

Reconstructing Higher Education in the Post-COVID-19 Period: A Lesson from Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine potent policy tools which can be utilized as levers in reconstructing higher education landscapes that have been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three key participants were purposively selected for the in-depth interviews of the study. The sample consisted of a former minister of Higher and Tertiary Education in Zimbabwe and two current Regional Directors of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) from Harare and Bulawayo regions. The study utilized the qualitative case study research design and a literature review to collect data to address the research question. The concept of hard and soft policy instruments and the Intervention Taxonomy were utilized as conceptual guides in data collection and the interpretation of results. The study results reveal that serious resistance to curriculum change and innovation in higher education can be overcome through the effective use of policy instruments. Policy tools can be utilized effectively and efficaciously to scale implementation barriers such as entrenched elitist cultures and practices, which are characteristic of higher education landscapes. More precisely, the study discovered that prudent and innovative application of a mix of hard and soft policy tools or instruments could effect sustainable and durable change. In view of this, the study recommends the use of policy tools as key levers in transforming and reconstructing higher education curricula and systems worldwide.

Keywords:

Reconstructing; Post-COVID-19; Curriculum Change and Innovation; Policy Tools.

ABSTRAK

Studi ini berusaha untuk menentukan perangkat kebijakan potensial yang dapat digunakan sebagai pengungkit dalam merekonstruksi lanskap pendidikan tinggi yang telah hilang akibat pandemi COVID-19. Tiga peserta kunci dipilih secara sengaja untuk wawancara mendalam penelitian ini. Sampel terdiri dari mantan menteri Pendidikan Tinggi dan Tersier di Zimbabwe dan dua Direktur Regional Universitas Terbuka Zimbabwe (ZOU) saat ini, dari wilayah Harare dan Bulawayo. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian studi kasus kualitatif dan tinjauan pustaka untuk mengumpulkan data guna menjawab pertanyaan penelitian. Konsep instrumen kebijakan keras dan lunak dan Taksonomi Intervensi digunakan sebagai panduan konseptual dalam pengumpulan data dan interpretasi hasil. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa resistensi serius terhadap perubahan kurikulum dan inovasi di perguruan tinggi dapat diatasi melalui penggunaan instrumen kebijakan yang efektif. Perangkat kebijakan dapat digunakan secara efektif dan efisien untuk mengatasi hambatan implementasi seperti budaya dan praktik elitis yang mengakar yang merupakan karakteristik lanskap pendidikan tinggi. Lebih tepatnya, studi ini menemukan bahwa penerapan yang bijaksana dan inovatif dari campuran alat atau instrumen kebijakan keras dan lunak dapat mempengaruhi perubahan yang berkelanjutan dan tahan lama. Mengingat hal ini, studi ini merekomendasikan penggunaan perangkat kebijakan sebagai pengungkit utama dalam mengubah dan merekonstruksi kurikulum dan sistem pendidikan tinggi di seluruh dunia.

Kata Kunci:

Merekonstruksi; Pasca-COVID-19; Perubahan Kurikulum dan Inovasi; Alat Kebijakan.

1. Introduction

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted universities and college campuses worldwide. According to Raj & Khare (2020), the Coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent lockdown have forced schools and colleges across India to shut down momentarily. This unprecedented move had created a huge gap within the education bodies despite the central and the government doing their best to support e-learning and online education. On the other hand, Rashid & Yadav (2020) postulate that the COVID-19 outbreak has caused a downward spiral in the world economy and caused a gigantic - on the higher education. This sudden closure of campuses as a social distancing measure to prevent community transmission has shifted face-to-face classes to an online learning system. Marinon, Land Van't H & Jensen (2020) are also of the view that the main findings of the IAU Global survey on the Impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world show that at almost all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), COVID-19 affected

teaching and learning, with two-thirds of them reporting that classroom teaching has been substituted by distance teaching and learning. It is important to note that the shift from face-to-face to distance teaching came with challenges of access to technical infrastructures, competencies, and pedagogies for distance learning and the requirements of specific fields of study.

The above view is also supported by Said (2021), who notes that in early 2020, COVID-19 has resulted in schools and universities being closed all across the world, making around 1.2 billion learners out of the classroom. The above scholar was exploring how the COVID-19 affected the higher education learning experience at one of the universities in Egypt. He pointed out that this leads to a distinguishing rise of distance learning whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. It is important to note that scholars like Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond (2020) are of the view that well-planned online learning is totally dissimilar from shifting online in response to a crisis, as the speed with which this shift is done could be shocking to faculty members and learners.

From the above scholars, we have noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Higher Education Institutions worldwide. The pandemic has caught most single-mode campus-based African universities ill-prepared and disoriented. Most campus-based universities (CBUs) are now searching for tools and mechanisms which will enable them to survive and sustain their operations for the foreseeable future. However, African higher education struggles have precedents. The quest for effective tools to transform higher education has preoccupied most African governments in the post-colonial period. Numerous waves of reform initiatives across the African continent have occurred but to no avail (Aina, 2010). Several studies reported that the adoption of the Bretton Woods Financial Institutions' prescriptions, widely known as structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the late 1980s and 1990s, precipitated a crisis in the governance of most African universities. Serious conflicts emerged between political elites on the one hand and academics and students on the other (Kinser, 2007). The conflicts arose due to national governments' withdrawal of financial support and other subsidies to universities which sparked riots and strikes. This period created authoritarian politics, which ultimately led to the emergence of the developmental university, whose mission or agenda served state interests (Khan, 2000).

In Zimbabwe, numerous innovative projects such as the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), the Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM), Minimum Bodies of Knowledge (MBKs), the Updated Curriculum Framework, Education 5.0, among others, have been implemented (Daniel, 2000). However, the results of these change efforts have been flurrying and disappointing. STEM has since been discontinued despite having received large sums of funding. On STEM, Mukeredzi (2018:1) says, "Government has binned the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics or STEM advanced-level scholarships geared towards final year school pupils, saying the money will be channeled towards university students." Similarly, the current STEAM appears to be stuttering without any clear progress being reported except for a few comments in the media. As for the other three projects, they are currently being implemented, but success prospects are bleak. What governments and CBUs can adopt effective

strategies to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak? This paper explores the potency of policy instruments in steering higher education reforms and reconstruction in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy instruments represent the third generation of theoretical constructs in the policy implementation literature. Fok, Kennedy, and Chan (2010) define a policy instrument as the tool or instrument that policy implementers use to put policies into effect. They focus more on the practical mechanisms employed in translating policy goals into practice instead of focusing on such issues as resource availability or implementer expertise (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Fok et al. (2010) further classified policy instruments into two categories, namely hard and soft policy instruments, which relate to the methods of coordination of the implementation process. The hard policy is constituted of rule-based coordination methods, whereas soft policy is embedded in guidelines and conventions that exercise authoritative impact (Fok et al., 2010).

Numerous scholars have also explored the nature of open learning in the post -COVID-19 era. For instance according to Said (2021), COVID -19 has dramatically reshaped the way global education is delivered. The above scholars also posited that millions of learners were affected by educational institution closures due to the pandemic, which then resulted in the largest online movement in the history of education. With this sudden shift away from classrooms in many parts of the globe, universities rapidly shifted to virtual and digital strategies. It is vital to note that many believe that online distance learning adoption will persist after the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, a new hybrid education model is expected to arise, and give the digital divide, new shifts in education approaches could widen equality gaps. This means that there was a sudden shift from face-to-face to online distance learning due to COVID-19 lockdown.

Scholars like Nworie (2021) believe that the post-COVID-19 period will be the time for higher education to build on online learning to assist students better, particularly for institutions that lagged in these efforts before the pandemic. In actual fact, the above author avows that in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, colleges and universities should actually develop plans that will guarantee students to learn online. This should be in normal times and in the event of disruptions to classroom instruction, ensuring that there are no roadblocks to synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Nworie (2021) also posits that in the post -COVID-19 period institutions may re-examine the emergency courses to determine how they could be improved upon to meet the necessary standards, format, and quality of online courses. Furthermore, the post-COVID-19 period could be a time for higher education to create a plan for effective distance learning, particularly by institutions that had lagged behind. It will be a period to develop policies and procedures for online learning, to assess and determine the best technologies and delivery methods for online learning courses, to assemble the right online learning team for course development and improvement, and to prepare faculty in course development and online teaching (Nworie, 2021).

The above idea is also supported by Donnelly, Patrinos & Gresham (2021). They assert that in the post -COVID-19 era, it is imperative that we not only recover from the pandemic but also use

this experience to prepare for future crises. To support this aim, countries need to build their capacity to provide blended models for future education. In addition to this, the above scholars pointed out that schools should be better prepared to change overeasily between face-to-face and remote learning as needed. The above scholars also propose using the post-pandemic to rebuild education systems and make them resilient. Moreover, these scholars point out that teachers need to be better equipped to manage a wide range of IT devices in the event of future school closures. Offering short training courses to improve their digital skills will help.

Against this background, this study sought to unravel, understand, and explain policy instruments and interventions that were used to successfully transplant and institutionalize the Open Learning (OL) system in the Zimbabwean higher education landscape post-COVID-19 period. The successful implementation and institutionalization of Open Learning (OL) in higher education in Zimbabwe provide a useful case study into useful policy tools which may be adopted and adapted to mitigate innovation failure. The continued existence of the OL as an educational innovation in Zimbabwe constitutes a unique case in view of the well-documented educational innovation failures in the post-independence period (Mswazie, Mudyahoto & Gamira, 2014). This study sought to explain policy tools that may have enabled the OL system to survive and entrench in higher education which may be appropriately described as a graveyard of innovations.

OL formally emerged on the higher education landscape in Zimbabwe with the founding of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The ZOU formally came into existence by an Act of Parliament on March 1, 1999. The reasons behind the establishment of the ZOU project are many and varied. However, the literature consulted suggests that internal and external pressures might have given impetus to adopting the Open Distance Learning System (ODLS) as an innovation in higher education. Policymakers in developing countries are strongly vulnerable to internal and international pressures for policy and institutional reforms. In the context of Zimbabwe, the socio-economic imperatives of the new millennium, namely dwindling financial support for universities due to the declining national economy, electoral politics, political demands for equity and access to higher education, demographic changes, and the forces of globalization, are some of the factors that gave rise to the establishment of the ZOU and new universities worldwide (Malada & Nettswera, 2007).

Still, other writers situate the origins of the OL within the globalization discourse. These contexts stressed the acquisition of technological innovation skills to cope with new challenges of the new era. Makhurane (2000) stresses that survival in this global village will depend on how people manage the technological changes. In this regard, technological innovativeness is regarded as central to socio-economic well-being in the new millennium. Similarly, the inaugural Vice-Chancellor of ZOU links the establishment of the ZOU to socio-economic imperatives of the new millennium as he states that the ZOU was established so that it could provide university education and training which is flexible, relevant, accessible, and cost-effective (Dzwimbo, 2000). Dzwimbo further identified some of the local and external pressures that drove the ZOU's establishment. These pressures include the introduction of new paradigms and needs in education and training with

a focus on lifelong learning; the inability of the state to provide adequate funding to institutions of higher learning for capital and recurrent expenditure; external threats from well-established and funded universities from South Africa, Australia, Asia, Europe, North America, and challenges in the political climate of Zimbabwe. However, worldwide, the COVID 19 pandemic has emerged as one of the greatest challenges on educational systems at all levels and human existence on the planet.

The COVID 19 epidemic has stimulated a torrent of individual and small group responses to how education could be transformed (Fullan & Quinn 2020). Worldwide, instituting successful educational change and innovation has proved tricky and elusive in higher education in Zimbabwe (Huberman & Miles, 1984; Fullan, 2001; Jansen, 1991; Mswazie, Mudyahoto & Gamira, 2014). However, the institutionalization of the open and distance learning approach on the Zimbabwean educational landscape provides useful insights into potent policy tools that can be deployed in durable educational reform. First, the adaptation and institutionalization of a complex technological-dependent innovation such as the OL in a socio-economic context lacking in advanced technological support infrastructures such as internet access and wide-spread use of computers call for creativity by the implementers and managers of this innovation. In the opinion of two eminent former Vice-Chancellors of Open Universities (OU), OL sustainability is contingent upon the availability of cutting-edge technological resources and a critical mass of advocates (Daniel, 2000; Khan, 2000). These former Vice-Chancellors of OUs argue that the OL is prone to failure without technological resources.

ZOU is gearing itself towards becoming a fully-fledged OL university in terms of infrastructure. For the university to continue delivering Teaching and Learning during the post-COVID 19 epidemics, a vigorous operational ICT infrastructure is highly called for. In actual fact, lack of technological resources would strongly affect access to proper teaching and learning by both members of staff and the students. Hence, serious infrastructure upgrading is strongly needed.

From a regional perspective, in particular the countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), this study would extend and contribute to the education reform discourses embodied in the work of Jansen (2002) and his South African counterparts such as Moja (2004) and many others not mentioned here. Countries such as Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, and South Africa are also currently involved in reviewing and reforming their higher education systems. They would undoubtedly benefit from a case study of one seemingly enduring reform initiative in the post-independence period (Crosier, 2007).

Similarly, the role of the traditional university has increasingly been questioned by influential politicians and scholars (Moja, 2004; Olukoshi and Zeleza, 2004). This study will add more grounded insights into innovation, adaptation, and policy implementation in the higher education landscape. Both innovation studies and the field of educational policy implementation on the African continent are deprived of grounded conceptual frameworks for explaining variables leading to successful educational reform. Most of the models or approaches for implementing educational

change have been developed in non-African contexts. Although promising, Western blueprints to curriculum reform have not effectively reconstructed the post-colonial curriculum (Lumumba, 2006; Aina, 2010). This study provides new insights into policy strategies that may be utilized in implementing sustainable educational reforms in higher education, especially in the post-COVID-19.

It is also important to note that Nworie (2021) postulates that in an uncharacteristically swift action for higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities to move their courses online while faculty, administrators, and staff worked remotely to protect millions of students and themselves. Since then, remote courses, remote student support services, remote graduation ceremonies, and remote campus tours have become the new norm, all aimed at controlling the rapid spread of this deadly disease. The above author also points out that a large and varied number of faculty and students were unprepared to teach or learn remotely. Lack of access to digital devices, the internet, and sufficient bandwidth further exposed the lingering issues of the digital divide. Many institutions lacked robust online programs, sufficient instructional design and technology staff, appropriate course development processes, and sufficiently structured student support mechanisms.

In addition to this, Paterson (2021) also notes that weaknesses in higher education provision across the world have been exaggerated and aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to findings presented by the university leaders and researchers at a recent webinar. To make matters worse, poorer students and institutionally susceptible tertiary institutions have been disproportionately damaged by the impacts of the national lockdowns. According to the academics who participated in the discussion, themed “Impact of a pandemic: Global perspectives.” Together with this, despite universities’ efforts to ensure equitable access to learning, poorer students in Africa and Europe have been disadvantaged by the global shift to online education in the face of campus lockdowns.

In line with this background, the overall aim of this study was to understand and explain policy mechanisms that facilitated the successful institutionalization of the OL in the higher education system in Zimbabwe. More specifically, the study's main objective was to unpack and explain policy tools and strategies that may have facilitated the successful institutionalization of the OL as an alternative educational philosophy and practice in Zimbabwe in the aftermath of COVID 19.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

Numerous studies of higher education reforms globally and on the African continent have utilized the case study design to a greater effect (Clark, 2005). In this research study, we used a case study design. The case for this study was Zimbabwe Open University in Bulawayo and Harare regions. This case study consisted of a former minister of Higher and Tertiary Education in

Zimbabwe and two current Regional Directors from Harare and Bulawayo. Using the case study design allowed the researchers to probe one situation in detail, yielding a wealth of descriptive and explanatory information. The case study design also facilitated the discovery of unexpected relationships. However, the data collected through the case study design could not be generalized to other situations since the information was so closely tied to the situation studied (Moorhead & Griffin, 1997).

2.2. *Sample and Sampling Procedure*

One key attribute of the case studies relates to their ability to bring out details from the participants' perspectives. As was the case in this study, data were elicited from three (3) important sources comprised of policy elites and in this case, the former Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, two current managers of the innovation (The Regional Director), and the documents that were generated before and during the implementation the OL. This multi-perspectival data provided us with holistic information needed to understand and explain policy mechanisms that underpinned successful OL implementation in Zimbabwe.

2.3. *Instruments*

The researchers combined data collection instruments such as documents, interviews, and observations. In the context of this study, document analysis and semi-structured interviews constituted the key data collection instruments for the study. Collectively, we found the qualitative case study methodology valuable in providing structure and focus in collecting the data to address the research question of this study.

3. **Results and Discussion**

This study set out to investigate policy mechanisms that were utilized to entrench the OL in Zimbabwe against a backdrop of fierce resistance by *status quo* forces (Chombo, 2000; Kurasha, 2003). The data collected through documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with the Regional Director (Participant B) and a former Minister of Higher Education (Participant A) indicate that a mix of policy tools and mechanisms were used to leverage the OL into the higher education landscape.

Utilizing the concept of hard and soft policy instruments as a theoretical construct (Fok, Kennedy & Chan, 2010), the following policy tools were found to be critical in the initiation, adoption, and institutionalization of OL in Zimbabwe. First, ministerial powers/statutory power (Participant A, 2021). There are mandates. These refer to the parameters or rules governing the actions of individuals or agencies (Benza *et al.* 1999; Chombo, 2000; Dzwimbo, 2000; Nherera, 2000). There are also inducements related to incentives given to an institution to fulfill its assigned role (Pfukwa & Matipano, 2006). More so, there is capacity-building which refers to the provision of a budget for investment in material, intellectual or human resources (2013). Last but not least, there is system-changing which refers to actions that are intended to transfer official authority

among individuals and agencies to alter the system by which public goods and services are delivered (Kurasha, 2007) as well as strategic planning (Dzwimbo, 2000).

3.1. Ministerial and legislative power: Dynamic levers for institutional reform

The study results indicate that ministerial and statutory powers constituted the lead policy weapons wielded by power elites to coerce and create space for the OL into the higher education sector. This was echoed by Participant A that:

“Ministerial powers were comprised of the statutory, legal, and coercive instruments or resources at the disposal of the Ministerial office. Ministerial powers were used as ‘persuasive and coercive measures’ specifically to develop initial courses for the first OL degree program. More importantly, ministerial powers were used to compel academics in the Faculty of Education at the UZ to accommodate OL within the faculty.”

This participant said ministerial powers were also handy during his tenure in reforming conservative assessment procedures at the UZ and rationalizing primary teacher education programs in Zimbabwe.

When asked to elaborate on the form and content of the persuasive measures, Participant A had this to say:

“I invited all the Vice Chancellors to my office and over a cup of tea. I then asked them why our universities were not producing first-class graduates whereas in the UK most students with 13 points and above at ‘A’ level obtained first-class degrees when they graduated”. When they failed to provide answers, I then asked the Vice Chancellors to indicate who among them had first-class degrees and none could be found, so I gently persuaded them to revise their assessment procedures in their institutions - hence we now have a significant number of our university graduates with first-class when they graduate.

Legislation constituted another hard policy instrument used to establish the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the sole provider of OL programs in Zimbabwe (Kurasha, 2006). Through the Act of Parliament of March 1999, the ZOU acquired legal status and raised its profile and independent status as a degree conferring institution that was no longer a surrogate of the UZ (Kurasha, 2003). According to participant A,

“An Act of Parliament is a more effective control than a university Charter because an Act of Parliament provides the government with the means of control and ensuring compliance to national policies and priorities. In the context of the OL, it proved effective not only in creating space for the OL in the higher education sector but, more importantly, in upsetting the status quo forces in the form of conservative academic and elitist cultures. The legislation also proved decisive in dispelling fears and anxieties among prospective learners regarding the relevancy and worthiness of OL degree qualifications. Consequently, the OL

took off the ground with relatively little opposition compared to other innovations that had been implemented and failed.”

Statutory mechanisms constitute another resource in the ministerial portfolio. Participant B alluded to the fact that:

“...previously the government had tried to control the activities of universities through Statutes; however, most of these have been administrative in nature. The government, in my view, can no longer afford to believe that changes in administrative structures will subsequently lead to changes in the nature of programmes in higher education. The suggestion here is that government and other interested organizations should directly contest higher education so that it influences the development and implementation of programs that enhance patriotism and cultural identity.”

3.2. Mandates: protective shield for the OL.

All state universities which were established during the post-independence period were assigned to specific educational niches. The mandate of the ZOU is clearly set out in the official documents generated at the time of its launch. Participant A went on to say that:

“Establishment of new universities goes beyond providing funding to ensuring quality management of the processes in the institution. A college of distance education, now the ZOU, was launched to cater for a variety of students and different learning modes. Most students who UZ and the NUST could not absorb could join ZOU.... In terms of numbers, ZOU is now the largest university.”

Similarly, participant B confirms the use of mandates as policy instruments used by the post-independence government in Zimbabwe:

“...the Government through the National Council of Higher Education gives the general orientation to the nature of the programmes that are offered. For instance, the NUST was specifically established as a state university to meet the high-level human resources in science and technology. The mission of the ZOU was mainly to increase access to university education in response to the massive demand that continues to exist.”

In the case of the ZOU, mandated use entailed the provision of accessible, high-quality, and cost-effective higher education to previously marginalized groups in society (Dzwimbo, 2000; Kurasha, 2003). For the ZOU, the mandate proved advantageous in one significant way - it provided the ZOU with a vast untapped, captive niche market in higher education. Benza *et al.* (1999) report that the university was established to provide university education to thousands of people who each year have been denied entry into the conventional universities and the prohibitive cost of conventional university education. The actual figure for this market was estimated at 300

000 prospective students every year (Zimbabwe Government, 1998). From a marketing perspective, the ZOU took off the ground with an inexhaustible protected market base to sustain its operations.

3.3. Capacity-building: a solid foundation for OL expansion in higher education

The data collected indicate that the government availed a wide range of resources at the disposal of the new institution. One of the critical resources provided for the OL at its initiation was the information in the form of needs assessment reports compiled before the launch of the OL in March 1999. Numerous commissions of inquiry, consultative meetings, and committees were set up to mobilize relevant knowledge (Mugadzaweta & Benza, 1999; Kurasha, 2003, 2006). Important reports tapped into include The University of Zimbabwe Act of 1982, The University of Zimbabwe feasibility study of 1986, and The Williams Commission of 1981. The University of Zimbabwe Senate minute 114 and The Zimbabwe National Second Year National Development Plan 1991-1995 were some of the reports.

Another critical resource was the initial start-up capital provided by the government at the launch of the ZOU. Participant B stated that:

“On the financial input from the government in 1999, the ZOU requested Z\$ 400 million for its recurrent budget it was only granted Z\$103 million. Yet another critical resource was the assistance in the form of resource persons to train ZOU staff who came from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the Australian government, and the British Council.”

By implication, the resources provided by the government relate to political support and goodwill. The documentary evidence suggests that, unlike other state universities, the ZOU enjoyed a unique mutual relationship with the government to the extent that the government seconded seasoned administrators to steer the innovation and provided the initial infrastructure to house the innovation. Kurasha (2003) acknowledges government support in glowing terms of marked political support for establishing the open and distance learning institution at the tertiary level since this was in line with the national development plan. The political pressure with regard to the principle of education for all, hence the pressure to upgrade teachers and school heads. This pressure also enabled the newly established Centre of Distance Education to recruit key and seasoned regional heads from the Ministry of Education and Culture to head the Regional centers. In the same vein, Mahoso (2012) has also highlighted Presidential office support as a key resource for the uptake and growth of the OLS. Participant C indicated that:

“President Mugabe has been the source of inspiration behind the concept of popular access to higher education.”

Historically, the support from the Head of State has proved a boon in the development and implementation of the OUs (Mahoso, 2012). Elsewhere, Harold Wilson, the former British Prime Minister associated with establishing the ‘University of the Air’ or the British Open University,

aptly captures the immense influence and resources available to the Head of State (Harold Wilson in Perry, 1976).

Likewise, political support for OL was also expressed through the state media. Pfukwa and Matipano (2006) reveal that the ZOU initially utilized electronic and print media to communicate and market programs. The print media, in particular state newspapers, such as *The Herald* and the *Sunday Mail*, have been effective tools in promoting and generating positive images of the institution and its programs in particular. For example, *The Herald* newspapers run a weekly media release advertisement entitled “ZOU on Thursday” to disseminate information about ZOU programs.

3.4. *Incentives: motivator and catalyst of OL adoption by clients*

This study indicates that the innovators used incentives and inducement mechanisms for attracting students and improving primary school management practices. Participant C pointed out that:

At a personal level, completing the initial OL program would increase salary, but more importantly, promotion. It also raised the professional and personal status of the primary school administrator for whom it was initially targeted. Secondly, it would improve the primary school's administration quality since it was initially targeted at school heads and was the first program offered through the OL.

Consequently, targeting the school administrative bureaucracy would eliminate negative attitudes and resistance towards OL provision, which contributed to the ZINTEC program's demise.

3.5. *Strategic planning: the linchpin of OL growth and survival*

Strategic planning has also been found to be the linchpin of OL growth and survival. Participants indicated that the principle of strategic planning was adopted as the lifeline for the OL from the very beginning. Participant C stated that:

Our strategic plan becomes the main vehicle for the ZOU to achieve its vision and mission of becoming a premier distance and open learning institution in the sub-region. Our new system of performance management based on individual key result areas and the notion of a balanced scorecard is our dynamic tool for managing the implementation and monitoring of our strategic plan at all levels. In other words, the ZOU is now poised to achieve a strategic fit between its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities.

The initiators of OL utilized a number of hard and soft policy instruments, namely mandates, legislation, strategic planning, and incentives, to coordinate the implementation of the OL. These mechanisms undoubtedly shielded and nurtured the OL during its most vulnerable phase.

Worldwide, initiating and sustaining higher education reforms has proved tricky and elusive. However, the results of this study indicate that prudent and creative application of a mix of policy tools might produce desired outcomes. In the implementation of the OL, several policy tools were utilized to navigate and scale implementation hazards of the innovation process, such as resistance to change and product acceptance (Kurasha, 2003).

The selected policy tools or weapons were utilized during the OL's initiation and early implementation phase mainly by senior government officials such as the education minister and other top officials in the Ministry of Higher Education to overcome the initial resistance to change. These policy tools were articulated in various hard and soft policy instruments, which according to the Force Field Analysis Theory (Lewin, 1951), are intended to shake up or unfreeze the organization in preparation for change. As reported above, hard policy instruments were largely intended at unsettling an entrenched elitist system of university education conventions and practices whose orientation and values were Western and British-oriented (Mahoso, 2013). In this regard, hard policy instruments included: mandated use (Nherera, 2000), and enabling Parliamentary or legislative Act (Mugadzaweta & Benza, 1999; Dzwimbo, 2000), an operational budget (Dzwimbo, 2000), administrative personnel and buildings (Kurasha, 2003), statutory or persuasive measures (Interview with Participant A March 2012), among other things. These hard and soft policy instruments, as strategy, served two important functions. Firstly, they paved the way or created space for the OL to gain a foothold in a higher education landscape which has been characterized as a closed system (Chombo, 2000), elitist and conservative (Kurasha, 2003). In particular, the market niche given to the ZOU by the government constituted a masterstroke in terms of opening up a vast and inexhaustible educational market (Dzwimbo, 2000).

Whereas hard policy instruments were intended to reduce resistance to the OL as an innovation, soft policy instruments were targeted at incentivizing the user system. These included, among others, aligning OL qualifications to promotional posts in the civil service (Interview with Participant A, 10 February 2021); and the continual adaptation and development of popular new programs with a user-friendly instructional delivery system (Dzwimbo, 2000; Kurasha, 2003). Four years after its launch, the ZOU became the most prominent university in Zimbabwe regarding student enrollment. Therefore, policy interventions were critical in laying a solid foundation for the institutionalization of the OL during the initial phase of the implementation.

While hard policy tools were effective during the initiation and early implementation phase to overcome institutional and user resistance, new strategies had to be crafted to meet the challenges associated with sustaining innovation in a hostile higher education landscape. These soft policies may be labeled multiple stakeholder or relational strategies. Mahoso (2013: D2) aptly describes relational strategies: "The relational approach is holistic, integrative and multi-disciplinary." In the context of this study, relational strategies were projected and articulated in inclusive management strategies and practices which sought to balance the interests of stakeholders of the OL. These significant stakeholders who drive and sustain the OL were identified as: the ZOU alumni and prospective students who pay for popular OL programs; personnel at the regional campus of the

ZOU who spearhead and micro-manage the implementation of the OL; employers who legitimize the ODL qualifications; top officials of the ZOU who macro-manage and support user-implementation through defending the OL and boosting staff morale at regional campuses in the Post COVID 19 period.

Similarly, incentive or “motivational regimes” as inducements offered to implement staff constitute another key lever in the growth and expansion of the ODLS in higher education in Zimbabwe. A committed and motivated workforce is essential in ensuring success in all areas of human endeavor. It was reported that the top management of the ZOU, specifically the Vice-Chancellor engaged in “energizing visits,” which are intended to boost staff morale at each of ZOU regional campuses in the aftermath of the COVID 19.

4. Conclusion

The study results reported in this study indicate that the use of hard and soft policy instruments has great potential in redesigning and reconstructing higher education landscapes thrown into disarray by the COVID-19 pandemic. Reforms driven by clear policies and top organizational managers stand better chances of transcending barriers and adversities. Further, top officials command resources at their disposal, and they enjoy better support networks than their subordinates. Overall, the study results indicate that the utilization of a mix of hard and soft policy instruments constitutes potent tools for mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, this study recommends the prudent and judicious use of hard and soft policy tools as critical levers in reconstructing higher education systems that have been dismantled and d torn apart by the coronavirus pandemic. The war with the COVID-19 outbreak demands that policy elites descend from their ivory towers to lead their subordinates to fight against this disease. Lessons from the establishment of the ZOU indicate that teams driven by top government and university leadership and effective policy tools constitute effective weapons in winning the war against the disruptive effects of the pandemic.

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