

The Emerging Work Roles of Academics During The Transition Phase of Open And Distance Learning in Zimbabwe.

Dominic Uzhenyu

Lecturer, Faculty of Commerce and Law, Zimbabwe Open University Harare/Chitungwiza Regional Campus.

Abstract: Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has transformed itself to become virtual with minimal or even no physical student contact as academics create learning platforms, mark assignments and even supervise dissertations and thesis online. The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has undergone a lot of transformation since becoming a fully pledged university in 1999. ZOU started with class contact (face to face with tutor) and use of modules but was in the pipeline of moving towards Electronic learning (e-learning) in line with contemporary global practices in ODL. The study used a survey design and was largely quantitative. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The study established that the majority of academics' workload had increased as the transition phase was taking longer than expected. A lot of administrative work coupled with inadequate training to effectively use the ZOU My Vista software learning platform, pressure emanating from doctorate degree studies, the need to undertake research and then publish research papers and implementing a demanding quality assurance system, were all straining academics. On a positive note, use of e-learning expedited feedback and communication to students and also was very convenient as they no longer had to queue at regional campuses. Streamlining of some administrative roles would make academics changing work roles manageable thereby reducing work stress but promoting work engagement and service delivery in ZOU.

Key terms

Academic-Ateacheratacollegeoruniversity. In this case, assistant lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and full professor.

Open and distance learning-learning mode in which the learner is flexible to undertake studies and other commitments at the same time and usually with minimal face to face contact with the tutor unlike in a conventional learning set up.

Service delivery - is a component of business that defines the interaction between providers(academics) and clients(students) where the provider offers a service and the client either finds value or loses value as a result. Good service delivery provides clients with an increase in value.

Transition- a period of moving from one delivery mode to another. In this case, from class contact to e-learning

Work Role-is a description of what a person (academic) does

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I. Introduction

Academics workload in Open and distance learning has been changing particularly over the last decade. Development in information technology has promoted the use of e-learning which is replacing the traditional methods of ODL delivery mode of using modules which are hard copies for learning, combined with face to face tutoring (physical classroom set up). However, this transition phase seems to be now including some aspects traditionally done by non-academic staff which are purely routine and administrative in nature (Mashile, 2014). This study wanted to find out the impact of those changing work roles on The Academics workload and ultimately service delivery. The presentation starts with the Background of the study, followed by the Statement of the problem, Research objectives and questions, Literature review, Methodology, Major findings (Results), Conclusions and Recommendations

II. Background Of The Study

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is increasingly becoming virtual with minimal or even no physical tutor-student contact as academics create platforms, mark assignments and even supervise dissertations and thesis online (Berge, 2008) and also give feedback through use of You-tube, teleconferencing and podcasts etc. This demonstrates how the roles of academics are changing rapidly according to Sammons and Ruth (2007).

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) has undergone a lot of transformation since becoming a fully-fledged university in 1999. During its early phases, ZOU, used to have between 12-16 contact hours for each

course per semester. Each student was issued with a hard copy module which has been the major mode of delivery. With the advent of e-learning taking center stage the world over, ZOU is in the pipeline to move in tandem with such global practice for higher education (learning). It has ten regional campuses and has a number of partnerships with local and international colleges and universities who offer its programmes. International learning institutions include, University of Zambia, BOCODOL (Botswana college of distance and open learning), ISCED in Mozambique. ZOU academics are responsible for writing modules, setting assignments and examination papers, chatting and discussing on-line at times with those students and are also external examiners. Academics workload seems to be including some aspects traditionally done by non-academic staff which is purely routine and administrative in nature (Mashile, 2014). These changing role expectations and increases in workload have been found to be leading to emotional discomfort associated with anxiety, stress, burnout and depression in academic staff (Baranova &Surikova, 2010; Bezuidenhout, 2014).

III. Statement Of The Problem

The transformation phase from the traditional modes of delivery such as use of printed (hard copy) module and conducting classroom tutorials to virtual learning such as use of e-learning software package, My Vista at ZOU, seems to be bringing a lot of changes to the work roles of academics. Such transformation could culminate in increased workload and making academics work become more complicated, strenuous and time consuming as they still have to perform other demanding key result areas such as research and publications, university and community service and materials development etc. This increased workload is likely to lead to increased stress levels and decreased work engagement (John, Kenny, &Fluck, 2014). The above issues regarding the changing academic roles, motivated the researcher to conduct this study.

IV. Research Objectives

- (i) To establish what has been the nature of work roles of academics in ODL before virtual learning
- (ii) To find out the adequacy of mechanisms put in place for this transitional phase.
- (iii) To identify problems which academics experience in their changing work roles during the transitional phase to virtual learning.
- (iv) To identify positives arising from the emerging academic work roles.

V. Research Questions (Sub-Problems)

- (i) What has been the nature of work roles of academics in ODL before virtual learning?
- (ii) How adequate have been the mechanisms put in place for this transitional phase?
- (v) What are the problems which academics experience in their changing work roles in during the transitional phase to virtual learning?
- (vi) Which are the positives that arise from the emerging academic work roles?

VI. Review Of Related Literature

.6.1 Theoretical framework

Transactional Distance theory by Moore (2009).

The theory was developed by Moore in 1993 for distance education (teaching). Moore (2009,1993) described ODL as an instructional method in which teaching behaviours are executed apart from the learning behaviours. In this case, communication must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical or other devices.

When autonomy is low, the need for structure becomes high and vice versa. Therefore, programmes with low dialog require a high degree of learner autonomy. The capacity of the learner for autonomous learning is influenced by the learner's conduct, learning styles, learning experience, the scope or context to be learned (Moore, 2009, 1993) The use of printed modules with face-to-face contact teaching (tutoring) hours with students per course, is becoming increasingly redundant (Hovenga&Bricknell, 2006). This has been due to the increasing use of information technology (IT) and the effect of globalisation especially in developed countries. Technology and globalisation have made access to learning material feasible to all corners of the world (Briggs, 2005).

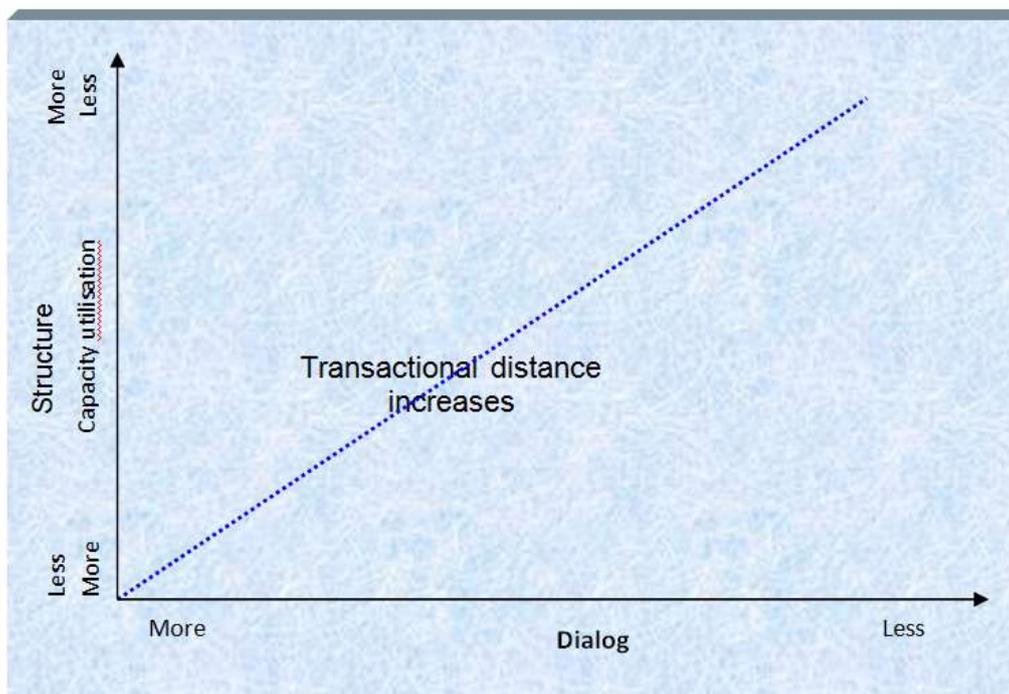


Figure 1: **Transactional Distance** (Moore, 2009, 1993)

Moore (2009) explained that pedagogical or transactional distance is a function of two sets of variables, that is Dialog (D) and Structure (S) resulting in 4 types of programmes namely;

1. No dialogue and no structure (-D -S)
2. No dialogue but structure (-D +S)
3. Dialogue and structure (+D +S)
4. Dialogue but no structure (+D -S)

The D and S are continuous variables If the ODL model of ZOU is considered, it seems to have been structured along Mooré's Transactional Distance theory since the institution's communication with its students has been facilitated by use of print, mechanical and electronic devices. This made it a very important and applicable theoretical framework for this study.

6.2 Conceptual framework

6.2.1 Work stress

Work or job stress is an important aspect of organisational behaviour. Job stress may be harmful physical and emotional responses in the event that job demands do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker (Jubenkanda, 2010; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), 2014). Stress is a dynamic condition and can be damaging if resources become scarce as opposed to being adequate where work engagement can be improved significantly (International Labour Office, 2012). The individual is faced with an opportunity, limitation or demand that is related to desired outcome(s) which is perceived as uncertain and important (Ganster, D, &Perrewe, 2011, Robbins, 2003). At ZOU, academics appear to be stressed by erratic salary payments which affect their budgeting. Stress in organisations is a critical phenomenon. It is generally associated with several vital individual physiological, psychological, and behavioural symptoms (Demerouti, Bakker &Gevers, 2015).

From the above definitions, this researcher has deduced that stress could affect an individual (academic) mentally, socially and even physically. It results in one failing to meet expected targets and that affects adversely his or her job performance. Figure 2 below gives an overview of different factors that cause stress and their impact on individuals or groups (academics). Such information is key to the understanding of stress especially in light of this study.

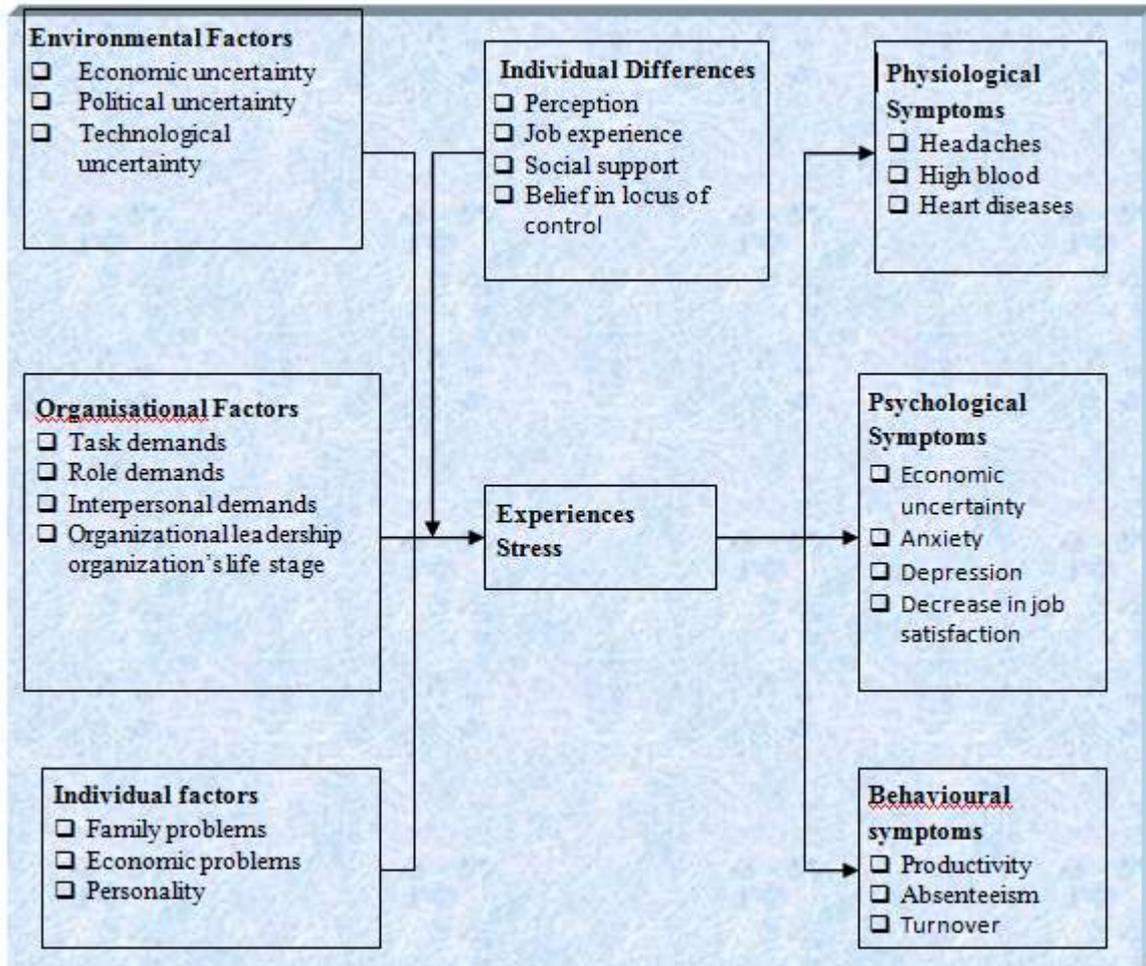


Figure 2: A Model of Stress (Robbins & Judge, 2012).

From Figure 2 it can be derived that, there are three potential sources of stress, environmental, organisational and individual, whose outcomes depend on how individuals perceive them. Consequences or results can also be divided into three, that is, physiological, psychological and behavioural symptoms (Robbins & Judge, 2012). He states that physiological symptoms relate to emotional and physical disorders such as headaches, back pains and dizziness. Psychological symptoms relate to the mental and emotional state of a person which affect the mind such as feelings and motivation. Behavioural symptoms are unusual persistent behaviours that are retrogressive such as drug abuse, criminal tendencies and aggression.

The other work stress model is the **The Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R)** (JD-R model) is very common in the study of Job stress. It assumes that employees' health is a result of the balance between positive and negative job characteristics. Its assumption is that any demand and resource pertaining to a job has a bearing on an employee's health, well-being and motivation. This occupational stress model suggests that strain is responsive to imbalances between job demands and job resources on an individual. The individual has to deal with those demands (Searle & Lee, 2015; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufelli, 2001).

Job demands are psychological, social, physical or organizational aspects of the job. They require physical and/or psychological effort or skills. They are linked to certain physiological and psychological costs (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufelli, 2001). Examples include work pressure, work overload, unrealistic targets, interpersonal differences (conflicts), job insecurity and emotional demands. According to the JD-R model, when job demands are high, there is need for additional effort to be exerted. This should help to achieve the work goals and to eliminate decreasing performance. However, this comes at a cost and can be overcome by taking a break, doing job rotation (switching tasks), or performing less demanding tasks.

Job resources include autonomy, job control, feedback, career opportunities, role clarity, supervisor coaching and guidance, and social support. Job resources are supposed to reduce job demands and subsequent exhaustion. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) observed that the adverse effect of job demands particularly on exhaustion, was strong if workers lacked resources.

Consistent with the above, the analysis of economic imbalances bedeviling Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Open University has not been spared. Lack of resources put a lot of demand and strain on academics (Ndudzo, 2012). Such job demands are associated with exhaustion. Lack of resources is also linked to disengagement (Searle & Lee, 2015, Liu & Cheung, 2015)). In this respect, part time lecturers, tutors and other qualified personnel disengage due to a lack of resources especially those related to e-learning,

From the above literature on job stress, it can be deduced that stress among academics could adversely affect their job performance and ultimately service delivery even at ZOU. Poales, Joubert, Bezuidenhout and Niebar (2014) found out that there were high stress levels for open distance academics. Therefore, managing stress is key to any organisation including ZOU as it saves costs. The savings would be on reduced medical bills due to illness, loss of productive time due to absenteeism (Ganster&Perrewe, 2011; NIOSH, 2014).

6.2.2 Work engagement

Work engagement is a positive, self-fulfilling, job-related state of mind, epitomised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Eldor&Harpaz, 2016; Schaufeli& Bakker, 2010). **Its benefits** (Searle & Lee, 2015; Courtney, 2013) are-

- better performance
- Experience positive emotions;
- Better health;
- Create their own personal and job resources.

Work engagement captures how workers perceive and experience their work in terms of being stimulating and energetic. This should determine the degree to which one can commit time, effort and input (the vigour component). There is also the desire for meaningful pursuit of a goal (the dedication component). Lastly there is the desire to be involved and fully focused. Employees should be psychologically connected to their work. They should have a clear conscience about their roles and expectations so that they remain focused. They should be determined and be able to invest themselves wholeheartedly in their roles. They should be proactive and committed to excellent quality performance. This calls for employees who naturally are engaged with their roles and work (Wright, More, Sinclair & Yang, 2015; Bakker & Leiter, 2010).

There are two key variables, namely job and personal resources that drive work engagement (Demerouti& Bakker, 2008)

Job resources. Work engagement is positively associated with job resources such as social support from workmates, supervisor, coaching, and job control. In addition, performance feedback, task variety, access to learning and development, and training facilities also enhance it. These resources help in reducing the effect of job demands on strain. However, they are also critical to the achievement of work goals if they can they stimulate learning and personal development. One consistent finding was that the motivational potential of job resources is particularly critical especially where there are high job demands.

Personal resources. Individual or personal resources, such as optimism, confidence and recovering from difficulty situation (resilience) are key to controlling the work environment and make a positive impact for success. Engaged employees have distinguishable personal characteristics from the less engaged employees. The characteristics include extraversion (sociability, energy, assertiveness, talkativeness), conscientiousness (awareness, alertness) and emotional stability (steadiness).

Work engagement can be measured using a more reliable self-reporting questionnaire, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale(UWES). It is a test that measures work engagement for both individuals and groups based on three sub-dimensions (Cohen, 2014; Schaufelli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006).

- i. **Vigour** refers to a high level of effort, commitment, energy and mental resilience during actual working, the desire to invest own effort in one's work, and resilience even in the wake of difficulties.
- ii. **Dedication** refers to being fully involved in one's work, deriving meaning and satisfaction in one's work and feeling being challenged There is also the experience of sense of determination, enthusiasm, motivation and pride.
- iii. **Absorption** refers to being fully focused and engrossed in one's work.

Those employees who score high on absorption, normally feel that they are happily engrossed in their work. They also feel immersed by their work and tend to develop difficulties detaching themselves from their work because they are carried away. Organizations look for employees who devote all their abilities and experience. They need employees who are engaged with their work, since engaged employees are more creative and more productive (Deepa, Palaniswan&Kuppusamy, 2014; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

Work disengagement may rise as a result of employee's emotional labor, due to lack of agreement between employee's felt emotion and the organizational desired emotion (Deepa et al., 2014). Broken systems

contribute to disengagement reasons, where organizations align individuals with the best fit positions. Employees usually become depressed and confused resulting in low job performance. Ultimately that could lead to high turnover (Moreland, 2013). A study by Eldor&Harpaz (2016) showed that work engagement was instrumental in explaining the relationship between the organization's learning climate and employees' creativity and their ability to adapt to the work environment. Employee engagement was found to be useful in explaining that relationship more thoroughly than related concepts such as job satisfaction as well as job involvement.

6.2.3 Related study on ZOU service delivery

A study was conducted by Chabaya, Chademoyo and Chiome (2011) at ZOU Masvingo regional camps on students' perceptions of service delivery at ZOU. The results showed that students were not satisfied with the institution's registration process through administration which was largely manual, conducting of tutorials and library services. In addition, there was discontentment over assignment management and overcrowded offices which housed many staff members. In the case of academics' offices, sharing of the offices made it difficult to offer counselling services to a student, as there would be no privacy which is required in such circumstances. Communication, shortage of computers and unavailability of some modules at registration also brought dissatisfaction among students.

VII. Methodology

7.1 Paradigm

The research used the Quantitative paradigm for objectivity in order to reduce bias (Khothari, 2014).

7.2 Target population

Was made up of ZOU Academics comprising all the grades of assistant lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and full professor. Majority of them held administrative positions of Regional programme coordinator (RPC), Programme leader, chairperson of department and Dean of a faculty. These were 80 and drawn from the National Centre (Head office) and Harare regional campus.

7.3 Sample size and sampling technique

Actual sample size was 38 based on Stratified sampling (Khothari, 2014)

7.4 Research instrument

A structured questionnaire was used to allow respondents to choose the best option or alternative for each question (Kennedy, 2009).

7.5 Research Ethics

These were observed especially of informed consent, confidentiality, honesty and integrity, verification of statements and trustworthiness (Cresswell, 2014; Porter, 2014).

7.6 Data presentation and analysis

Results were analyzed using simple Descriptive statistics to ensure that interpretation was easy and understood (Leedy&Omrod, 2016).

VIII. Results AndDiscussion

The study came up with the following results;

8.1 Bio-data of respondents

8.1.1 Gender composition of respondents

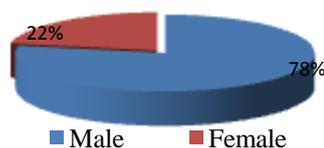


Figure 1: Gender composition

Majority of the respondents were males. It is common that generally universities have more male academics than females (Gregory & Lodge, 2015; Hovenga&Bricknell, 2006).

8.1.2 Job Positions of Respondents

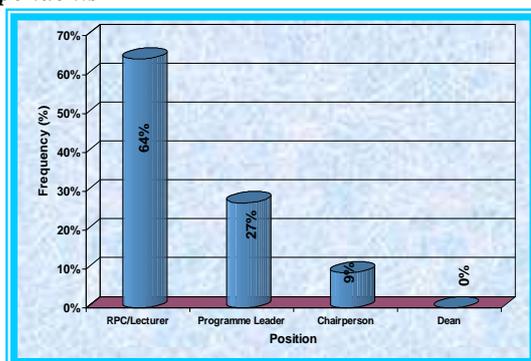


Figure 2: Positions

Majority of the respondents were lecturers, some of them also held the administrative position of Regional programme coordinator (RPC).

8.1.3 Titles of Respondents

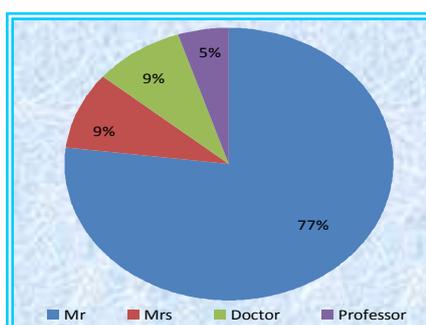


Figure 3: Titles of Respondents

Majority were lecturers with very few being Doctorate degree holders and Professors. The above distribution of staff according to title, conforms with the pattern among ZOU staff. Professors are still relatively low and doctorate degree holders too. This could be the reason why ZOU and the parent Ministry of higher and tertiary education, science and technology development have made it mandatory for all academics to attain a doctorate degree qualification based on empirical study (doctor of philosophy) as a requirement to secure one's employment. This could also be putting a lot of pressure (stress and burnout) as the Academics have to embrace both demands of studies and the routine tasks comprising teaching, research and publications, developing learning materials, university and community service in addition to a lot of other administrative duties they performed (John et al., 2014).

8.2 Responses on whether the workload was increasing or not

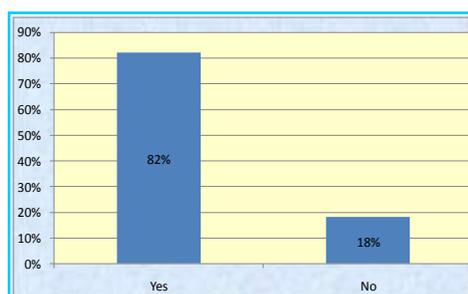


Figure 4: Response to whether there was increasing workload or not

There was an overwhelming response that the academics workload has been increasing owing to changing roles. This shows that the emerging or changing academic work roles are contributing to more work load thereby causing work stress and work engagement challenges as supported by Poales et al. (2014) and Picksgill (1998).

8.3 Major reasons for increasing workload of Academics

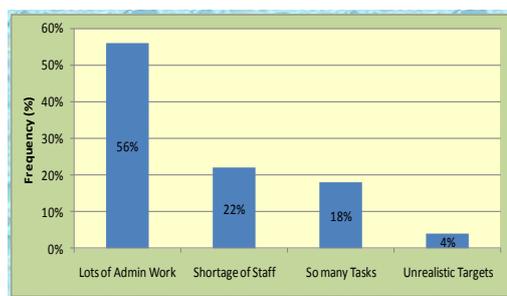


Figure 5: Major reasons for increasing workload of Academics

The academics mentioned that they did a lot of administrative work such as; assisting with both students and staff recruitment which involved a lot of paperwork and time, records management, implementing a new quality assurance system as well as attending to numerous student issues including queries and alike. This affected their time to do core roles of Research and publications, teaching, developing learning material, students research supervision, university and community service (John et al., 2014; Mashile, 2014; Vutete & Uzhenyu, 2016).

8.4 Challenges emanating from academic changing roles (emerging roles)

Table 1: Challenges emanating from academic changing roles (emerging roles)

Problem/challenge	Percentage (%)
Not conversant with My Vista especially students	82
My Vista at times down	59
Some students have no access to internet	64
Inadequate training for academics on online use	55
Lack of confidence	41
Shortage of computers	32
Slow computers	27
Job stress (too much demands)	64
Low morale	23
No time off duty	36
Doctorate studies demanding whilst at work	59
Personal funding to do research and publishing instead of a provisional institutional budget	41
Dual reporting structure (matrix structure) region vs faculty as they are so many changes to both	32

The results (findings) showed that e-learning had a lot of challenges which needed to be addressed. Majority of both students and staff had not received any training on e-learning especially on My Vista, a ZOU

learning online facility on its website. My Vista at times was down and could not be accessed while some students did not have internet facilities and were dissatisfied with service delivery (Chabaya, et al., 2011).

8.5 Strengths or Positives of E-learning

Table 2:Strengths or Positives of E-learning

Positives from e-learning	Percentage (%)
Students can access their work online anywhere	68
No need for students to queue at regional offices	64
Quicker feedback to students	59
More challenging duties or work	45
Better experience (exposure)	50

Although ZOU mode of delivery transition to e-learning had still some challenges, there were positive responses that e-learning should be the way forward as it had a lot of advantages that could enhance service efficiency and effectiveness to both students and academics.

IX. Conclusions

Although e-learning is user friendly and convenient and provides quick feedback, at ZOU the implementation of it is taking time since not much preparation to date has been done to cater for the transition e.g. not much training has been done to both students and staff on the use of e-learning resources. A lot of ZOU staff are part time tutors and majority have not received My Vista training. Some students came from relatively remote areas and do not have no access to internet facilities. The transition period has brought a lot of administrative and routine work e.g. trying to meet the demands of a new quality assurance system, more communication to as many students through the My Vista platform and WhatsApp groups including marking of assignments, examinations and research projects (dissertations). It can be safely concluded, based on these results, that the emerging roles of Academics at ZOU has increased their workload.

X. Recommendations

The following recommendations have been suggested in order to improve the changing roles of academics in open and distance learning.

10.1 Need to streamline some roles e.g. removal of some administration work such as recruitment, records management etc. both students and academics.

10.2 Adequate training to improve services delivery Training students on the use of My Vista

10.3 Improving My Vista accessibility by having more computers in the laboratory and library

10.4 Provision of speedy computers for efficiency which calls for the replacement of outdated (obsolete) computers with modern ones.

10.5 Empowering Regional programme coordinators (RPCs) and also streamlining or rationalising the dual reporting system due to a matrix structure in the organization so as to make the work load manageable.

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