

Luring them Back Home: Strategies to Lure Back and Retain Professionals in the Diaspora: A Case Study of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)

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Abstract

The study explored possible strategies to lure back and retain professionals in the Diaspora with particular reference to the case of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). A purposive sample of 10 former lecturers responded to the open-ended questionnaire via the internet. The study found out that harsh economic conditions, poor salaries and working conditions, personal reasons, failure to leave a decent life and lack of staff development opportunities drove ZOU lecturers away. The study concluded that perceived good salary perks and working conditions attracted ZOU lecturers in the Diaspora. It also concluded that brain drain of the ZOU lecturers was never induced by institutional leadership. The study recommended the need for the Government and employer to offer attractive salaries and working conditions that are comparable to those offered by other universities in the SADC Region. Professionals need housing and car loan schemes so that they can live a decent life. The government needs to tap Diasporan professionals' expertise for the benefit of Zimbabwe. The government needs to offer staff development opportunities through staff exchange programmes so that lecturers can share latest practices with lecturers from other universities. Comparative research needs to be carried at a macro-scale in the same area at last three ODL universities so as to generate new knowledge meant to revamp the operational systems of ODL universities.

Definition of Key Terms:

The following terms are worthy defining in order to provide the study proper direction.

- **Strategies** refer to an approach technique of dealing with a problem of brain drain.
- **Professionals** refer to lecturers who will have left ZOU in search for greener pastures in the developed world.
- **Diaspora** refers to the First World or developed countries which act as destinations for ZOU professionals.
- **Luring** in this study refers to the practice of attracting lecturers in the Diaspora back to the ZOU.
- **Retaining** in the context of this study denotes the practice keeping and holding onto the lecturers who will have returned from Diaspora.

1. Introduction

The pressure on Higher and Tertiary Education Institutes (HTEIs) to attract and retain academic staff has been greater than before. African HTEIs are suffering from low human resources development and poor employee retention (Dawson, 2004). Developing countries on the other hand, appear to be experiencing challenges of retaining much needed staff through brain drain as professionals are opting for greener pastures in the developed countries (KEDI, 2000; Mushonga, 2005). From a Zimbabwean scenario, The Herald dated 3 August 2007 observes that developing countries are acting as training grounds for professionals such as teachers, doctors, nurses, pilots, engineers and architects who set their sights on

greener pastures after completing their training. In support of these view, Kelderman (2008) argues that states with booming industries, including oil and natural gas, are using their riches to bolster higher education sometimes at the expense of the developing countries.

As noted by the Global Policy Research Forum (2003), not less than 70 000 highly qualified, trained and experienced Africans leave their countries annually to industrialized countries. On the same wavelength, Huddart, (2003) laments that Ghana has been losing 600 professionals annually. Furthermore, a National Skills Survey in Swaziland revealed that the country is suffering from a haemorrhage of skilled and educated people to South Africa and the Western World (Financial Gazette, 17 – 22 August, 2007). From a local front, Muradzikwa, (Zimbabwe Independent, 23 – 27 November, 2007) estimated that there are 3, 4 million Zimbabweans in the Diaspora. In reality, these figures of the Zimbabweans in the Diaspora could be an undercount since they do not take into account the considerable numbers of skilled professionals who desert the nation unofficially or under the guise of study leave (Mushonga, 2005). What is taking place in Ghana, Swaziland and Zimbabwe may be regarded as a tip of an iceberg since the majority of the Third World countries, economics are suffering from the problem of brain drain. One of the hardest hit sectors of the Third World countries economies is Higher and Tertiary Education, universities in particular. To underscore this position, Mushonga (2005) contends that about 23 000 lecturers from African Universities leave the continent annually for greener pastures.

Zimbabwe is one of the developing African countries that have been hardest hit by brain drain since the turn of the new millennium. HTEIs appear to be losing some of their most valuable staff. A case in point is advanced by Mushonga's survey which revealed that the University of Zimbabwe had only 370 lecturers out of the expected 1200, with another on various kinds of leave. Another notable, example, is that of the Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) which lost 24 lecturers through brain drain (Annual Report, 2007). Developing countries seem to be producing academics and professionals for the benefit of the first World (Kelderman, 2008). Regrettably, an unchecked flight of skilled personnel coupled with failure to have and retain locally trained staff is very expensive to the country that would have invested its scarce resources to train the professionals (Blair and Jordan, 1994). Fewer studies however, have been about improvement of academic staff retention and practices affect brain drain. The preceding findings managed to highlight the magnitude of brain drain in HTEIs. They did not focus on strategies to lure back and retain professionals in the Diaspora in the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) situations. The present study therefore seeks to interrogate and re-examine the present literature and practices in place meant to lure back and retain professionals in the Diaspora in the context of ODL situations with particular reference to the ZOU. It also intends to explore strategies to lure back and attract ZOU's professionals in the Diaspora.

2. Literature Review

The study was informed by the push-pull theory. Push factors, according to the Policy Paper on Brian Mobility (2004), are the factors that increase brain drain of professionals in a given country. They force skilled workers out of their institutions, jobs, organisations, sectors, regions, countries or continents (Blair and Jordan, 1994). In reality, they may be a disincentive to professionals' desire to stay and work at local institutions. Such push factors include poor remunerations, in ability to live a satisfactory life style on the salary received, disgruntlement with promotion policies and procedures and lack of freedom for research (Atkinson 1998; Blair and Jordan, 1994). Other push factors noted in literature include stress, burn out, poor economic performance by a country inflation, lack of compensation, to prevent professionals from moving away from current jobs and politics (Crouch and Perry, 2003; Amrein – Beadsley, 2007; Smithers and Robinson, 2001). These findings on push factors lacked context specificity of ODL situations as they zeroed on the traditional universities' situations. The present study intended to explore push and how they affected ZOU and the country. Pull factors on the other hand; refer to factors that attract professionals. Absence of them in the developing countries increases the rate of brain drain while reducing it on the host

countries. Just like push factors, pull factors are diverse. Chief among them noted in the literature include; good working conditions of service, good levels of reward, total package, performance -related rewards, control, communication and salary structure (Cole, 2000; Ding and Lehre, 2003). Also sensible taxation, pension schemes, medical aid schemes and other allowances are critical pull factors (Blair and Jordan, 1994; Ingersoll, 2001). The foregoing findings were not particularized to ODL situations. The focus of this study was to investigate how pull factors contributed to ZOU professionals brain drain, how they affected ZOU and what could be done to employ them in a bid to reverse brain drain.

3. Methodology

This study was rooted in qualitative research paradigm in. according to Thomas and Nelson (2001:15), qualitative research in one, “one which involves intensive, long time observation of phenomena in which in a natural setting, precise and detailed recording of what happens in the setting, interpretation and analysis of data using description, narratives, quotes, charts and tables”. By virtue of this study being qualitative it was therefore a comprehensive phenomena using a prolonged first hand presence at the site whereby the researchers got true reflections of what goes on at the research site since they were both employed of the ZOU.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case study research design. A case study is a form of descriptive research in which a single case is studied in depth to reach greater understanding about similar cases (Silverman, 2006; Seale 2006; Thomas and Nelson, 2001). We used a case study to enable us understand the nature of brain drain of professionals at the ZOU as well as its reversal in great depth, and in its nature setting recognizing its complexion and its context. Use of a case study is valuable in theory in theory building (Willig, 2001). As researchers, we also intended to generate new knowledge regarding strategies to lure back and attract professionals in the Diaspora.

Purposive Sample

The study used ten purposively sampled lecturers in the Diaspora to gather data. They responded to an in-depth questionnaire via the internet. Purposive sampling was used because it enabled us to contact research participants with characteristics desired by this study (Thomas and Nelson, 2001). The purposively sampled research participants are summarised by the ensuing five tables focusing on demographic characteristics such as gender, age, participants’ former Department at the ZOU, participants’ current professional status and Diasporan lecturers’ previous level of teaching experience at the ZOU.

Table 1: Distribution of the research participants by gender (N = 10)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	7	70
Female	3	30
Total	10	100

Table 1 shows that most (70%) of the research participants contacted were male, while only 30% were female.

Table 2: Distribution of the research participants by age (N = 10)

Variable Age in Years	Frequency	Percentage (%)
40 – 49	2	20
50 +	8	80
Total	10	100

Table 2 indicate that majority (80%) were aged at least 50, whereas, the rest were aged below 50.

Table 3: Research participants former Department at the ZOU (N = 10)

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Variable (Department)	Frequency	Percentage
Education	8	80
Commerce (MBA)	1	10
English and Communication	1	10
Total	10	100

Table 3 shows that majority (80%) of the research participants once belonged to the Department of Education, while 10% belonged to the Faculty of Commerce and Law (Master of Business Administration) and the other 10% was attached to English and Communication (Department of Language and Media Studies).

Table 4: Current Professional Status of research participants in the Diaspora (N=10)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Professor	0	0
Doctor	2	20
Lecturer	8	80
Total	10	100

Table 4 shows that the majority (80%) of the professionals in the Diaspora is still working as academics. Twenty percent of them are now Doctors.

Table 5: Diasporan lecturers' previous level of teaching experience at the ZOU (N = 10)

Variable (level of Teaching Experience in years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0 – 5 years	4	40
6 – 10 years	5	50
11 + years	1	10
Total	10	100

Most (50%) of the Diasporan lecturers had a teaching experience between 6 and 10 years at the ZOU. Forty percent of them have a teaching experience between 0 and 5 years. Only 10% of them had a teaching experience exceeding 10 years.

Research Instruments

The study gathered data using in-depth or open-ended questionnaires through the internet. The presence of the investigators was not necessary as participants were contacted through internet. Research participants filled in their questionnaire in the comfort of their privacy (Bell, 2000). The research instrument had details regarding the research participants' demographic data, causes of brain drain, effects of brain drain and strategies lure back professionals from the Diaspora. The questionnaire was distributed to 10 former lecturers through the internet. All the research participants responded within five days' time.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion Procedures

Thomas and Nelson (2001) defined data analysis as the process of making sense out of data. Bell (2000), views data presentation and analysis procedures as the overall products to be used to organize, describe, analyze and interpreted data. In brief, research data were content analyzed using logical themes, and actual research data described interpreted to reveal meaning.

4. Discussion of Research Findings

The discussion of research findings was done following these themes:

- Causes of brain drain.
- Effects of brain drain.
- Strategies to lure back and retain professionals in the Diaspora

5. Discussion of Actual Research Data

Why did research participants leave ZOU?

Research participants indicated a number of reasons that triggered their leaving of ZOU. All of them did not hesitate to indicate that they were pushed away by the unfavourable macro-economic environment that obtained in the country since the turn of the new millennium. One participant indicated that the economic climate in the country was in a sorry state to sustain wage bill of professionals. Another one indicated that the country was suffering from economic meltdown such that it could not prioritise the welfare of the professionals. A third participant pointed out that the nation was suffering from an economic haemorrhage resulting in the loss of skilled personnel to countries that had stable economies. These findings seem to be consistent with the National Skills Survey in Swaziland found when it revealed that the country was suffering from a haemorrhage of skilled and educated people to South Africa. Inflation was one other push factor that 90% of the participants indicated as a brain drain driver. According to Amrein-Beadsley (2007), inflation erodes professionals' salaries such that they will not live a decent live by their standards in a given society. Eighty percent of them indicated that as a result of inflation, their real wages were eroded by day. They no longer had real wages, but money wages. They were unable to buy asserts and let alone, food, clothes and pay school fees and various rates and rent bills. The host countries had favourable macro-economic conditions which enables participants to live a decent life.

In addition to the foregoing economic push factors, 40% of the research participants indicated political push factors as contributor to their leaving of ZOU jobs. One participant indicated pointed out that the political situation that obtained in the country between 2005 and 2008 was fluid such that it worked against the economic performance of the country. By so doing, the country was unable to channel its resources to the retention of professionals. Their new destinies were politically stable and conducive for work. Low salaries poor conditions of services that obtained during the first decade of the new millennium were also viewed as a push factor. All research participants reviewed that Universities in Zimbabwe offers salaries that were marginally comparably lower than what other Universities in Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries offered. The problem was worsened by the Zimbabwean Dollar which was ever losing power and value by hour, gas, triggering frightening inflation. On the contrary, host nations offered more attractive salaries, packages and allowances. As a result, Diasporan based professionals hardly think of returning home even uncertain circumstances regarding redressing local Universities' salaries and conditions of services. These observations were compatible with previous findings by Chetsanga and Muchenje (2008) who observe that some of the reasons for the departures of skilled personnel stemmed from poor execution of capacity building and domestic policies which result in imbalances between labour supply and demand.

Effects of Brain Drain

The effects of having professionals can be perceived from the position of allowing them to remain working in the Diaspora. Ten research participants were asked to respond to the question: how does your exit affect your former institution and country? One participant indicated a negative effect: it affected my former institution negatively in the very large way because I was a programme coordinator and my departure negatively affected the running of programmes, particularly on the issue of student queries. Some students would still contact me on my e-mail long after my departure. Of course, the country lost

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an upcoming academic who would have served in the university system. In this regard we feel that both the country lost a valuable human resource, thus, the host country benefit from brain gain while ZOU and Zimbabwe suffered from brain loss. This observation is comparable with Mutume's (2003) finding which notes that recipient countries get a wealth of talent that may enhance economic development in such countries. By implication, recipient countries were reaping benefits from the Zimbabwean human capital at the expense of Zimbabwe. This is what we view as brain lost in the drain because one country suffers from brain loss while the other profits from brain gain.

Another participant proffered an affirmative position by pointing out that: I believe my exit is largely due to the benefit of my country as my current services can still be accessed by higher education institutions in the country. I also think that the greatest benefit to my country has in the expertise and experience gained outside Zimbabwe, which will be a lasting asset to the country. The exit in this case is supposed to add value not only to ZOU, but to other Higher and Tertiary Education Institutions, as well.

The other 80% of the research participants indicated two things. First, they pointed out that their exit left gaps that we hard to fill. Second, they felt that students were short changed by their departure. These findings tend to be in tandem with Mushonga(2005) and Mutume's (2003) lamentations that the developing world was losing skilled workers to countries with better economies .These findings appear true to a large measure, because research participants were likely to be replaced by assistant tutors or inexperienced programme coordinators. Students, to a large degree were on the receiving end in terms of ODL guidance offered by new tutors.

Likely Benefits of Luring Professionals back Home

Research participants put forward interesting likely benefits to the country if they were to come back home. One participant had this to say, "I will bring back all the knowledge, and capital gained outside the country and will support the national Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (ZIMCHE) as well as individual higher education institutions in their quality assurance endeavours. Another participant indicated similar sentiments: "I can still work collaboratively with guys at home and the country benefits from my new expertise. Through workshops and conferences we can share ideas". Fifty percent of the participants indicated that the country also benefits from the foreign currency they bring into the country since most of their investments are done at home. The other 30% were of the view that the country benefits by employing other professionals to replace the departed research participants, thereby, reducing unemployment levels, in brief the country benefited a great deal in continued collaboration with former academic areas in the areas of research and expertise to solve socio-economic and political development problems. Second, foreign currency earned by these professionals is a valuable boost for investment opportunities in Zimbabwe. Third, they can be employment creators for other Zimbabweans through their investments.

In connection with how their country likely to benefit if they were to decide not to return home and continue working there, the study presented interesting findings. Ten percent of the research participants indicated that they had new qualification and new skills that would certainly assist in the improvement of operations in the experience they have gathered in the South African education system will also help to inform policies and priorities in their home country. A further 10% indicated that their country would still benefit from their services which are offered to quality assurance organisations and institutions in Africa. Also benefit will be extended to their country through publications on quality assurance they were currently releasing. Seventy percent of the participants indicated a unique benefit. Zimbabwe will enjoy whether or not they come back home is the positive reputation accorded to the country as a result of the work they undertake in the region. Ninety percent of the research participants indicated that Zimbabwe will benefit a great deal in terms of foreign currency earned by professionals in the Diaspora and a bit of employment creation for upcoming professionals. Tsang (2003) argues that professionals in the Diaspora are a relief to the unemployment burden in a country. We drew four views from these findings. First,

acquisition of higher qualifications by former ZOU employees is an added value to ZOU provided that they anytime associating with ZOU and Zimbabwe. Second, research in quality assurance can be shared by in-post and out-post ZOU lecturers so as to put ZOU in the best light among competing world class ODL universities. Third, true Zimbabweans will remain Zimbabweans forever. They will always act as good ambassadors for the country wherever they go to offer their services, hence, the spirit they always derive and pride in introducing themselves as Zimbabweans. Last, while Diasporan professionals presented the country with some employment opportunities for upcoming professionals, the new professionals lacked experience, expertise and stability that the Diasporan professionals possessed.

Possible Strategies to Lure Professional back Home

A plethora of strategies to lure ZOU professionals were proposed by the research participants. Thirty percent of the research participants indicated that the main strategy should be to utilize their expertise even when they are outside the country. They felt that modern communication technology makes this possible and convenient. Ten percent pointed out that the other way of luring them back home is to show plans in place to utilize their expertise in quality assurance, at national and/ or institutional level in order to utilize their expertise in full in developing sound quality assurance systems. Again, this can be achieved by taking advantage of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and making the information available on relevant website. Sixty percent of the participants indicated that the employer and the government needed to peg salaries in universities with regional benchmarks. Eighty percent felt that university professionals needed to be supported with schemes to acquire houses, cars and start businesses. Sixty percent indicated the need to support lecturers with staff development schemes for university staff through exchange programmes. Forty percent pointed out that for as long as university professionals do not see that the government they work for values their knowledge and skills, people will always look for alternative ways for surviving. To underscore this position, 10% of research participants indicated: “who wants to be a poor professional after spending all the years investing in acquiring education? Seemingly in total agreement with these sentiments are Jordan and Blair (1994) who cite poor remuneration and an inability to live a satisfactory life as one of the economic push factors of brain drain in HTEIs. In a few words, the foreign findings devote the need for improvement of the macro-economic fundamentals. They are not indicative of the use the need to improve political environment or institutional leadership.

Lastly, in terms of indicating any other relevant issues in connection with the phenomenon under study only 20% gave their opinions. Ten percent indicated that hiring professionals back to the country can be very complicated, if not impossible and until the economic fundamentals are addressed. They went on to indicate that people love their home countries, but life is lived once. Years wasted will never be recovered. Governments should not waste professionals’ time. The other 10% asked the question, “What available opportunities the country has for professionals in the Diaspora?” By implication, the above findings professionals do not want to come back and be in a worse economic position than their colleagues whom they left home.

6. Summary

Developing countries are facing the challenge of brain drain from their universities to other universities in the developed countries. The present authors have investigated the strategies to attract the ZOU professionals who left the ZOU to join the Diaspora. Ten lecturers who left the ZOU and joined the Diaspora were sent a questionnaire to find out reasons that made them leave the ZOU. It was found out that harsh economic conditions, poor staff development opportunities, and working conditions forced them mainly to leave the ZOU. It also emerged from the study that failure to fend for self and family by the ZOU’ lecturers - and perceived favourable conditions of service, salary perks, and other allowances in foreign lands drove lecturers away from the ZOU.

The study concluded that ZOU's lecturers' departure was never induced by the leadership at the institution, although political leadership that was obtaining in the country was viewed to have played a big part in inducing brain drain. The study went on to conclude that brain drain of the ZOU's lecturers deprived the country of its valuable human capital and benefitted developed countries at the expense of Zimbabwe. The authors also concluded that lecturers who departed ZOU preferred working in the foreign lands to working in Zimbabwe owing to favourable working conditions, salary perks, allowances and medical aid schemes offered by the former. The study further concluded that lecturers in the Diaspora promised to collaborate with lecturers back home in all spheres of professional work. This means that although lecturers are in the foreign lands, they still have a big heart for their country Zimbabwe, thus, they are patriots to a large extent.

7. Recommendations

In the light of the above findings and conditions the study recommended the used for:

- The Government and employer to offer attractive salaries and working conditions that are comparable to those offered by other universities in the SADC Region because the current salaries for State Universities in Zimbabwe are pegged at half the State Universities in the SADC Region.
- The Government to offer professionals housing and car loan schemes so that they can live a decent life and be viewed as people of high esteem in their societies.
- The Government to offer professionals resources to start business so that they can continue to be self-reliant and self-sufficient after retiring from university service. They should not be seen to be destitute or seeking re-employment as contract workers for the sake of fending themselves.
- The government to continue tapping Diasporan professionals' expertise instead of inviting them home where they feel they will not be utilized optionally.
- The government to offer staff development opportunities through staff exchange programmes so that lecturers can share latest practices with lecturers from other universities.
- ZOU to regularize its sabbatical and contact leaves for deserving lecturers so that they are kept satisfied and motivated job-wise.
- ZOU to engage in collaborative research opportunities with sister ODL institutions in the SADC region with the intent to increase organisational efficiency, effectiveness and proficiency.
- Comparative research needs to be carried at a macro-scale in the same area using at least three ODL universities so as to generate new knowledge meant to revamp the operational systems of ODL universities.

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