms learning materials, inadequate library facilities, and institutional reputation. It is

the rise in block release programmes that are being offered by the conventional universities that has caught the attention of the researcher. What motivated the researcher to research this area was the great concern that the rise of block release programmes by conventional universities seemed to have had a negative correlation with the student population at the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region. While the researcher acknowledges that the other factors mentioned above could explain the decrease in student population, it is the block release programmes that are being rolled out by conventional universities that the research feels may have the greatest effect on the student population at Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Region.

1.2. Motivation for the Study
The researcher initially noted that at Kushinga Phikelela Agricultural and polytechnic colleges, where he lives there were eight members of staff who used to be ZOU students who had since dropped but had joined other universities on block release programmes and some have actually completed their studies. The researcher also noted that when he was making follow ups on inactive students in a bid to persuade them to complete their studies, a great number of these students responded that they had since joined other universities doing the same programmes under block release programmes. It was then that the researcher realized that many students at Mashonaland East were dropping their studies to join other universities and continued under block release and he wondered what was attracting these students to do their studies under block release programmes. It also dawned on the researcher that this was an opportunity to make a contribution to our institution by carrying out a research to find out the effects of these block release programmes on the student population at Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Region. The researcher being a student affairs practitioner at ZOU Mashonaland East Region is also expected to carry out researches on issues that affect students and this research presented an opportunity to satisfy both course and job requirements.

1.3. Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of block release programmes on student enrollment at the Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Regional Centre and to find the general factors which caused low students enrollment and retention between 2009 and 2013.

1.4. Problem Statement
Mashonaland East Region of the Zimbabwe Open University is currently faced with a serious challenge that needs immediate attention. Student dropout rate is very high currently standing at more than 40%. The present study is an investigation into the effect of block release programmes on student population at Mashonaland East Regional centre between 2008-2013.

1.5. Research Questions
- Which mode of study did students use before joining Zimbabwe Open University?
- Which teaching methods do students prefer?
- What were the institutional push factors that led the inactive students to stop studying with Zimbabwe Open University?
- What can ZOU do to attract new students and to retain those that are already studying with it?

1.6. Significance of the Study
If the study establishes the effects of block release programmes on student population in terms of the push factors that led students to leave Zimbabwe Open University then this information will help Mashonaland East Regional Centre and other Regional Centres to address the problem of low student retention through attracting new students and student retention. If factors which cause students dropout are established, both institutional and students related, this data will be used to improve the services that are offered to students. It is felt that this research will enable staff working at the ZOU and in other ODL institutions to identify factors that students prefer in block release programmes (intrinsic and extrinsic) which are responsible for attracting students from Open and Distance Learning institutions. This research also identified at risk students and student groups (e.g., individual students or entire student groups more likely to dropout) .It is also felt that this research will enable student support staff at the ZOU, as well as staff at other universities offering open and distance learning, to deal with high-risk groups of students more efficiently and effectively, thereby improving on student retention strategies.

1.7. Limitations of the Study
The present study focused on only one regional centre of the Zimbabwe Open University- Mashonaland East Region. This might therefore affect the generalisability of results to other regions of the Zimbabwe Open University. Due to this consideration, the number of respondents was made large enough to ensure representativeness so as to allow results to be generalized to other regions of the Zimbabwe Open University. The researcher was constrained by the fact that there was limited time available for the completion of the study and has other commitments. The researcher made use of evenings and weekends to necessitate the completion of the study as scheduled. The researcher also faced financial constraints since he had to travel to many outlying areas in Mashonaland East Province for the distribution and collection of the questionnaires to the inactive students included in the sample. As a way of mitigating this problem, the researcher made use of personal savings to finance the whole project.

1.8. Delimitation of the study
The study was delimited to active and inactive ZOU students in Mashonaland East Region between 2009 and 2014. The study focused only on the reasons that pushed the students out of ZOU and also the reasons that fail to attract new students to ZOU. Strategies which can boost student attraction and retention at ZOU were also sought.

1.9. Assumptions
- In this research it was assumed that all the research participants included in the sample agreed to participate in the research after understanding what was contained in the consent form.
- The research participants gave accurate information relating to why they dropped out of their degree programmes and why ZOU is failing to attract new students in large numbers.

2. Literature Review
The search for related literature was guided by the objectives of the study.
The literature, organized our literature review under the following subheadings:
- The conceptual Framework
- Theories and models of Student Dropout
- The nature of block release educational programmes
- Previous research studies

2.1. The Conceptual Framework
Key concepts which are distance education open and distance learning and block release educational programmes.

2.2. Distance Education
Kangai etal (2013), pointed out that although distance education was known as far back as the early seventies as a form of correspondence education, the concept was formally recognized in 1982, when the then International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) (Holmberg, 1986). Since then several writers and scholars have attempted to define and explain the term 'distance education'. In his explanation, Peters (1976), tends to use the term distance education interchangeably with the broader concept of correspondence education. Peters (1976) argues that distance education is characterized by the use of (1) printed material, radio and TV programmes, (2) computers and (3) study circles.
Holmberg (1977:7) attempted to go deeper into explaining the concept of distance education. He explains:

> The term 'distance education' covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization. Distance education includes all 'those teaching methods in which, because of the physical separateness of learners and teachers, the interactive, as well as the pre-active phase of teaching is conducted through print, mechanical or electronic device.

To further clarify his definition, Holmberg (1977:7), identifies the following activities as constituting some of the major characteristics of distance education.
- Non-contiguous communication;
- Based on pre-produced course;
- Organized two-way communication between the learner and a supporting organization;
- Individual study;
- A form of mass communication;
- An industrialized type of teaching and learning

Kangai et. Al. (2013) asserted that another scholar, Moore (1983:157) conceives distance education as synonymous with 'independent study'. He defines distance education as "…an education system in which the learner is autonomous and separated from his teacher by space and time, so that communication is by print, electronic, or other non-human medium". According to Moore (1983), Distance Education is a system consisting of three sub-systems; the learner, teacher and a method of communication.
Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of distance education is that first proposed by Keegan in 1980 and subsequently modified in 1986. Keegan's definition incorporates aspects of the definitions proposed by Holmberg (1977), Peters (1973), and Moore (1973). Keegan (1986) identifies seven principal characteristics, which he regards as being essential for any comprehensive definition of distance education. These characteristics, Keegan (1986:49-50) argues, distinguishes distance education from other forms of education systems. These characteristics include;
- The separation of teacher and learner which distinguishes it from face-to-face   lecturing;
- The influence on educational organization which distinguishes it from private study;
- The use of technical media, usually print, to unite teacher and learner and carry the educational content;
- The provision of a two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue;
- The possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes;

- The participation in an industrialized form of education which, if accepted, contains the genus of radical separation of distance education from other forms;
- The privatizing of learning so that learning occurs away from the group.

Thus Keegan (1995:7) gives the most thorough definition. He says that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained". The feature of separation of teacher and learner was also coined by Teaster and Blieszner (1999:741) who say, "the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separate in space and possibly time".   With the history of distance learning encompassing so many different learning environments, we need to find a definition that fits in all situations. There have been many definitions put forward in modern literature. From these definitions we can see that the student and teacher are separated by space, but not necessarily by time.

2.3. Open and Distance Learning
 Kangai etal (2013) pointed out that the concept "open and distance learning" is relatively new and several writers and scholars have attempted to distinguish between "open learning" and 'distance education'. Saide and Saide (2003) define open learning as "an organised educational activity, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on study are minimised in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study, or any combination of these". The same authors define distance education as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted (through some form of technology) by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner".(Saide and Saide, 2003). There is, however, extensive overlap between the use of the term "open learning" and "distance education". The decision of the United Kingdom government in the mid 1960s to rename the University of the Air the "Open University" popularized the term "open" The term is now widely used in distance teaching universities that include; The Open University of Tanzania (1993), The Open University of Bangkladesh (1994), and more recently the Zimbabwe Open University (1999), just to mention a few examples. The establishment of open universities around the world aim to address the educational and re-educational needs of adult learners and workforce by providing a high level of studies (Evans and Lockwood, 1994, Evans and Nation, 1996). Open universities typically develop educational activities underpinned by an educational philosophy fundamentally different from those held by conventional educational systems. The main aspect of this philosophy is to promote "lifelong education" and to provide adults with "a second educational chance" (Keegan, 1993). The educational method used in an Open University system is most typically "distance learning."
Closely allied to the concept open learning is the concept of flexible learning. Van den Brande (1993:2) defines flexible learning as "enabling learners to learn when they want (frequently, timing, duration) how they want to learn (modes of learning) and what they want (that is learners can constitute what is learning to them). These flexible principles may be applied at a distance. In such cases the learners can choose where they want to learn (at home, at a training center, etc.)
The present study will investigate how block release programmes are affecting the student population at the Zimbabwe Open University in Mashonaland East Regional centre.

2.4. Block Release Educational Programmes
There is rather scanty literature on block release programmes, but in Zimbabwe, these programmes were born out of the realization by the universities that a great number of students now prefer to study while they are working. The intense competition for students by various universities has also prompted the rise in block release programmes. Block release programmes are meant for the people who want to be engaged in life-long learning in improving their skills at the work place. The people who enroll for block release programmes are expected to enroll for programmes that go hand in hand with what they are doing at their places of work. These block release students normally are exempted from attending work related attachments since it is assumed that they are already working and hence do not need to do work related learning. The visiting students normally complete their degree programmes one year earlier than the conventional students. The block release programmes also came into being due to dwindling government financial support, so universities had to find ways of raising funds for financing various college activities. Many universities have come to realize that students are no longer just consumers of educational products but rather are customers who need to be satisfied hence at times the universities endeavor to bring education to the door step of the student by carrying out lectures in the areas where students are staying. A typical example is provided by Bindura University of science Education, which actually travels to Mutare, Bulawayo, Harare, Gweru and other areas to carry out lectures. The university moves to where the students are rather than for the students to move to the university. This concept of bringing education to the doorstep of the student has also been adopted by the Zimbabwe Open University, as it has established district centres in the various provinces in Zimbabwe. Block release programmes are undertaken either by having one month at college where face to face interaction with the lecturers take place or it could be done in two terms of two weeks periods. During the time the students are at college they are exposed to lectures and assisted in various ways before they are given work to do at their work places. Assignments are supposed to be done, and send back to college for marking and recorded for the course work before examinations are written at the end of each semester. The researcher was also interested in finding whether block release programmes are approved by Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education and if so what the requirements are for carrying out such programmes. The people who were interviewed on the issue were rather evasive and it appears that these block release programmes are being rolled out once the university has come up with a degree outline. The issue of coming up with a degree outline and then embark on offering that degree on a block release basis gives conventional universities the advantage of rolling out new

programmes much faster as compared to open and distance education institutions, since these are required to come up with all the modules before rolling out a new programme.

2.5. The Organization and Management of Distance Education at the ZOU
The mode of delivery of the DE programme is predominantly print (modules), supplemented with face-to-face tutorials of six hours per module, telephone contacts, emails and one-on-one contact with tutors as and when needed. Most of the programmes take four academic years to complete. Each year is divided into two semesters and four modules are studied per semester. Examinations are set in each module and written at the end of each semester. (ZOU Regulations, 2010)
There is minimal use of ICT systems to enhance interaction among students and tutors. Interactive e-learning platforms, tele-conferencing, and other packages for e-learning are not available. There are no course websites that have courses to be uploaded and downloaded online. Students mainly rely on the printed materials and the scheduled face-to-face tutorials. Final examinations are written at accredited examination centres which are usually located in the host DE institution.

2.6. Distinction between Distance Education and Conventional Education
One key feature that distinguishes distance education from conventional education is that whilst conventional students are formally taught in institutions such as schools, colleges and universities, where students enjoy face- to- face interaction with their teachers, in open and distance learning environments, students have minimum contact with their teachers and are taught through a combination of delivery modes that include the printed materials. In conventional education, students are taught through lectures and they visit the library to study from prescribed text books. In distance education, the learning materials must be compiled, packaged and delivered to students far away from the educational institution. Unlike the traditional student who interacts with the teacher, a distance education student is guided in her or his studies through some form of technology. That includes telephone, limited face- to- face tutorials, and study guides. The idea here is that since in distance education, the lecturer is separated from the students and cannot personally deliver instruction, he /she then prepares the lecture notes in written form and delivers them to the distance education student who will use these notes as study guides. The development of study guides (commonly referred to as modules) has always been a critical activity for distance education systems because the quality of the learning materials has a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning distance education students receive.

2.7. Theoretical Framework of Student Retention

2.7.1. Interactionalist Theory
Vincent Tinto propounded the interactionalist theory in (1975) on student retention research. The premise of this framework is that individual students possess pre-entry college characteristics, which contribute to their decision to persist or depart their institution. These characteristics were crucial in determining persistence in students and included factors such as an individual's socioeconomic status and background, personal attributes and educational experiences before entering college. Thomas (2002) pointed out that pre-entry college characteristics strongly influence a student's initial commitment to his or her higher education institution, which affects their capacity to persist (Braxton, 2000). Researchers who have tested Tinto's theory discovered that it does not universally apply to all students (Grayson and Grayson, 2003)

2.7.2. The Student Integration Model
The Student Integration Model (1975) also propounded by Vincent Tinto supplements interactionalist theory. Thomas (2002 asserted that, the student Integration Model illustrates the process of how students integrate academically and socially into their college environment. In this model, integration can either lead to persistence through graduation attainment or the decision to drop out. Academic integration relates to a student's grade performance and intellectual development, while social integration results from a student's transactions with faculty and peers (Grayson and Grayson, 2003). Academic and social integration not only involves interactions with faculty and peers, but "can be a consequence for grade performance and intellectual development" (Grayson and Grayson, 2003,)
Grayson and Grayson, (2003) argued that theoretically, the converging of a student's background, commitment levels, and the academic environment, all lead to persistence or drop out. Thomas (2002), submitted that specific factors can lead to a student's decision to persist or depart their institution prematurely. For example, disadvantaged students who arrive at college with low educational goals, and become involved with negative peer groups, are likely to leave college. In contrast, advantaged students who have high educational goals, and are equipped to engage positively with their institution, are likely to persist and graduate within a reasonable amount of time (Grayson and Grayson, 2003) as cited by Thomas (2002). While interactionlist theory and the Student Integration Model provide a general framework for explaining student drop out decisions, these will be used in this research to find factors which contribute to students drop out at Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Region

2.7.3. Factors Influencing Student Retention In Higher Education
According to Thomas (2002), a lot of factors have been unearthed which affect student retention. These factors include both personal and institutional, as propounded by Tinto1975, 1993, Benn 1982, Astin 1984, and Moortgat 1997. These were academic preparedness; the academic experience (including assessment); institutional expectations and commitment; academic and social match; finance and employment; family support and commitments; and university support services.

A lack of `academic preparedness' of new student groups has also been seen to be a major contributing factor in determining student retention at a college. Thomas (2002), defined `academic preparedness' as the extent to which students feel they are ready to study at higher education level, and the ways in which the institution provides academic support if it is needed. In addition to the academic preparedness of students a second, related issue is the `academic experience' which embraces curricula, teaching and learning issues, accessibility of and relationships with staff, flexibility of timetable and deadlines and both modes of assessment and opportunities for re-taking courses. The degree of academic and social integration into their institution is very crucial in retaining students at an institution. This area of interest stems from the work of Tinto (1975, 1993, and 1997). Tinto's `interactionalist theory' views retention as a function of the match between the student's academic capabilities and motivation and the institution's academic and social characteristics. All other things being equal, the fit between the individual's and the institutions characteristics strongly influence the rate of student persistence at an institution of higher learning. Finance and employment and family support and commitments were also discovered by Thomas (2002) to be very influential in determining student persistence at a college. University support services have also been found to be another overarching, area of interest which might contribute to early withdrawal. The ways in which the university assists students to stay in higher education, and how it could be more supportive is very crucial in influencing student retention.

Warren (2003) as cited by Thomas, (2009) reviews existing literature and finds that student-centred, discussion-based and group based learning activities promote:

- Enhanced student participation and interaction.
- More willingness by students to express their ideas.
- Improved communication among students in culturally diverse classes. Better adjustment to university study (for international and UK students).
- A shift towards deep learning as a space is created for learners to test out new concepts.
- Student-centred interactive learning does not only have to occur in small groups, but methods can be developed and utilised to teach large classes too.
  Warren (2003) identifies different methods that have been employed with large groups of students such as collaborative learning groups (3–5 students) working on tasks during lecture periods ,group presentations and interactive lectures featuring discussion of concepts and application to practical exercises. Thomas (2009) pointed out that it is the development and utilisation of such learning and teaching strategies that promote a more active, student-centred approach to learning, which draws on students' previous experiences and interests, that helps to enhance student engagement, course commitment

3. Methodology

3.1. The Research Paradigm: Mixed Methods
The present study employed a mixed methodology and collected both quantitative and qualitative data through the use of a questionnaire. Based on Davidson (2000) and Jones (2001), the researcher identified the descriptive survey research design as the best means for this type of study. The descriptive survey research design has strength in that it; allows for a wide range of social problems to be investigated; allows for easy collection of data from a wide area and a large number of respondents; is best suited when the information one needs should come directly from people; allows for three major methods to elicit information from the respondents namely; the personal interview, the questionnaire and the telephone survey which incorporates elements of cost reduction; helps in obtaining data on the descriptions of attitudes, values, habits and background characteristics (Sekara(2010), and Remenyi (2009). It assists the researcher to see beyond the casual observation. This entails that the researcher is able to see beyond what the laymen can see; is cheap and easy to design and execute. The researcher is going to use a combination of the questionnaire, and interviews.

3.2. Guiding Philosophy to the Research
According to Sobh and Perr, (2005), a research philosophy is a framework with which a research is conducted. The philosophical framework guiding this research is interpretivism. Interpretivism is regarded as the epistemological position that advocates the necessity to understand differences among humans as social actors. Interpretivism appeared to be the best for this research, since it seeks to explore the effect of block release programmes on ZOU student population, looking specifically on why the students are being attracted to do their studies with other universities dropping out of ZOU. The general push and pull factors are going to be looked at. Interpretivism philosophy proposes that truth is not universal and is relative. In this case, problems affecting student "A" may not necessarily be affecting student "B" in the same way, so factors which could have pushed some students out of ZOU are varied, and how they affected the different students is also subjective and personal.

3.3. Population and Sample
Chiromo (2006) pointed out that a population refers to all the individuals, units, objects or events that will be considered in a research project. In this research project, the population consisted of all the students who dropped out of ZOU in Mashonaland East Region and joined other universities on block release programmes between 2009 and 2013.The list of inactive students contains all students who dropped out of their programmes, and the list for the year 2009 to 2013 stands at 500. Out of these inactive students 150 students were contacted, and reported that they had since joined other universities on block release programmes. 60 inactive students who had joined other universities made up the sample.

3.4. Sampling Procedures

Stratified random sampling which involves dividing the population into homogenous sub groups that is groups containing similar characteristics was used. After dividing the inactive students according to faculties, a random selection of each group was done. Stratified sampling ensures that all subgroups in the inactive student population will be represented. The 150 students will be placed in the strata of faculty of:

Faculty	Inactive students in faculty	Inactive students included in faculty sample
Arts and Education	39	15
Applied Social Sciences	37	15
Science and Technology	37	15
Commerce and law	37	15

Table 3: Distribution of students included in the sample by faculty

In each faculty strata 15 participants will be selected using a simple random sampling method where each unit stands an equal and independent chance of being selected. A simple random sampling method involves using corded cards to represent each of the unit of the population and then putting the corded cards in a hat, after shacking, a person while blindfolded will pick each corded card one at a time until the required number has been achieved. Random sampling of the lecturers in the four faculties to be interviewed will be done as well.

4. Research instruments

4.1. Interviews

Chiromo (2006) submitted that interviews involve the collection of data through direct verbal interactions between the interviewee and the interviewer. It requires the actual physical proximity of two or more persons and generally requires that all normal channels of communication be open to them. Over and above collecting information through verbal responses, the researcher gleaned information through the respondent's comments, facial and bodily expressions, and tone of voice, gestures, reactions, feelings, attitudes, evasiveness or non cooperation. The researcher avoided influencing the response of the research participants by asking the respondents in as neutral a voice as possible. The weakness of the interview was also be mitigated by the use of other data collection methods like document analysis.

4.2. Records and Documents

Documents were be used in the collection of data. Guba and Lincoln (1981:225) define a record as "any written statement prepared by an individual or an agency for the purpose of attesting to an event or providing an account," and a document as "any written (or filmed) material other than a record". Documents and records serve as an in-context source of information. Documents provide a rich database for present and past events. Documents and records serve as research techniques for objectivity, systematic, and quantitative description of the phenomenon under study. They also provide a low-cost information base. Documents examined in this study included, students application and admission forms, students files, students attendance registers, ZOU policy documents and regulations.

4.3. Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

In selecting instruments for gathering data, the researcher ensured that the instruments met two important criteria: validity and reliability. The present study was more interested in content validity of the research instruments and in order to ensure validity, the question items were derived from the statement of the problem. Reliability was established by carrying out a pre test in which the research instrument was tested in the collection of data on two occasions. The results of the two sets of data were then correlated and this provided the researcher with test- retest reliability. The researcher collected data from two different sources as a form of 'data triangulation' to contrast the data and 'validate' the data if it yielded similar findings (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bloor, 1997; Holloway, 1997).

4.4. Data Collection

Data was collected from two different sources (ZOU inactive students who joined other universities, interviews on the lecturers of the four faculties and document analysis. Purposive sampling techniques were used to identify persons who had dropped out of ZOU and have joined other universities between 2009 and 2013.

4.5. Ethical Issues

Ethical issues are an integral part of a research design and considerations for ethics should run throughout the course of the research process, including identification of research problem, engagement in the inquiry and dissemination of results. Sound research is a moral and ethical endeavour and should be concerned with ensuring that the interests of those participating in the research are not harmed as a result of research being carried out. Ethical principles that were considered in this research were:

4.6. Informed and Voluntary Consent
The researcher obtained voluntary informed consent from all those who took part in the research. This principle adheres to the larger issue of respect to the participant so that they are not coerced to the participation and have access to relevant information prior to the consent. Consent was obtained through consent forms with prior information of research which included purpose, procedure, time period, risk, benefits and a clause stipulating that participation was voluntary and the participants had the right to withdraw from the study.

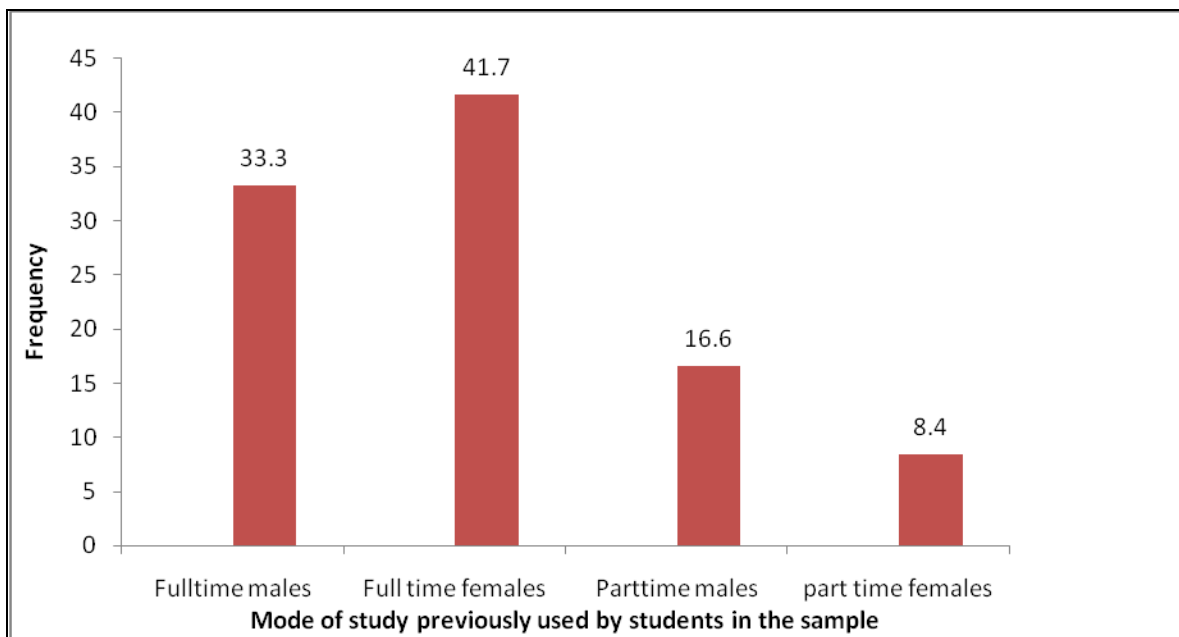## 5. Data discussion and Analysis

Figure 1: Mode of study used in previous studies

When respondents were asked which mode of study they used in their previous studies, 75% indicated that they were full time students and switching from being a full time student to a part time student could prove to be a problem to some students since some of the students may find it difficult to plan and manage their own studies without the assistance of a lecturer or a teacher. The fact that most of the respondents are experienced as full time students may also point to possible reasons which are making them drop their educational programmes with ZOU and joining conventional universities as full time students.
"I find it very difficult to study on my own I need to have someone reminding me and pushing me to do my studies." These are some of the responses that the researcher got from the students when he was interviewing them. Some respondents pointed out that they feel motivated to do their educational work better if they are gathered at an institution rather when they are alone at home. Some respondents pointed out that they find it difficult to resist the temptation of going out with friends but when they are gathered at an institution then they can concentrate since they will be away from friends.
Twenty percent of the respondents indicated that they were part time students in their previous studies and these students could be dropping out of ZOU programmes due to other reasons other than inexperience with being a part time student. These students could be dropping out of their studies due to other institutional factors which they regard as not being done properly.
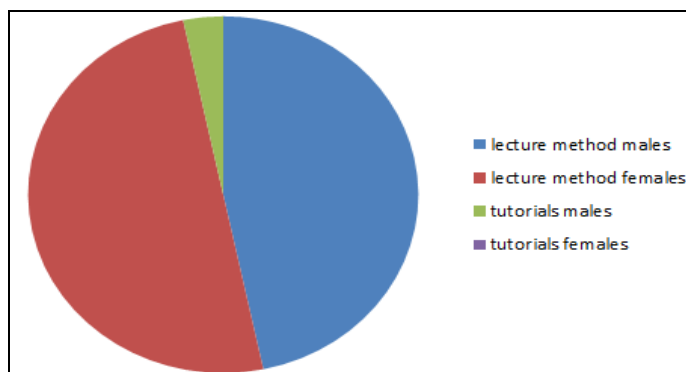

Figure 2: Teaching methods preferred by students

When asked on the preferred teaching method 96.7% of the respondents indicated that they preferred the lecture method only a paltry 3.3% pointed out that they preferred tutorials. This finding could be very instrumental in influencing the decision of the students in determining their persistence or withdraw from college. When the researcher further queried the respondents on the type of teaching method that are used at conventional universities, it emerged that the lecture method is the teaching method which is mostly used. The fact that the principal mode of teaching at ZOU is the tutorial, it means that the university is using a teaching method that is at variance with what is preferred by the students. This mismatch of what is preferred and what the university is offering could also be one of the major reasons for the high student attrition at ZOU Mashonaland East Region. The above finding is in sync with what Warren (2003) identified. Warren (2003) identified different methods that have been employed with large groups of students such as collaborative learning groups working on tasks during lecture periods and, group presentations and interactive lectures to be very useful in imparting knowledge to students. Tinto, (1975) also pointed out that it is important that students are supposed to be integrated socially and academically if they are to persist at college to their graduation. The fact that students prefer lecture method to tutorials may mean that the University may need to accommodate the students' preference and offer lectures instead of tutorials.

Student Support Service	Effective	%	Not Effective	%
Tutoring		30		70
Study packs (modules)		90		10
Examination Administration		80		20
Registration Process		40		60
Student Induction		75		25
Assignment Handling		70		30
Publication of Results		20		80
Communication with students		60		40
Library services		50		50
Guidance and counselling		82		18

Table 4: Institutional Push and pull Factors affecting student enrolment

Thirty percent of the respondents are of the opinion that tutoring is effective as a way of teaching while an overwhelming seventy percent think that tutoring is not an effective way of teaching and this has a direct impact on the student enrolment on student withdraw at the Zimbabwe Open University since the principal mode of lesson delivery is through tutorial

Ninety percent of the respondents pointed out that the study material at ZOU Mashonaland East is effective and only ten percent regarded ZOU study material as ineffective. Some respondents actually pointed out that ZOU study material are used by most colleges including the conventional universities. Some respondents indicated that ZOU study material are very detailed and written by experienced highly qualified academicians. Examination administration, student induction, assignment handling, communication with students, library services, guidance and counselling all received positive percentages. The respondents regarded the examination administration at ZOU to be highly organised and the student induction processes were thought to be effective. Eighty percent of the respondent complained that the publication of results was rather poor and these respondents complained of missing results, incorrect courses on result slips, incorrect names and surnames. With regards to communication 60% of the respondents thought that communication between the region and the students was effective but 40% of the respondents thought the communication between students and the region needs to be improved. An important factor which may be affecting the communication process between the regional centre and the students is the geographical dispersion of the ZOU students who are scattered in remote rural areas of the country. In these rural remote areas of the country network connectivity is very limited or nonexistent at all, so this poses some problems when information from the regional centre is sent to these students through short message services (SMSs), emails, or through newspaper. Communication services are crucial to students as noted by Warren (2003). The respondents indicated that library services were good in terms of the services they got from library personnel but they expected the library to have internet connectivity and also to have a library lab where they can search for information when doing their research projects and assignments. The respondents also pointed out that more current books should be sourced to augment the modules and other library resources. Eighty two percent of the respondents indicated that guidance and counselling services were effective and 18% of the respondents thought that they were not effective. Guidance and counselling services being carried out by the student management include provision of counselling services, psycho social support, advisory services with regards to course selection, exemption procedures, time management, study skills, management of anxiety , examination preparations, and any other services that the student may require. Students are also referred to other service providers by the student management unit.

"I want to feel that I belong to this university by being close to it and to its lecturers" .This was a statement which also emerged from the respondents. The above statement highlight the fact that some respondents are adversely affected by the distance which separate the open and distance learner and his or her institution. The above sentiments were also echoed by Keegan (1986) who argued that distance education is characterized by the separation of teacher and learner. The lack of face to face interaction in distance and open learning may also be responsible for the high student attrition in Open and Distance learning as they opt for block release programmes which offer this close relationship with students .According to Tinto, (1975) for students to persist, they need to be integrated academically and socially, and this seemingly lack of integration may be a big contributing factor to the student drop out. Students can be integrated at college through interacting with faculty members, and other students, participating in sporting activities and the

general social activities at college. These factors mentioned above are conspicuously missing in the lifestyle of a distant learner hence there will be very little integration socially and academically.

The degree programme is completed in a shorter time than through open and distance learning
Some respondents thought that it was faster and therefore cheaper to do a degree programme through block release as compared with doing it through distance education. On further inquiry, the researcher found out that all Zimbabwe Open University degree programmes are completed in a minimum of four years and yet a similar programme through block release can be completed in three years. The above point obviously favours the block release programme over the open and distance education programmes. On further inquiry, the researcher also realised that the conventional universities assume that those students who come for block release programmes are expected to be doing work which is related to the degree programmes they enrol in and therefore are not expected to go for work related learning, which normally takes up to a year.

5.1. Interventions ZOU Can Take to Attract Students and Improve Student Retention.
A number of recommendations were raised which could potentially assist ZOU in attracting new students are retain those who are registered with them. The following issues were raised by the respondents:
- ZOU should adopt the lecture method as their principal mode of teaching.
- ZOU should establish more district centres so that students are not very much isolated and can keep in touch with what is happening in the university.
- The library should have internet connectivity
- More current books should be sourced
- Result publication should be error free.
- ZOU should arrange for more sporting activities, and other student social gatherings to promote student integration in the university.
- ZOU should establish an effective online result publication and registration platform.

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