

Re-Visiting the Conversation on the Effectiveness of Odl Universities: an Analysis of the Factors That Enhance Institutional Operational Effectiveness

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Abstract: *The study evaluated the level of effectiveness with which open and distance learning (ODL) universities in Africa carried out their mandate. The study was necessitated by the transformation in the operating environment faced by higher education institutions. That is, a reduction in government financial support, an increased demand for high service quality by customers and intense competition internationally brought by globalization. The study employed the qualitative research methodology and utilized the descriptive research design. Data were gathered through indepth interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions. The study revealed that the major determinants of ODL university effectiveness were university infrastructure, ICT related competencies, the quality of student support services, level of effective team work, quality of leadership, staff engagement and financial capacity. The major recommendation was that effectiveness was a function of effective organization; ODL universities therefore should institute several committees at regional campus level which include examination management committee, general administration management committee, disciplinary committee, fundraising committee, research committee, weekend school management committee, marketing committee, alumni committee among others.*

I. Introduction

The nature and structure of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in Africa is that they have several campuses in different geographical areas. For example the Zimbabwe Open University has ten regional campuses, with a campus located in each of the ten provincial capitals in Zimbabwe. The University of South Africa (UNISA) has installations throughout the country and in the Region.

ODL is premised on the separation of the learner from the teacher in terms of time and space. Hence to ensure that education is brought to the doorstep of the learner, ODL institutions have to set up various regional campuses across the country. This study is based on the argument that the effectiveness of the individual regional campuses and installations has a strong implication on the overall effectiveness of the whole organization. The combined effectiveness of the campuses therefore is the effectiveness of the organization. On the other hand, the researchers also have a strong belief that the effectiveness of an organization is a function of effective strategy and organization. Other universities like the Open University of UK are doing away with the regional campuses strategy as they want to remove ‘geography’ and replace it with ICT in the whole equation of service delivery.

The regional campuses being the focal point of ODL universities organization and business model are evaluated basing on the following criteria;

1. Student recruitment
2. Financial performance
3. Service quality
4. Effective management and leadership skills
5. Key ratios: retention rate, attrition rate, pass rate, throughput rate

The study benchmarked the practices and procedures the effective regional campuses employed and determined how the non-effective regional campuses could adopt the practices and procedures of the effective regional campuses.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Reduced government financial support for higher education including ODL universities across the world necessitates a greater emphasis on operational effectiveness and self sustenance of the universities. This study is necessitated by the observation that there has been limited literature and discussion on the pillars for university operational effectiveness.

1.4 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to analyse factors that enhance the operational effectiveness of open and distance learning universities.

1.5 Research objectives

Primary research objective

- i. To analyse factors affecting the operational effectiveness of ODL universities
- ii. To establish strategies/ practices that could improve the operational effectiveness of regional campuses

1.6 Research questions

Primary research question

- i. What factors militate against the ODL universities attaining operational effectiveness?
Secondary research questions
- ii. What practices could be put in place to assist regional campuses achieve operational effectiveness?

1.7 Significance of the study

The study should assist ODL institutions and their regional campuses perform in such a way that they are self sustaining and able to pay for all their operational expenses. Ultimately, regional campuses are also expected to be able to contribute effectively to the national campuses after meeting their own expenses.

The students should be the primary beneficiaries of an effective regional campus because for a regional campus to be operationally effective it should first, and foremost, enhance the quality of service to its stakeholders, especially the core stakeholder, the student. When the student receives service that satisfies and induces them to tell others the registration numbers increase and the fee payments increase; it is the increase in student registrations that enables the regional campus to collect enough financial resources for both its use and the national centre use.

The workers of the University benefit in that they get motivated by working in an institution that provides the resources needed. ODL as a mode of education is still in its infancy and early growth phases in Africa. It is imperative that the mode of education is able to attract top professors and administrators so as to build a positive image of the mode and also to gain acceptance of its graduates in industry and commerce.

1.8 Delimitation

The study is conceptually confined to the discipline of operational effectiveness in open and distance learning institutions. Geographically, the study was carried out with a focus of open and distance learning universities in the African continent only.

1.9 Limitations

The study faced a general but limited reluctance of administrators to participate in the study, the researchers however patiently explained the importance of the study and managed to get satisfactory response levels from the targeted respondents.

1.10 Ethical considerations

The people who participated in the study were fully informed of the purpose of the study and permission was solicited after a thorough discussion with potential respondents regarding their concerns on confidentiality. All respondents were also advised that they were free to leave at any time or to withhold participation at any time if they were of the opinion that their interests were infringed.

II. Review of related literature

The purpose of the current section was to consider past studies in the area of institutional effectiveness and establish the gap that the current study could address. The section also considered any empirical studies and how these could be related to the current study, especially when it came to the findings and their generalisability.

Operational effectiveness relates to any kind of practice which allows an institution to maximise the use of its inputs by developing products at a faster pace than competitors or reducing defects to the barest minimum. Operational effectiveness is often divided into four components: leading and controlling functional performance, measuring and improving the process, leveraging and automating process and continuously improving performance. The four processes are driven by institutional leadership if they are to be successfully implemented in an institution or organisation (Bianca, 2014). In general, the structure of operational effectiveness includes an organization's services, productivity, performance and areas for improvement. An institution can measure each of the four components to improve performance and it can outperform rivals only if

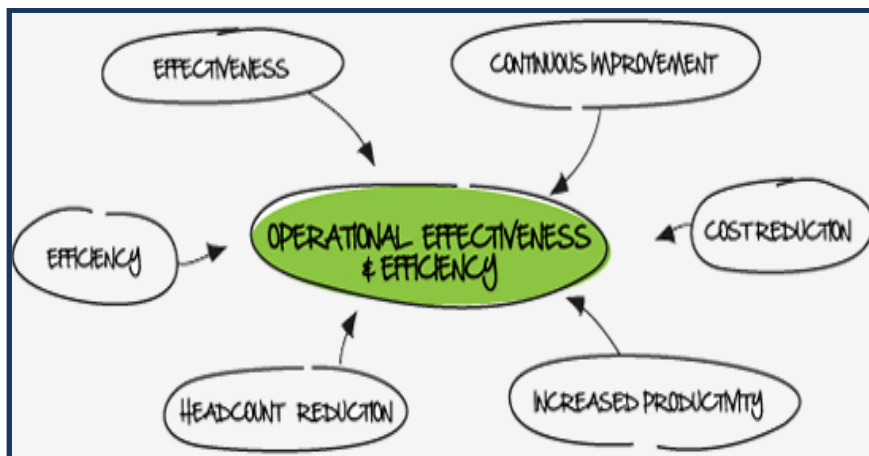
it can establish a difference that it can preserve, terms of its performance. For a regional campus to achieve effectiveness it had to work together with employees in a way that not just benefited the institution but also the employees. In other words, a regional campus was required to do the right thing for itself and to do the right thing for its employees and key stakeholders like students and the government in a win-win matrix.

The contemporary definition of operational effectiveness in academia was the degree to which an academic business unit's resources and educational practices are managed efficiently and effectively. It is the extent to which resources and processes are organised effectively, coordinated, and deployed in a manner that enables it to achieve the academic business unit's goals, intended outcomes, and performance objectives. The desired objective of institutional effectiveness would be sustainable, self-renewing outcomes to ensure that future generations were provided for and were able to bequeath a livelihood to next generations; institutional effectiveness was not just a collection of systems or a processes but something the organisation worked towards achieving. Gish (undated) differentiates operational effectiveness from efficiency: operational effectiveness of a business constitutes its ability to perform a function with optimal levels of input and output and operational efficiency essentially denotes how prudently an institution uses money in pursuit of its goals.

The current study defined regional campus effectiveness as the efficiency with which a regional campus was able to meet its objectives. The main measure of regional campus effectiveness would be expressed in terms of how well its net profitability compared with its target profitability, which was the contribution the regional campus made to the institutional fiscal year. Additional measures might include growth data and the results of customer satisfaction surveys, but the study dwelt on the main measure.

2.1 Conceptual framework

Rouble (2012) proposes a model that clearly articulates the concept of operational effectiveness, and that is conceptual framework adopted for the study. The strength of the model is that it outlines the different entities that combine to form operational effectiveness.



Source: Rouble, 2012

The best way to comprehend the concept of operational effectiveness is to view it as a segment divided into parts that make up the whole concept; operational effectiveness has to have efficiency, cost reduction, increased productivity, continuous improvement, and effectiveness and head count reduction.

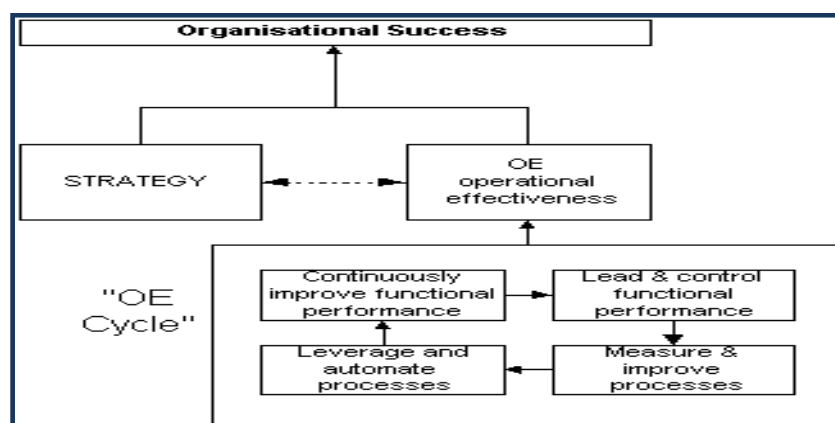
The above model shows that the current concept of operational effectiveness is premised on the need for an entity to produce more with less input. In an institution, both management and the general workforce are expected to produce more output with less input, irrespective of the industry or company they are working in. Operational effectiveness refers to any number of business or operational practices that allow an organization to better utilize its inputs. Generally speaking, it means finding ways to produce more and/or better results at a lower cost.

2.3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study was suggested by Bianca (2014) who laid down parameters that an institution should fulfill in order to attain operational effectiveness. The model by Bianca (2014) includes operational success which embodies operational effectiveness as a sub-set, but the study would not escalate the discussion to include a consideration of operational success, which takes place at organisation level. The thrust of the current study is to interrogate operational effectiveness, as a sub-set of operational success because the regional campus is a sub-set of the university.

According to Porter (2015) the four requirements of operational effectiveness are to continuously improve functional performance, to lead and control functional performance, to leverage and automate processes and to measure and improve processes. Operational effectiveness is about continuously improving functional performance. To do this, managers lead and control the functional activities within the organisation, measure and improve the processes that they are responsible for, and leverage those processes through standardisation, communication and automation in order to then close the loop to provide ever increasing efficiency and effectiveness. These four "meta-activities" form a virtuous cycle of supporting things that make the organisation a master of functional efficiency and effectiveness.

The Operations Effectiveness (OE) cycle



Source: Porter, 2015

The Operational Effectiveness cycle starts with the institution's capacity to lead and control functional performance. Functions are the specialised units within the institution that work together to produce, and support the production of, the unit's outputs, whatever they may be. Typically these specialised units reflect the fundamental way in which the institution's activities are grouped in order to exercise control, which could be sales, production, logistics, research and development, and so on. In an educational institution the activities include research, teaching, learning and the administrative work involved. They are specialised in order to concentrate expertise and the greater their expertise, the greater will be their effectiveness; the effectiveness grows when the expertise differentiates the institution from its competitors. Leading and controlling functional performance covers the activities of the institution's people, who are its staff, and encompasses all the factors that lead, encourage, and support people to be more effective; factors such as leadership, training, interpersonal relationships and teamwork.

Beyond the application of such personal skills are processes, as depicted in the second segment. These are the unit's standard methods of doing business, and by measuring and improving them, operational effectiveness is consolidated, maintained, and improved through constant learning and innovation.

However, it is not enough just to develop employee effectiveness, and improve processes, as shown in the third segment. Operational Effectiveness also demands that the organisation constantly and systematically seeks out opportunities to leverage personal and process expertise by widening their application and by constantly seeking opportunities to improve quality and efficiency through automation.

The aim, and the end result, is continuous improvement in functional performance, shown in the fourth segment. It is not enough simply to achieve a certain level of operational efficiency. Operational Effectiveness encompasses the capacity to continuously improve, leverage, and automate. Constant improvement in operational effectiveness is necessary to achieve superior profitability.

2.4 Operational effectiveness – a discussion

The importance of leadership in operational effectiveness was emphasised by Bianca (2014) who insists that the critical role of leadership was to ensure that employees could perform their jobs at a level demanded by the institution. Leadership considered ways to maximize the performance of each employee and group of employees. Workplace learning, a combination of employee training and development, helped an institution improve the level of operational effectiveness. This required successful collaboration among managers and professional trainers.

A few suggestions by Rouble (2012) should be considered seriously by all leaders when they deal with workers. The writer says that when dealing with employees effective leaders should always attend to their concerns, ideas, and well-being. The leader should always acknowledge the suggestions and requests of workers

and, where their concerns can be acceded to, it should be done. However, a cautionary statement was given by Stanleigh (2015) who says that an institution should not link its business strategy, as measured in part by its operational effectiveness, to outperforming competitors in every operational area. This was likely to make it impossible for the company to capitalise on its unique advantages or competitive advantage. The writer quotes Porter (2015) who says that many institutions disadvantage themselves when they tried to be the best in their industry, and then the best in every aspect of business, from marketing to supply chain to product development. The problem was that there was never a best institution in any industry.

Porter (2015) explains that there was a clear distinction between operational effectiveness and strategy. Both are essential, but the two agendas of operational effectiveness and strategy are different. The operational agenda involves continual improvement everywhere and there are no trade-offs and it complements and informs strategy. Failure to do this creates vulnerability even for companies with a good strategy. The operational agenda is the proper place for constant change, flexibility, and relentless efforts to achieve best practice. In contrast, the strategic agenda is the right place for defining a unique position, making clear trade-offs, and tightening fit. Operational effectiveness was not a substitute for strategy and institutions that neglected operational effectiveness and concentrated on strategy were bound to fail. Operational effectiveness was a necessary but not sufficient condition for organisational success; sufficiency came in when the two were adopted and implemented in equal measure.

There was further guidance from Porter (2015) when he postulates that the relationship between these two factors went a little deeper than simply mutual dependency. They informed each other. Operational effectiveness was about having functions in the organisation that worked well. These functions were, of course, the institution's skill sets or 'core competencies' and therefore, as Porter points out, must fit together and work together to implement the strategy. On the other hand, the possible strategies available to an institution were constrained, at least in the medium term, by the competencies available to implement them. Additionally, operational effectiveness may also create an opportunity for strategy development by inventing new technologies or methods of working. Porter (2015) refers to operational effectiveness as any number of practices that allow a company to better utilise its inputs by, for example, reducing defects in products or developing better products faster; a process that make the institution a master of functional efficiency and effectiveness.

Porter (2015) defines operational effectiveness as a process of continuously improving functional performance. This is accomplished through managers leading and controlling the functional activities within the institution, measuring and improving the processes that they are responsible for, and leveraging those processes through standardisation, communication and automation to then close the loop to provide ever increasing efficiency and effectiveness. It is strategy's role to mould these functions into a coherent institutional whole that succeeds in the chosen markets.

Operational effectiveness cycle

The table below illustrates the current approaches that can be applied to each aspect of the cycle.

1. Lead and control functional performance	Information is abundantly available on leading and controlling functional performance. A high level of expertise is needed in the specialist area that the unit deals with, as well as general managerial skills such as leadership, planning, training and teamwork.
2. Measure and improve processes	Measuring and improving processes can be achieved by the application of such well-established programmes as Total Quality Management, continuous process improvement, and Six-sigma. They all have the same range of analytical, testing, and innovation techniques based on quality measurement and reduction in variation.
3. Leverage and automate processes	Conventional and established methods of business and systems analysis are used to support computer systems development.
4. Continuously improve functional performance	This component relies on the application of the above approaches and on the integration of each aspect with the others. This is where most institutions experience greatest weakness in OE.

Source: Porter (2015) Harvard Business School

The above table shows how institutions and other organisations could enhance their operational effectiveness and reap maximum benefit from their operations. Porter (2015) cautions organizational leaders that new technology alone would not boost productivity. Productivity gains come from managerial innovation: fundamental changes in the way companies deliver products or services. Companies generate innovation, in

profitable and in unprofitable years, by deploying new technology along with improved processes and capabilities.

2.5 Knowledge underlies Operational Effectiveness

The underlying principle of operational effectiveness is that it depends on personal effectiveness, which is dependent upon, and determined by, key determinants such as capability, expertise, know-how, talent, and skill. These concepts are a reflection of one's 'knowledge'; personal effectiveness is principally determined by personal knowledge (Porter, 2015).

The list below outlines the institutional forms of knowledge, starting with the negative, ignorance, to the positive, knowledge and the number of levels at which knowledge operates within an organisation.

- Ignorance invariably means a person is incapable of performing a task satisfactorily or reliably. Ignorance is costly for institutions in many ways; time wasted, materials wasted, poor quality products or services that have to be replaced and alienated customers,
- Personal knowledge is what is immediately available to a person to apply to the task at hand. It is the means by which tasks are performed satisfactorily and reliably. Personal knowledge can be extended and made more useful by being codified.
- Codified knowledge is knowledge that is written down or otherwise communicated. It extends a person's capabilities beyond personal knowledge. In this way it leverages capabilities. It also helps to increase personal knowledge.
- Corporate knowledge can be defined as codified knowledge of standardised processes. This provides further leverage by coordinating and making consistent the productive activity of many people. Corporate knowledge also leverages knowledge by providing a 'jump-off point' or 'platform' for process improvements and the means by which process improvements are communicated and implemented.
- Embedded knowledge, or knowledge transformed into artifacts such as tools, machines, or computer programmes, takes standardised processes a step further and automates them. Embedding knowledge in tools, machines and computer programmes also opens up the possibility of performing tasks that cannot be performed by people. This means that the potential for leverage is almost unlimited. But, in order to control these artifacts and utilise them effectively we need to manage two complementary categories of knowledge – knowledge about how to use the artifacts, and knowledge about the artifacts themselves in order to build, maintain, and improve them. The more complex the artifact, the more leverage is gained by, in turn, codifying this knowledge in some permanent form.

Experience explained in Chabaya (2013) seemed to have outlined the characteristics of an effective regional campus, which were given as:

- Teamwork
- High student enrolment
- Effective tutoring
- Effective student support
- Structured and well administered assignment handling system
- Accounting system which is error free
- Very high stakeholder satisfaction for both staff and students
- A productive collegial culture which must be felt by both internal and external stakeholders
- A clean environment
- High pass rate
- A very active alumni
- High research output among staff
- Effective communication should be felt by the National Centre, students and regional staff members.
- A region must radiate its influence and contribute to the province in which it belongs

III. Research Methodology

The study employed the qualitative research methodology, which is significantly inclined towards the interpretivist philosophy. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population of the study was made up of administrators of open and distance learning organizations in Africa. A sample of fifteen respondents was selected using the purposive sampling technique. Primary data gathering was carried out through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. Document analysis was used to further determine the factors that influenced the effectiveness of ODL institutions and their regional campuses. The analysed documents were interrogated to determine how they corroborated responses given in the focus group discussion and responses to the questionnaire: data triangulation was achieved

IV. Research Findings

Student recruitment

Effectiveness in student recruitment and retention is the most important goal and indicator for an academic institution pursuing the goal of self sustenance. The respondents were also in consensus that these indicators were the areas where open and distance learning institutions were being outperformed by conventional universities. The major causes of lack of effectiveness in student recruitment and retention noted during the interviews and indepth interviews include lack of understanding of ODL, poor brand image of ODL institutions, the general lack of student engagement and somewhat slack student support mechanisms in ODL.

Effective performance management strategy

The benchmarking exercise carried out by the researchers clearly showed that one of the most effective ODL universities had put in place performance enhancement strategies. It had well laid down processes of function performance. For instance, the regional centre, managed its affairs through an effective committee system; the regional centre had a committee to manage each of its core functions, like an examinations committee, a tutorial committee, an assignment management committee and many others. This explained how it consistently performed more effectively than the rest of the regional centres.

Marketing orientation

The study revealed that successful ODL universities had an inbuilt culture of customer centricism and through a marketing oriented business model. The institutions build structures, facilities and offer reliable services that have the most impact on customer and stakeholder satisfaction.

Universities that did not perform their duties and responsibilities to the total satisfaction of the stakeholders struggled for self sustenance and usually relied heavily on grants, subsidies and other forms of support from central governments. The students from these institutions were neither delighted beyond their expectation nor satisfied with the quality of service delivered hence the institutions struggled to create value for their customers.

Quality assurance and adherence to regulatory regulations

The study revealed that the open and distance learning sector had been bedeviled by negative publicity and negative perceptions regarding the quality and authenticity of its processes and outputs thereof. The respondents to the study and the findings from document survey from open and distance learning universities indicated that successful and effective institutions observed strict adherence to regulatory requirements and had established quality assurance departments to monitor quality and adherence issues.

The third finding was that in some ODL universities the levels of leadership engagement and workforce engagement were too low for these institutions to effectively perform their duties.

The study revealed that the main areas where open and distance learning institutions were perceived as ineffective included rigor in teaching and learning of science and engineering subjects. The above perceptions require an organized institutional response and we suggest the following committees for ODL institutions.

3.4.2 Suggested institutional parameters

- Quality Assurance Committee
- Examination Management Committee
- General Administration Management Committee
- Disciplinary Committee
- Fundraising Committee
- Research committee
- Weekend school management Committee
- Marketing Committee
- Alumni committee
- Health and environment Committee

The study's findings on service quality and how it could be improved were that:

- There should be regular academic board meetings to review tutorials, assignment management, module status and projects.
- ODL universities should invest more on regional paraphernalia and information dissemination, top flight marketing ideas, innovation in marketing and branding management
- Academic programmes, at every level should be demand driven

- Regional centres should train part-time tutors in order for them to be effective. The regional centre should host periodic training seminars, workshops and discussion sessions on effective marking, tutoring, assessment, relationship with adult learners and distance learning philosophy should be regularly done
- Support staff should be trained to enhance their interpersonal skills and relations because they interface with key stakeholders.
- The universities should develop a vibrant student support system, through a student representative structure headed by the SRC.

V. Conclusion

The study concluded that the major determinant of regional centre effectiveness were the quality of student support services, which resulted in a variety of other causes, some of which appeared to loom larger than the paucity in effective student support services. The off-shoot determinants were identified as a level of effective team work, quality of leadership and staff engagement and financial capacity.

VI. Recommendations

Given the characteristics of an effective ODL university, the following suggestions were recommended as initiatives that could eventuate in enhanced effectiveness:

- ODL institutions should institute committees to enhance operations and to improve implementation of plans
- National Centre must enhance the level of leadership and workforce engagement
- Leaders should develop a keen sense of teamwork among the regional centre staff
- Employees should be involved in relevant decision making for them to be committed, to buy-in when the strategic plan is formulated.
- Workforce should be made up of well educated and qualified staff that appreciate their mandate and work for its achievement and the promotion of the brand.
- Leadership should develop a service culture among the workforce; institute a responsive communication system and a strong sense of involvement and participation among staff.

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