

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCILS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE FOR THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at establishing the effectiveness of the Student Representative Council in Open and Distance Learning institutions. A case study was undertaken at the Zimbabwe Open University, in the Mashonaland East region which the researchers selected to understand in depth regardless of number of there being 10 regions in the ZOU. In order to make an assessment of the effectiveness of the Student Representative Council at the Zimbabwe Open University, this current study sought to find out what services were being offered by the SRC, how beneficial these services were and how effective the SRC had been in addressing student concerns. The study also aimed at unearthing the challenges which the SRC faced in their quest to provide effective student services. The respondents were drawn from all the 436 active ZOU students from the four faculties in Mashonaland East region duly registered for the August-December 2010 semester. A sample of 100 students was drawn and consisted of 10 Student Representative Council members, and 90 ordinary students. The responses from the students were solicited through the use of a questionnaire, for the ordinary students, while the student representatives' views were extracted through the use interviews. Findings revealed that at most, the SRC was not being effective in rendering the services for which they were elected. No meetings had been held with students although only one had been held with the Regional Administration. Students' grievances were obtained through a suggestion box once, but unfortunately, these had not been deliberated upon. The most dominating challenge was lack of funds and this made the majority of the SRC's objectives unattainable during the 2010 academic year.

For the effective functioning of the SRC, it is recommended that financial control of the students' monies should be devolved to regions in order to expedite disbursements to various service providers. For ease of coordination, office space should be availed to the SRC where the receive students' issues and sit for their meetings. There is also need for a vigorous campaign to have the students linked with their counterparts in universities inside and outside the country for exchange programmes.

Key Words: Open and Distance Learning, Distance Education, Student Representative Council, Student Unions

INTRODUCTION

The importance of student councils has increased over the past years (Kaba; 2000) and as they get involved in the decision making process of the universities and colleges, they get to appreciate the transparency with which activities are executed (Durman; 2009). Colleges and universities in Sub-Saharan African countries, Zimbabwe included, have fortunately, in the face of democracy, embraced the idea of student participation in the affairs of educational institutions. Since direct participation by large numbers of people in the running of the organizations is, in practice, impossible, it can only be replaced by some form of representative system whereby elected members represent the electorate and carry out the members' will (Robert Michels in

Haralambos and Holbron; 1995). Such democratization of organizations has, therefore, seen the proliferation of workers' organizations, student unions and other assortments of representatives towards the quest for harmonious institutional relations. The formation of student unions in institutions of learning has, therefore, had its foundations on these premises. Each and every school, college or university is, in some countries such as Zimbabwe, statutorily required to cause the formation of one such organization that represents the wishes, rights, beliefs and desires of the students thus being represented in the institution. It follows, therefore, that it is no longer the prerogative of the institutional administration alone to transmit its suggestions and seek enforced co-operation from the unsuspecting student. This inclusion of the student body in decision making has been hailed by many as a means that has helped to increase the legitimacy of the democratic processes in the eyes of the student (Calkins; 1974, Ryan; 1976). While the nobility in the creation of the student councils is at least in the name of democratization of learning institutions, their success in the provision of the much needed student services has been brought to question. It is behind this observation that this current study sought to assess the effectiveness of the Student Representative Council at the Zimbabwe Open University, an Open and Distance Learning institution.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Zimbabwe Open University (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 was established on 1st March 1999 through an Act of parliament (Chapter 25:20), with an initial enrolment of 624 students registered for the Bachelor of Education degree programme. By 2004 ZOU had become the largest university in the country and second largest in Southern Africa compared to University of South Africa (UNISA), with a student enrolment of approximately 13 000. However, the student population, in the year, 2010, dropped to approximately 10 000. During the time of this study, in 2010, ZOU had four faculties;

- the faculty of Arts and Education,
- the faculty of Science and Technology
- the faculty of Commerce and Law and
- the faculty of Applied Social Sciences,

These faculties are offering more than 30 undergraduate degree programmes, over 3 diploma courses, over 5 masters' degree programmes and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in all the four faculties.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to make an assessment of the effectiveness of the Student Representative Council at the Zimbabwe Open University, this present research study sought to answer the following four questions:

1. What services are being offered by the SRC?
2. How beneficial have been the services offered to the student body by the SRC?
3. How effective has the SRC been in addressing student concerns?
4. What challenges have the SRC faced in their quest to provide effective student services?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Student Representative Council: Definition, objectives and structure

A Student Representative Council (SRC), also known as student union or government, student senate, students' association or council, guild of students or government of student body is a student based civic organization designed to help promote school, college or university spirit and leadership among the student body. In higher

education, the student union is often accorded its own building on the campus, dedicated to social and organizational activities of the student body(Kaba; 2000, Wang and Salo; 2009).

Being student based, the student unions are run by students, independent of the university authorities although in most institutions the resources for the operationalisation of the union are institution funded. The purpose of this organization is to represent students both within the institution and externally, including on local and national issues. They are also responsible for providing a variety of services to students. Students can get involved in its management through numerous and varied committees, councils and general meetings.

In some countries, joining students unions is through what is known as “compulsory unionism”. This is a practice whereby every student in any tertiary institution is compelled to join and to fund a student union as a prerequisite for admission to or graduation from a tertiary institution (Clarke; 2007). In contrast, some countries` institutions offer freedom to belong to any union whether a trade union, a religious group, a political or civic organization. Likewise, students in institutions of learning are accorded the opportunity to join any association if they so wish. In Zimbabwe, by compelling students to pay SRC fees is clear testimony that student unionism is compulsory, thus students have no right to refuse to belong to such unions or councils.

The structure of the Students Union at the Zimbabwe Open University

Zimbabwe Open University Act No 12/98 Chapter 25:20 envisages the establishment of an association of students to be known as the “Students Union”, which is an association of all the students in the Zimbabwe Open University. Under the union is the Student Representative Council (SRC) which consists of two separate bodies: the Student Representative Assembly on one hand, and the Student Executive Council (SEC) on the other. The SEC is composed of 14 members elected by the students union. Office bearers in the SEC shall be the President, Secretary General, Treasurer and ten Regional committee members who shall be the chairpersons of the SRA in their respective regions. The SEC is responsible for administrative functions of the SRC and is directly accountable to the SRA and to the Students Union at general meetings. The SRA is responsible for regulating the activities of the SRC.

The Composition of the SRC at the ZOU

- The president
- Vice President
- The Secretary General
- The Treasurer
- Transport Secretary
- Social Welfare Secretary
- Academic and Legal affairs Secretary
- Sports and Entertainment Secretary
- External, Publicity and Information Secretary
- Properties Secretary

Aims and Objectives of the Student Union

The aims and objectives of the Student Union as stated in the Student Union Constitution (2002) are given as follows:

- to provide for the representation of the students in matters that affect their interests both as individuals and a body in the pursuit of academic excellence
- to promote intellectual, scientific, artistic, cultural, aesthetic, political , religious and economic activities arising among its members, and to promote their general welfare
- to provide, encourage and develop among its members the formation, organization and operation of clubs and societies for such purpose as are mentioned in clause 2.2 above

- to provide effective channel of communication between the student and the University authorities and the people of Zimbabwe in general
- to organize the students on the basis of love for peace, justice, democracy, progress, the elimination of racism, tribalism, regionalism, nepotism, neo-colonialism and imperialism
- to promote and maintain the co-operation of its members with other students at national and international levels

What is distance education?

Peters (1973) defines distance education as a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes which is rationalized by the application of division of labour and organizational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, especially for the purpose of reproducing high quality teaching material which makes it possible to instruct great numbers of students at the same time wherever they live. It is an industrialized form of teaching and learning (Peters, 1973:206). The definition presented Moore (1973) states that distance teaching is the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors, including those that in a contiguous situation would be performed in the learner's presence, so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical, or other devices.

Distance education is not a new phenomenon; it has been a mode of teaching and learning for at least the past one hundred years (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The first distance learning was known as "correspondence education" and used printed course material delivered by post (Saba 1997). Garrison and Shale (1987) assert that distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between teacher and student occurs non contiguously and that distance education involves two-way communication between teacher and student for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process and they further state that one very salient feature of distance education is its use of technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication. The term needs to be conceived as a sophisticated collection of methods for the provision of structured learning in situations, increasingly the norm, where students are unable primarily to attend fixed classes at a centralised venue and in the physical presence of lecturers (Saide, 2003).

Therefore, distance education is seen to be a planned teaching/learning experience in which teacher and students are separated by physical distance. In distance education courses and programs, student-teacher interaction may occur and course materials may be delivered in an asynchronous or synchronous mode over a wide spectrum of existing and evolving media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Models of Student Representation

A number of models have given rise to the formation of student representation in various institutions of learning particularly in higher education. Among these are the Representative democracy Model, the Liberal model and the direct democracy model (Birch1993). Hereunder we discuss these models in detail.

The Representative Democracy Model

The model involves the selection of representatives by the students being or at least seeking to be represented. If the posts being vied for are filled in through democratic student elections, then the elected student representative body is called a democratic student body. The most common mechanisms for coming up with such student representation is to involve elections and the candidate with a majority or a plurality of the votes takes his/her place in the student council to represent the wishes and desires of the students who elect them into such position. However, while these student representatives are elected by the student body to act on their behalf and in their interest, they retain the freedom to exercise their own judgment as how best to do so (Dahl; 2000).

Liberal Model

The Liberal democracy model postulates that a representative democracy is one in which the ability of the elected student representatives to exercise decision-making power is subject to a constitution incepted by the students to guide the operations, a constitution which emphasizes the protection of students rights and freedoms and regulates the actions leaders against making unpopular decisions (Dahl; 2000).

Direct Representation Model

The direct model approach to student representation posits that in an organized institution, students participate in the decision-making of the organization personally, contrary to relying on intermediaries or representatives. The supporters of direct democracy argue that democracy is more than merely a procedural issue. The direct democracy model gives the voting student population the power to give binding orders to its elected representatives, such as recalling them before the expiry of their term in office.(Buccus;2010). Whatever model is followed three patterns of student representatives have emerged. These are one which allows for one students` association for all the faculties of the same university, another where each faculty has its own student representative and yet another with students` national union comprising unions of several universities and colleges (Madziyire et al; 2010).

The Representative Democracy Model apparently is of major use today in most institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Open University has also adopted the model towards its thrust to democratize the institution through student participation and other means that are meant to achieve that endeavour. The Student Representative Council Constitution of the Zimbabwe Open University dated 20 March 2002 bears testimony towards this thrust. However, despite this desire for student democracy through the formation of the Student Representative Council, among other arrangements, the effectiveness of the SRC in an open and distance learning institution needs to be established through this current study.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH STUDIES

Research on the effectiveness of the Student Representative Councils in Open and Distance Learning institutions has not been bountiful as in other areas such as conventional universities, colleges and schools. However, important theories have been identified that have dwelt on the need to have student councils in all institutions of learning. The present study reviewed literature on the five motives for the formation of Student Representative Councils. Literature was also identified from previous researches that which centred on, mostly, conventional colleges, universities and high schools. Of interest to the present study, was literature on the following responsibilities and services rendered to the student body by the SRCs; representing the student body in issues affecting their learning in the institution, holding consultative and feedback meetings with the students, production of informative pamphlets for the benefit of all students and organizing campaigns of various forms, among others.

THE RATIONALE DEBATE FOR STUDENT PARTICIPATION

Debate has raged over the years on what reasons have been advanced for student participation in decision making processes in institutions of learning. Five schools of thought have emerged and proponents have advanced these categories of reasons on why students` participation in the decision making of the institution has been given the green light in most institutions of learning particularly those of higher education. These reasons have been advanced as the moral reason, the morale reason, decisional reason and educational reason (Schmerler, 1977). Ryan (1976) offers the fifth reason as the "credibility reason".

According McGrath (1970), the most compelling reason for student participation in the affairs of the University rests in the generally accepted political proposition that in a free society all affected by a policy have the right

to be involved in the formulation of such a policy even at its inception. Otherwise the policy stands to be resisted. The morale argument in favour of student participation in university decision processes was provided by Johnson (1991) whose reason for the involvement lies on the premise that student input creates a sense of ownership and engagement between students and the institution. The decisional paradigm for student representation and involvement argue that students have special information and expertise not available to faculty and administrators and which would not be represented if students were not included in the deliberations. The students offers knowledge, perceptions and opinions that can only be held by someone who is the recipient , customer and purpose the educational process (Webber, 1974). The educational motive for student involvement posits that one of the main goals of educational institution is to educate the students for citizenship and democratic living. In order therefore, to inculcate the philosophy of democracy and citizenship in them, they must be afforded the opportunity to participate in civil and democratic dispensations in which they are directly involved in making decision which affect them most (Northington, 1972). Starkweather (1975) concurs when he argues that it seems reasonable that students would be better able to move from the role of students to the role of a citizen if they experienced optimum decision making while at college. The "credibility reason" paradigm postulates that student involvement in college governance allows for policy decisions to be viewed as more legitimate by the student body resulting in the institution avoiding looking paternalistic (Ryan, 1976). This eventually leads to improved quality of educational decisions and policies, diminished student dissent and unrest, giving legitimacy to colleges and creation of patriotic and better citizens.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND SERVICES OFFERED BY THE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCILS

According to Wang and Salo (2009), council members are expected to design and participate in approved activities that serve to enhance the quality and image of both the physical and behaviour of the institution. Presented hereunder are some of the reviewed responsibilities and services offered by the SRCs to their electorate.

Representing the student body in issues affecting their learning in the institution

As originally proposed by John Dewey in Democracy and Education (1917), the purpose of representatives in democracy is to engage in meaningful dialogue between different groups of a given social set up. Student Representative Councils therefore, shall exist for the benefit of the students in order to help students share ideas, interests, and concerns with tutors, other members of different faculties, administrative staff and to help build harmonious relationships between students themselves. The Student Representative Council therefore, represents the student community to other students in other tertiary institutions and to the outside world. In the United States, Australia and Canada student councils are involved in curricular and extracurricular activities and student organizations promote public education and its values. In an article by Saba (2000), to secure students` perceptions of and feelings about their participation on these decision-making bodies, student representatives indicated that they helped to share decision-making responsibilities with the authorities in their institutions. However, while participation helped to foster a sense of equality and ownership among of stakeholders, student reps, were not given a corresponding opportunity to substantively affect policy and other changes in their schools (Saba;2000).

The concept of student participation usually conjures an image of elected student councils. However, a new generation of school reform experiments has brought to the fore a different kind of student leadership arrangement. The student council is no longer viewed as the primary mechanism for garnering student input; rather, the trend in student participation is now geared toward "more democratic decision-making modes" and "revised power alignments" (Schmerler, 1972). The idea is to "provide students direct access to administrative decision-making procedures" (Schmerler, 1977). Critics of traditional student councils have hailed this shift as a way to lessen the potential for co-option by administrators and faculty and as a means for increasing the legitimacy of the democratic process in the eyes of students (Calkins, 1974; Ryan, 1976).

Holding Consultative and feedback meetings with the students

The SRCs hold group meetings which should be held at regular intervals of time in order to discuss various aspects of functioning of the student council). Such meetings are to be attended by all stakeholders who include the student council, college or university counselors and faculty members. In order to facilitate consultation, the SRC raises student issues, engage in consultations and provide advice on educational and youth issues to the institutional authorities and appropriate government authorities and youth agencies (Vikas; 2009, Wang and Salo; 2009; Kaba;2000).

Communicating with the Student Constituents

As the representatives of the student body, the SRC has a responsibility to report information of various kinds to fellow students. They inform their constituents about the issues that were discussed or information items disseminated at meetings with the university authorities. It is vital that they gather information from their constituents about issues brought before meetings with authorities as well as about any issues that their constituents have. They also may wish to host one or two meetings per semester to update students on issues and to discuss any issues that need to be addressed. In order to stay in touch with what is going on in their institutions, they should meet with the college authorities at least once or twice a semester (Wang and Salo; 2009).

Participating in Committees

There are numerous opportunities to participate in committees within the college and the university level. Student bodies elect representatives to stand for them in University -wide committees. These representatives report back to students at organized meetings. Furthermore, Student Representative Councils have the opportunity to serve on Policy and Review Councils within the university (Wang and Salo; 2009). In Chicago, for example, in the United States student representatives elected by their peers share with authorities the responsibility for governing their institutions (Hess; 1996).

They are given the opportunity to take part in the approval of changes and the addition or deletion of the current university programs. The importance of taking part in such committees is therefore very important since avoiding such committee involvement will weaken the student's voice in the operations and governance of the university. Research suggests that while participation fosters a sense of equality and ownership among student members, they are not given a corresponding opportunity to substantively affect policy and other changes (Kaba; 2000). The students therefore are not in possession of the same level of power like other power bases that are a source of legitimate authority to effect policy changes in the institution.

Provision of general student services

In Australian institutions, student unions are established for, among other reasons, provide eateries, small retail outlets (e.g., news agencies), student media (e.g., campus newspapers), advocacy, and support for a variety of social, arts, political, recreational, special interest and sporting clubs and societies (Clarke; 2007). In Sweden unions provide counseling services to members and publish their own magazines and newspapers. Larger Student Representative Councils often own and run their own facilities at the university such as shops, restaurants and night clubs. Most also operate specialized support services for female student are also catered through the provision of special services. Foreign or extra-territorial students also have special services offered to the through initiatives of the Student Representative Councils. These councils are ultimately for the benefit of the students. So all the activities conducted should be student pro. Involve the students as much as possible. Encourage suggestions and ideas by them (Vikas; 2009)

Fund raising

The Student Council may also help to raise funds for university-wide activities, including social events, community projects, and university reform (Bylaws of the Laurel Springs Student Council, 2010, Article I,

Section 2) Most students' unions take out membership fees to allow them to provide more services to the students they represent within the university.

Involvement in various national political social and non-academic activities

In some developed countries, for example French, student activism has resulted in the largest national student unions having a strong political identity and their actions are generally restricted to the defense of their vision of higher education rather than the particular interests of the student body of a single university. The strength of unions can be best measured by their effectiveness in national protests rather than by membership figures. In some instances, students' unions are highly politicized bodies, and often serve as a training ground for aspiring politicians. Campaigning and debate is often very vigorous, with the youthful enthusiasm of the various partisans. The Netherlands is also home to a unique case of student representation in which a local political party completely run by students gained seats during local town hall elections. In Greece, as in Portugal, Student Representative Councils organize and support numerous activities such as political debates, demonstrations, university occupations, public lectures, cultural and artistic events and conferences. In some instances, members work on student yearbooks being designed as an informational tool for the students. In some cases, such student media is often partisan, inexperienced, and under no financial pressure to slant coverage to please a broad readership, and a general lack of serious consequences for decision all encouraging political gamesmanship. Other unions, however, are less politicized. Students' Representative Councils generally have similar aims irrespective of the extent of politicization, and focus on providing facilities, support and services to students as well as political goals (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>). In a case analysed detailing student participation in Australia, students are compelled to fund the student unions for the provision of service. However, these services are very often, dubious services which they may not need or do not want. They are compelled to fund a multitude of political groups, including many of an extremist nature. They are compelled to finance groups with policies and values which may be anathema to their religious or political views, or to their sense of decency.

Some SRCs organize and promote non-academic extracurricular activities such as sports and culture events, and get together parties and festivities. Organizing events of interest to the students and those that give an opportunity for students to showcase their talent is also an important role that should be played by the student councils (Vikas; 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted the case study design which meant focusing on one phenomenon that is, the effectiveness of the SRC in ODL institutions at ZOU Mashonaland East region which the researchers selected to understand in depth regardless of number of there being 10 regions in the ZOU (McMillan and Schumacher; 1993). The case study was also used to gather directly from individual students for purposes of studying their perceptions of the effectiveness of the SRC. The case study assisted in studying a single entity of the ZOU (the SRC) and enabled the two researchers in the investigation, who are also stakeholders to the problem under study to be enmeshed in the study and obtain an in-depth insight into the activities of the Student Representative Council at the ZOU's Mashonaland East Region.

POPULATION

The population for the study consisted of all the active 436 ZOU students from the four faculties in Mashonaland East region duly registered for the August-December 2010 semester with the university. These were made up of, on one hand, all the members of the Student Representative Council, and the ordinary students, on the other. The following table shows the population distribution by faculty.

Table 1: Distribution of the ordinary student population by faculty

FACULTY	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL
	Number	%	Number	%	
Arts and Education	63	14.93	38	9.00	101
Commerce and Law	81	19.19	28	6.64	109
Applied Social Sciences	58	13.74	87	20.62	145
Science and Technology	33	7.82	34	8.05	67
TOTAL	235	55.69	187	44.31	422

Source: Mashonaland East Regional Administrator's Student Enrolment records dated 31 August 2010.

The 14 members of the SRC were combined with the population of ordinary students to give a population of 436, which was the total student enrolment for the region during August-December 2010 academic semester.

The sample and sampling procedure

Out of the total population of 422 for ordinary students, a sample of 80 students was chosen through the stratified random technique. A list of all the students enrolled by faculty was obtained from the Regional Administrator's office and from each faculty list, 20% of the subjects was obtained. This ensured proportional representation of all the 4 Mashonaland East regional faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University. From the SRC population of 14 students, 10(71%) were selected using the lottery method, which also made sure that all students had an equal opportunity of making it into the sample. Ninety (21%) students made up the sample out of 436(100%) students.

Data collection Instruments

The present study adopted a questionnaire as the instrument to facilitate the gathering of data from the ordinary students while the student representatives' views were extracted through the use interviews. The current research also adopted document analysis which was carried out in Student Representative Council archives in order to cross validate the data obtained through both interviews and questionnaires. Validity and reliability of the instruments were established and enhanced through a pilot test which was conducted with a sample of 10 students obtained through convenience sampling based on availability and vicinity to the Zimbabwe Open University Mashonaland East Regional Centre. A test-retest method of improving reliability of the instruments was carried on the aforementioned sample, and in both instances, yielding similar results.

Data Collection

The process of data collection was carried out over a duration of three months stretching from August to October 2010, during which period the researchers had the privilege to interact with the student body, analyze documents such as minutes of meetings and as well observe some of its activities meant to satisfy student member's needs. After the samples had been drawn, a questionnaire with an introductory letter was mailed to all ordinary participating students. A total of 80 questionnaires were completed and subsequently returned giving a response rate of 100%. All of the 7 members making up the Student Representative Council sample were successfully interviewed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Collected data were coded to facilitate easier interpretation and analysis. Data were grouped in themes and described using frequencies and percentages. The coding of collected data and presenting them in tables allowed the researcher to analyze the data in order to come up with meaningful conclusions from the data.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The following discussion is based on the results which were obtained through data solicited through the use of questionnaires (for ordinary students) as well as interviews (for SRC members). All the 80 (100%) ordinary students returned the questionnaire and the 10(100%) selected members of the SRC were successfully interviewed.

The majority, 6(60%), of the SRC members exhibited knowledge of their responsibilities as student representatives. Among the 10 members, 4(40%) appeared not to be conversant with their responsibilities as student representatives. The majority, 8(80%), could recall all the 6 major objectives for the formation of the SRC although the remaining 2(20%) struggled to explain the reasons for the formation of the student body. One is, therefore, left wondering how the duties expected to be carried out by these representative were to be executed. Out of the 80(100%) ordinary students, the majority of 78(96%) indicated that they knew there was an SRC in the university but had not yet been assisted in any way by this council. Only 2(4%) remarked that they were only aware of the existence of the council through the compulsory payments of subscriptions to the SRC coffers.

Students paid their SRC subscriptions of USD\$20 per semester which was meant to sustain SRC activities for a particular year. Whereas the majority 75(94%) of the ordinary students blamed the SRC for the misuse of their subscriptions, all the 10(100%) SRC members retorted that they did not handle the subscriptions and neither did they have control of such funds. However, concern was raised on the disbursement of the funds as the SRC was required to apply for the funds which were kept in the university account only to be released when applied for. All regional meetings operated at zero budgets and this implies SRC members had to finance their travel and subsistence despite travelling on SRC business. This is contrary to the funding systems prevailing in other countries particularly the developed world, for example in Denmark where student unions are funded by government and the university ([http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Students%27_ union](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Students%27_union)).

There was lack of coordination between the Regional and National SRCs hence activities in the different regions were obviously different and fragmented. There were no harmonized programmes of activities among the regional student bodies thus implying that there was no sharing of ideas as was the case with other colleges and universities. Some 3(30%) members of the SRC were ignorant of the existence of the National SRC, a body that should be harmonising regional activities and representing the students at national and international fora. The majority of the SRC members, 8(80%), did confirm that they had no contact with other student bodies from other universities and neither were they affiliates of the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU), a body made up of SRCs from all tertiary institutions across the country. This, therefore, shows a situation of isolation on the part of ZOU students, who are deprived of a platform on which to associate and share beliefs, concerns, successes and failures with students from other colleges and universities. This contrasts sharply with other SRCs which join national associations. In Canada, most student unions are affiliated to the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations. In Zimbabwe, most SRCs are affiliates of ZINASU. One therefore, wonders why the SRC at ZOU, Mashonaland East Region was ignorant of the existence of ZINASU.

A total of 4 meetings were supposed to be held per each academic year at the rate of 2 meetings per semester, for the SRC representatives. However, due to unavailability of funds, 3 of the scheduled meetings failed to take off, with only 1 materialising. No meeting by the current SRC had been held with the students. All the 80(100%) student respondents indicated that they had not had any meetings with their SRC, a situation that could have accorded them the opportunity to air their grievances that had accumulated over the years. There, therefore, appears to no communication between the student body and the SRC, hence communication as a service by the SRC was ineffective.

However, the majority, 7(70%) of the SRC members 7 (70%) indicated that due to the geographical dispersion of the students, the SRC was unable to arrange meetings with them, even when tutorials were in session. Most students do not attend the tutorials resulting in meetings penciled in for the encounter failing to take off.

There was clear evidence that there is lack of contact between the student representatives and the university administration. All the 10(100%) student reps indicated that they had held only one meeting with the administration and hence the performance of the SRC in representing the students concerns to the university authorities was clearly in doubt. However, according to 55(69%) students, the SRC had invited the students to provide them with lists of concerns through the suggestion box method, which they did. Unfortunately, no feedback was ever provided to the students.

There is also lack of continuity between current and previous SRCs. Since there was no handover-takeover with the previous SRC, the current representatives are unable to exercise their duties because they are not certain of where to start from given the fact that no files were availed to them. The previous SRC has cited 'no funding' as their reason for failing to pitch up at the Regional Office for handover-takeover.

The SRC, however, has plans for its organization. Activities earmarked for the 2011 academic year include the following:

- charity work in old people`s homes as well as orphanages and health centres
- marketing of the Zimbabwe Open University`s academic programmes
- sporting and entertainment activities for the current, former and future students
- fund raising activities for the SRC activities

All the 80(100%) respondents in the study indicated that they did not take part in the political affairs of the country as a student body. However, individuals were free to affiliate to any political party of their choice outside the auspices of the SRC as well as the university. This is unlike other universities and countries where student councils and unions have been actively involved in supporting, even through financing, political parties. Many such unions are highly politicized and have often served as training ground for aspiring politicians. However, the situation in conventional universities in Zimbabwe spells a different picture. A sizeable number of the modern day politicians in the country have found themselves ascending the ranks from student activism at the University of Zimbabwe. As explained by the majority of the respondents, political activities in the ODL situation were out of question for a number of reasons:

- the geographical fragmentation of the students(52%)
- more effort was devoted to learning since the majority of the students had lost out on studies which they should have concluded long back(39%)
- lack of interest in politics(78%)

The above findings therefore, show that political activities among the students ZOU are not among the functions of the SRC.

After establishing the services and responsibilities offered to the students by their SRC, the researchers sought to find out the challenges mitigating against the SRC`s effective discharge of duty. Prominent among the SRC responses, were the following:

- the geographical fragmentation of the students making it difficult to organize and worse still mobilize resources
- No funding (80%)
- no office from where to administer the affairs of the council (78%), hence poor coordination because there was no call-in centre for registering concerns, grievances or appreciations for services rendered

Unlike the situation prevailing at the ZOU, some local universities have office for their SRCs. Elsewhere, in developed countries, student unions own magnificent buildings, for example the Teviot Row House at the University of Edinburgh (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Students%27_union).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The results of the current research show a discouraging arrangement in which students learning through ODL appear to be weakly represented by their elected Student Representative Councils. Because of the SRC's lack of capacity to control their own finances, programmes earmarked for inception are failing to take off thereby hindering attempts by the student body to address the concerns of their electorate effectively. The devolvement of fund control to the regions is thus encouraged.

As a result of lack of funding, there seems to be a gulf between the students and administration because their representatives are less effective than expected and in some cases, almost dysfunctional.

Despite the lack of funds, the SRC has not made any attempt to undertake any other activity that does not require any meaningful capital outlay. It was hoped that activities such as cleanup campaigns and visits to Old people's homes for cleaning services could take off with minimum financial expenditure.

There should be meaningful engagement between the SRC and the university authorities on the issue of SRC subscriptions to establish the way forward and where possible devolve the financial management to the regional SRCs. The current breed of SRC members does not seem to have established themselves fully as the student representatives and as such time is running out as they approach the end of their tenure in office without having effectively justified their existence.

There is need to establish links with other universities and colleges and be affiliated to the national student bodies such as ZINASU to enable cultural exchanges and involvement in inter-university activities. It is also at such gatherings that the Zimbabwe Open University gets to be known, subsequently creating a large client base. Otherwise, the students currently are isolated from the rest of the other colleges and universities. The SRC should play a major role in creating an environment that is conducive to student learning through holding regular meetings with the university administration during which, issues of concern to student problems are resolved.

There being lack of coordination, the SRC is encouraged to lobby for office space so that students have a meeting place and reporting centre that is clearly identifiable and conveniently located to the advantage of the students.

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