

# Learning Organisation Concepts in Open and Distance Learning University: Their Application in Fluid Times of Discontinuity and Uncertainty

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**KEYWORDS** Education. University. Modern Learning Organisations. Life-Long Learning. Leadership

**ABSTRACT** This study explored the key elements in applying learning organisation concepts in changing environments of uncertainty and discontinuity in the Zimbabwe Open University. Drawing on the interpretive paradigm and grounded theory, an open-ended questionnaire generated data from a convenient sample of 20 lecturers and 120 students. Findings suggest that ODL institutions are pivotal for effective collaborative engagement to meet institutional goals. Thus, they need to apply organisational learning concepts and function as “learning organizations”. This may be achieved by fostering both collaborative and individual life-long learning, professional development and intellectual stimulation, research, creativity and innovation. Transformational leadership and autonomy, collective accountability and responsibility and, appropriate incentive schemes also emerged as important. The study suggests re-designing of the ODL university leadership and aligning it to the dictates of modern learning organisations. Being mindful of such issues may assist the university in navigating its way through the uncertainties in the terrain.

## INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the last decade of the twentieth century, Zimbabwe had one university, the University of Zimbabwe notwithstanding that at independence in 1980 campaign style strategies were employed to expand educational provision to the majority of the population who had been racially denied education opportunities by the previous colonial government. The impact of the large expansion was felt in higher education between 1984 and 1986 as students who entered secondary education in 1980 had now completed Ordinary and Advanced Levels (Zindi 2006). The massification of education cascaded into higher education institutions (colleges, polytechnics and universities) resulting in a mismatch between supply and demand higher education of vacancies. The government responded by appointing the Williams Commission in 1989 and tasked to find ways of addressing the high demand for higher education generally in particular university education. The commission recommended among other things:

- ♦ The establishment of a second university in Bulawayo.
- ♦ The establishment of private universities.
- ♦ The establishment of the National Council for Higher education.

The National Council for Higher Education Act was passed in 1990 paving the way for the expansion of universities. While efforts to open more universities were underway, the then only university in the country, University of Zimbabwe horizontally expanded its enrolments and offerings at general undergraduate level and at the same time established the College of Distance Education in 1993, now the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The ZOU with an enrolment of approximately 20 000 is the largest university in Zimbabwe and the second in southern Africa after UNISA (ZOU 2010).

While the ZOU tries to consolidate the quantitative gains, it does so against the backdrop of increased competition, dwindling government support, donor fatigue and a depressed educational market (Chiome 2010). According to the dictates of the Phillip’s curve, there is an inverse

relationship between quantity and quality of educational provision. Studies undertaken in Brazil confirmed the inverse relationship between quantitative provision of education and quality (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall 1985). Thus there is a trade off between quality and quantity. As the university grapples with the large numbers of students, the macro-economic outlook contrarily is not sympathetic. The ravaging economic conditions, dwindling government grants and declining graduate market also impact heavily on the university's operations. Dealing with the rapidly changing times against a background of discontinuity and uncertainty in the political and economic environment becomes a big challenge. Sadly, there is an apparent paucity of empirical work that university leadership can fall back on in these times of need.

The activities and developments within the higher education sector during the period 1990-2000 were within the scope of the national development plans such as the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) and the Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST). During the first decade of Zimbabwe's independence, the government followed a socialist path. The driving principle was "Growth with Equity". This was adopted to redress the inherited inequities and imbalances in access to education and health facilities among other basic needs. The silver lining in Zimbabwe's education continued to shine reaching its peak in 2010 when the country was rated the most literate nation in Africa (UNDP 2010). Latest reports indicate that Zimbabwe has overtaken Tunisia to become the country with the highest literacy rate in Africa, (UNDP Digest 2010). Tunisia had held pole position for years with Zimbabwe second- best and number one in Sub-Saharan Africa. Zimbabwe's literacy level jumped to 92 percent, up from 85 percent while Tunisia remained at 87 percent (UNDP Digest 2010).

However, the period 2000- 2009 marks the dark period in the history of education in Zimbabwe. Economic challenges plunged the country on a steep downturn and mayhem giving rise to the highest inflation level in the world. This devastated the economy and left the education sector badly bruised and processes in shambles. There was a massive exodus of teachers and lecturers from schools, colleges and universities to neighboring countries to seek greener

pastures as hardships took the steam out of some of the most hardworking professionals. The once prestigious educational institutions were left in tatters and the vibrant education system was dealt a serious blow as the government had no capacity for rescuing the collapsing education system. UNICEF (2009) indicated that Zimbabwe's education system was in a condition of great disorder and schools were mere white elephants as there were no textbooks and other learning materials. The situation for the Zimbabwe Open University was even worse. With its large enrolment and dwindling government funding, there was a mismatch between resources and enrolment (Mukeredzi and Ndamba 2007). This was worsened by the rapidly changing times and a background of discontinuity and uncertainty in the economy and the political landscape.

### **Productive Educational Institutions**

The challenge for Zimbabwe was to make the once prosperous educational sector productive again. The research literature identifies productive educational institutions as those that educate all of their students well, have a clear vision of their teaching and learning goals, and take action on those goals (Gavino et al. 2010). Such organisations also have high expectations for all students (Berry 2007) and are built on humanised, intellectual relationships for learning where students are viewed as individuals and are aware that professionals in the institutions are humanistic, caring about their personal and academic needs (Schechter and Feldman 2010). This is the same vision that guides the Zimbabwe Open University as it seeks to become:

*A world class open and distance teaching university (ZOU 2010).*

In a world class teaching university, teachers are supported as professionals and thus continually increase their capacity for growth and success. In addition, productive institutions are nested in a dynamic, adaptive culture for change that is situated in a local context (DES 2007). Productive establishments are also built on fundamental beliefs of democracy (MoE 2010) future oriented leadership (Bush 2008) and critical reflection (Moos 2008) and reflexion. Interestingly, these factors or characteristics have much in common with the concept of organisational learning (Mulford 2003). However, according to

Gavino et al. (2010) the key factor required for a successful transformational change process is the leadership of the institution. The leadership team must demonstrate its commitment to achieving the goals and supporting the process the institution is about to undertake. It needs to be well versed and fully supportive of the framework to be utilized in the transformation process, and must model the requisite behaviors of an inclusive community.

### **Organisational Learning**

The need for rethinking productivity in the ZOU entails a reconceptualisation of the concept of a university as a learning organisation. ZOU can reach world class if it operates as a learning organisation in the double sense where staff learns with and from one another. While the promise of organisational learning as a vision and philosophy for restructuring universities is compelling, insufficient empirical evidence remains the reality concerning the specific characteristics of universities that will enable them to operate as learning organisations, and the contribution leadership makes to these characteristics (Schechter and Feldman 2010). This demand is even worse in the ZOU situation as it apparently operates in a background of discontinuity and uncertainty in the economical and political landscape as well as the rising enrolment against the odds yet ultimately, however, the impact of these factors on a range of student outcomes should be most convincing (Silins and Mulford 2000). As the new millennium unfolds, the scope and pace of change seems to be accelerating in all areas of human learning (Illeris 2009). The ZOU has no option but to move with or ahead of it if it has to maintain pace and avoid lagging behind. Educational institutions are feeling this tidal wave of change in ways that have left many educators – consciously or otherwise – confused, exhausted and disillusioned (Silins et al. 2003).

### **Senge's Model of a Learning Organisation**

The concept of a learning organisation originated in systems thinking and is typified by Senge's (1990) model of the five disciplines of a learning organisation. These are systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, team learning and shared vision. According to Senge, sys-

tems thinking integrate knowledge from across the disciplines and focuses on wholes rather than parts. Personal mastery drives people to expand their ability to achieve their goals. This is possible since "organisations learn only through individuals who learn" (Senge 1990:139). In universities, individuals should be able to learn continuously and improve so that the lifelong learning of adults is just as respected as the goal of fostering lifelong learning in students (MoE 2010; UNICEF 2009; Bamburg 2010). Senge further talks about mental models which refer to the subconscious, taken for granted beliefs that limit thinking about how the world works. One good example is the thinking in some educationists that students are vessels for teachers to fill in. This constrains likeminded people's ability to change. Mental models determine not only how use is made of the world but how people act and what they perceive. Awareness of and re-examining these models in the light of espoused beliefs brings about change that is badly needed in a university faced with uncertainties and stiff competition from conventional institutions.

An important area that Senge (1990) espoused is team learning. To Senge (1990), team learning is a critical discipline because "teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning units in modern organizations" (Senge 1990:10). Senge argues that if teams learn they become a microcosm for learning throughout the organisation. Most important organisational decisions are made in teams. HMIE (2007) contends that in leadership this promotes student learning but, the challenges of leading in a time of change is that institutions focus on individual and not on team learning. Cooperative or collaborative learning for students learning at a distance is critical but teachers are not provided with the time, structures, cultural norms nor language to promote it (Tee Ng 2008). Most staff development programs support the learning of individuals. The issue of shared vision emerges from people who truly care about their work, who possess a strong sense of personal vision and who see the collective vision as one that can encompass the personal visions of all. It aligns what we do with what we say we want to do. Senge (1990) calls this the rudder that can keep the organisation on course during times of stress, and stress is epidemic in most educational establishments today in Zimbabwe where UNICEF (2009) reports

that resources are thin. Senge (1990) posits that learning organisations are characterised by valuing and developing these five disciplines and that the basic meaning of a learning organisation is one that is “continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (p.14). This appears to be what the ZOU is short of going into this research.

### **Some Conditions Fostering Organisational Learning in Education**

Developing people and partnerships was seen by Gavino et al. (2010) and Bamburg (2010) as the most important step in which educational institutions can foster organisational learning. Building leadership capacity in others enhances easing pressure on educational leaders. The most important resource in any establishment or service is its people. Leaders create an empowering culture in which staff feels able to argue, propose, question and challenge. Bush (2008) is of the opinion that some educational leaders play a vital role in the practice of leadership. Evidence shows that the quality of leadership provided by these leaders in influencing their establishment matters greatly. Muijs (2011) posits that leadership has long been seen as a key factor in organisational effectiveness. It is important to note, however, that these leaders are seen to be effective not simply because of their position or power, but because of their ability to influence and empower others.

Team working skills is another important area. Gavino et al. (2010) also concur that learning occurs best when associations are built. Leaders recognise the benefits of teamworking and the development of teamworking skills. They sometimes need to be in the chorus rather than out front (Bamburg 2010). The most effective open and distance learning institutions need to build teams that will encourage members to engage in life-long learning.

The Singaporean experiences appear to hold water in the face of diversity and changing circumstances in the ZOU. A key milestone in the phase of educational development in Singapore was the launch of the Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (TSLN) vision in 1997. This official vision emerged from a strategic review of education, motivated by a pre-occupation with the future. It guided subsequent initiatives in the education system until today. TSLN is seen as a

vision “for a total learning environment, including students, teachers, parents, workers, companies, community organisations and the government” (DES 2007: 5). Thinking Schools is a vision of a school system that can develop creative thinking skills, lifelong learning passion and nationalistic commitment in the young. Learning Nation is a vision of learning as a national culture, where creativity and innovation flourishes at every level of society. This model can be used in the ZOU with some rewards being reaped thereafter. Against this background, this research explored ways of dealing with a rapidly changing environment under conditions of discontinuity and uncertainty.

The notion of organizational learning (OL) has reached the forefront of both institutional change discourse and academic inquiry (Schechter and Feldman 2010). However, this notion has apparently not yet undergone deliberate thinking and academic work within the ODL domain in conditions of discontinuity and uncertainty. By seeking answers to the question: ‘What are the ways of creating an ODL University that will deal with the rapidly changing times against a background of discontinuity and uncertainty? This paper attempts to contribute to debates around organizational learning mechanisms (OLMs) in ODL as embedded in the learning culture of open and distance learning.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In many developing and indeed developed countries, the growing impact of globalization, capitalism and increased economic competition, which are usually beyond the direct control of nation states, have forced individual nation states to change their economic and supporting human resource development strategies in order to adapt to the demands of the changing external context. In Zimbabwe, the economic turmoil of 2000-2008 saw the country’s education thrown into despondency and there are no systematic ways of dealing with such a situation under conditions of a transitional government authority that is also posting further challenges of uncertainty and discontinuity. The study therefore sought to find ways of applying learning organisation concepts in dealing with a rapidly changing environment under conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity in an open and distance teaching university.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Research Paradigm

The study sought to explore the key elements considered as essential in applying learning organisation concepts in dealing with a rapidly changing environment under conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity in the ZOU from the perspective of students and lecturers. Thus, the study was located in the “interpretive” paradigm. From the interpretive perspective, reality consists of people’s subjective experiences of the external world. Hence, interpretivists adopt an inter-subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed (Myers 2009). From this interpretivist stand point where concern revolves around understanding the world from subjective experiences of participants, this paradigm suited our study.

### Research Design

Given the paradigmatic location of the study, the research design was based on grounded theory. Grounded theory is an inductive approach which Bloor and Wood (2006) view as an integration of qualitative and quantitative strategies. It is principally in the qualitative domain and its main thrust is discovery and or generation of theory from data systematically obtained from social research’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Hill et al. (2003) contend that this design does not only enable unearthing and grouping issues into categories, but also identifying and exploring the diversity within the categories and any links that may exist.

### Population and Sampling

The population for this study was made up of all lecturers in education and second year Masters in Education (MEd) students in the Masvingo Regional Centre in 2010. A convenient sample of 20 lecturers and 120 students were selected to participate in the study. A convenience sample involves taking subjects that are conveniently accessible to the researcher to participate in a study. In the particular case, the MEd students and lecturers who arrived early for the contact session presented easy access and availability to the researchers. While there was neither randomization nor matching to the

demographics of the general student population, the sampling design facilitated speedy data generation.

### Data Collection Tools

An open-ended questionnaire was used to generate data. The questionnaire was administered to both students and lecturers during the May 2010 contact session.

### Data Analysis

Content analysis technique was employed to unpack the data and make sense of the data. This entailed several stages. The first stage involved transcribing and reading through transcripts and making brief notes in the margin when interesting or relevant information was found. Then going through the notes made in the margins and listing the different types of information found. This was followed by reading through the list and categorising each item in a way that offered a description of what it was about. We then determined whether or not the categories could be linked in any way and listing them as major categories (or themes) and / or minor categories (or themes). This was followed by comparing and contrasting the various major and minor categories. We then repeated these stages for all the transcripts. After going through all the transcripts, we collected all the categories or themes and examined each in detail, considering whether it fitted in and its relevance. Transcript data was then categorised into minor and major categories/themes and reviewed in order to ensure that the information was categorised as it should be. All the categories were then reviewed to ascertain whether some categories could be merged or if some needed to be sub-categorised. Finally we returned to the original transcripts to ensure that all the information that needed to be categorised had been so. We then exchanged our analyses.

### Credibility and Trustworthiness

The instrument was pilot tested with 3 lecturers and 3 students. The object of this exercise was to determine appropriateness of the research structure as envisioned and to get to grips with some practical aspects. Further, gauging the duration and obtaining insights into the

technical elements that did not speak to the key question could only be achieved through piloting (Seidman 1998).

In addition, during data analysis, we ensured internal validity by working independently and then exchanged our analyses to provide the critical friend perspective to identify errors and omissions (Cohen et al. 2000) at the end. We compared the analytical themes and whenever a difference emerged in the categorization, we searched the data for disconfirming and confirming evidence to support the themes. We continued to discuss differences in categorization until an agreement was reached. All these attempts were meant to ensure internal validity of the processes thereby enhancing credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Ethical Issues**

Before administering the questionnaire, the purpose of the study was clearly explained and participants were assured of strict confidentiality and anonymity. They were also reassured that there was no right/wrong answer.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Transformational Leadership**

An interesting finding related to leadership is the ability of ZOU to promote transformational culture in all its processes through transformational leadership. One lecturer pointed out that:

*A critical aspect of organisational learning is that schools must promote a culture of transformation so that all university processes are geared towards enhancing it.*

A growing number of studies have indicated that the transformational form of leadership has been perceived by educators as to generate the most helpful management practices in the context of educational change and restructuring (Leithwood 2006; Leithwood and Jantzi 2008; Silins and Mulford 2000). They all point out that transformational leadership is well placed to champion change in an uncertain environment. In other words, reciprocally enriching shared organizational knowledge through organisational learning continuously recreates and shapes organizational structures, procedures, and routines, thus providing further concrete indications of

learning at the organizational level (Schechter and Feldman 2010).

### **Rigorous Evidence-based Self-evaluation**

An interesting finding from the respondents in this study is the need for the university to develop a quality assurance framework based on the principles of reflexion and self evaluation. This involves looking 'inward' as opposed to reflection where they re-play and think about the processes and activities from the 'outside'. Some related comments are:

*The use of the self-evaluation framework has the potential to streamline evaluative activities and reduce duplication and repetition if the principle is based on trust and authentic self evaluation and assessments (Lecturer).*

*For a university to act as a learning organisation, the best way for teachers, students and other staff members to learn is through a framework that is based on the principle that the most effective way of improving standards of service is to use a combination of rigorous evidence-based self evaluation alongside independent external inspection (Student).*

A model of self evaluation was given in this study. The model provides the basis for the development of performance measures and quality indicators for use in self evaluation. The same measures and indicators can also be used selectively for inspection. A similar model was applied in the Scottish education system as confirmed by HMIE (2007). The framework has been developed in accordance with the principles of the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management and is also compatible with a number of other quality models and awards, for example, Investors in People, Charter Mark and ISO 9000 (Chiome 2010) and can be used in conjunction with them. For example, evidence produced through the use of models such as Charter Mark can contribute to evaluations made using measures and indicators within this framework, and vice versa. A similar model is believed to be relevant and effective in ODL institutions.

### **Shared Accountability and Collective Responsibility**

One important area that was unearthed in this research is the issue of shared accountabil-

ity and collective responsibility. The respondents felt that:

*Accountability for successful work and continuous improvement should rest with everyone in the university. There must be collective responsibility in a university department that fosters organisational learning (Student).*

*Everybody in an open and distance teaching university has to take responsibility for the quality of their work. Senior staff is sometimes reluctant to delegate accountability though they are prepared to delegate authority and that is a real challenge in ZOU which need to be halted if university is to work as a learning organization (Lecturer).*

Accountability, responsibility and collaboration are not new terms in educational leadership practices. For instance, institutionalising the processes of collaboration and collective responsibility has been linked with the notion of building leadership capacity in schools (Lambert 1998). Institutions that practice collaborative decision making have been linked to success. To Bush (2008) this is a process of what he termed democratic building. Senge (1990) posits that learning organisations are characterised by valuing and developing team spirit. Thus conditions of uncertainty entail people working in collaborations to reduce workload impact and possibly ward off uncertainties.

### Intellectual Stimulation

An analysis of the responses from both students and academics revealed that intellectual stimulation is valued in open and distance learning context. Some supporting statements made by lectures and students include:

*There is need for deans and chairpersons to encourage staff to reflect on what they are trying to achieve with students (Lecturer).*

*Both students and staff need to be in a position to contribute intellectually to the success of the university under conditions of uncertainty so that this uncertainty can be halved (Student).*

*A university that facilitates opportunities for staff to learn from each other and enhances individual and collective continual learning practices provides ideal conditions (Lecturer).*

Intellectual stimulation appears to be an important aspect of organisational learning. In a study in Australia, Silins and Mulford (2000) also

found that the extent to which the principal encourages staff to reflect on what they try to achieve with students and how they do it; facilitates opportunities for double-loop learning where staff learns from and with each other. Learning organisations in double-loop collective learning cultures foster both teacher and student learning (Graven 2004; Friedman 2005). Hence, collaborative practices and an ethos where there are good relations, with personal, interpersonal, interdepartmental inclusive of intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary agency, build on openness and trust, are conceived as underpinning both teacher and student learning and success (Muijs 2011). Thus the practice of individual on-going learning when aggregated promotes organisational learning. In fact, a Thinking School concept is seen as a vision “for a total learning environment, including students, teachers, parents, workers, companies, community organisations and the government” (Muijs 2011). This can be applied in an ODL context. With its thrust on lifelong learning, it is sufficiently well placed to do this.

### Teacher and Student Autonomy

The philosophy of autonomy appears to be creeping into staff and students in the ZOU. Both students and lecturers appear to concur that there is no organisational learning that can take place in ZOU if both students and staff have not been granted autonomy to act in manners that promote the university vision of becoming a world class open and distance teaching institution (ZOU 2010). The following sentiments expressed by one lecturer appear to substantiate this:

*Teachers and students need the laxity and autonomy to make decisions that matter on the point of service delivery. In this case, they will engage in continuous learning not to be programmed to refer all cases to the higher authorities all the time.*

The need to relate autonomy and organisational learning in ZOU has been echoed by Eck and Goodwin (2008) who pointed out that the autonomy gap in educational institutions was stifling leadership practices and as a result, heads of divisions who are not autonomous cannot grant autonomy to their subordinates.

### Continuous Professional Development

One reason why Zimbabwe's education system is emulated in Africa is that schools engage in on-going professional development. This practice was cited in this research as a way that fosters organisational learning in a university. One lecturer put it this way:

*Continuous professional development is believed to be one of core elements that facilitates and sustain organisational learning.*

Tee Ng (2008) support the idea of continuous staff development arguing that it is another significant initiative, to develop institutional cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future by fostering a sense of identity, pride and self-respect as a university community. Again, the general goal of ongoing teacher staff development is to systematically, deliberately and purposefully enhance knowledge, understanding, behaviour, skills, values and beliefs in relation to teaching practice (Bamburg 2010) this would enhance institutional sustainability. The underpinning intentions of all approaches to continuous improvement are shared by educators, one might think that academics and school-teachers would be reasonably well disposed to adopting the approach: they should already be using it as part of their everyday teaching (and research) (Doherty 2008).

### Conducive Working Environment

An interesting though obvious finding in this study is the issue of climate or what respondents referred to as university atmosphere. The respondents in this study believe that climate has profound influence on promoting organisational learning in an open and distance teaching context. Some substantiating statements made by a lecturer are:

*Lecturers will work effectively when the university atmosphere is conducive. They will put more effort in learning continuously. Thus, interactivity in e-learning fosters this for students.*

The social nature of organisational learning makes it an ideal way of creating a conducive learning organisation as unearthed in this study. Whereas individual learning is generally perceived as a cognitive process, organisational learning need to be perceived and therefore stud-

ied as a socio-cultural process (Schechter and Feldman 2010) where knowing resides not in individuals but distributed across teachers, students, conceptual (theories) and material artifacts (books, computers) etc. (Kelly 2006). Thus, social interactions take place in organisational learning contexts through interpretations of events and multiple representations of knowledge. Accordingly, these social learning interactions cannot be perceived as a single and uniform process in organizations, but rather as a "network" (Schlager and Fusco 2003) of diverse institutionalized social arrangements. With this said, learning in ODL, at the organizational level, is dependent on the interactions among staff and students at a distance. The variety of staff members and the unique organizational structure of ODL enable many types of learning interactions (Chiome 2010). Thus, the uniqueness of the ODL structure, processes and instruction that include e-learning, enriches the possibilities of socio-cultural learning processes.

### Collaborative Innovation

One major finding of this study which has been a practice in Zimbabwean schools for years is what respondents in this study called collaborative innovation. One lecturer had this to say:

*Teachers of each subject collaboratively innovate teaching methods and teaching materials. The results of innovation are shared through cross-faculty lesson study. Even teachers from other universities come to observe the successful innovative practices.*

Collaborative innovation has been seen to promote teaching through collaboratively innovated teaching methods and teaching materials. This is critical in ODL where the learner is separated from the point of service delivery by distance. This stance is well documented in literature. The "excellence model" cannot be effectively imposed from the top-down: it has to be achieved and it can only be achieved through the commitment of the whole organisation (Doherty 2008).

### Fostering Enquiry and Creativity

An important finding in this study is that an open and distance learning university is not just a place in which knowledge is disseminated. The

university works to instill values of enquiry and values of creativity in both students and staff. One student ably articulated this issue:

*The dark days of economic collapse have taught us to be innovative. ZOU is now a hub of enquiry and innovation. The ability to lead a university these days lie in fostering enquiry, innovation and creativity in both tutors and students.*

This was supported by a lecturer as follows:

*Time and money should be allocated for research workshops for staff to talk, work, share, debate, reflect and experiment together for innovative practices.*

### **Appropriate Incentive Scheme**

It also emerged that respondents felt the need for appropriate incentive schemes that recognise, acknowledge and reward innovation. In this way, the university promotes creativity and at the same time foster organisational learning. One lecturer pointed out that:

*The incentive scheme that was legalised through the secretary's 2009 circular that empowered universities to reward innovation and creativity is in line with the dictates of fostering organisational learning in an open and distance learning context.*

Robbins and Coulter (2005) appear to support the issue of an appropriate incentive scheme arguing that employees will be motivated to exert a high level of effort when they believe that effort will lead to a good performance appraisal. This is important in Zimbabwe at a time of heightened expectations from stakeholders who suffered the burden of high teacher turnover during the decade of economic mayhem and are still shrouded in uncertainty and discontinuity owing to a transitional arrangement in which they are operating.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study investigated key elements that students and lecturers considered as essential in applying learning organisation concepts in dealing with a rapidly changing environment under conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity in the ZOU. Data analysis indicates a number of issues as essential in a changing environment. These include: transformational leader-

ship, rigorous evidence-based self-evaluation, shared accountability and collective responsibility, intellectual stimulation, teacher and student autonomy, continuous professional development, conducive working environment, collaborative innovation, fostering enquiry and creativity and appropriate incentive schemes. These observations are in tandem with earlier studies where an ODL institution is more than a place of instruction or a "knowledge distribution center", rather, it is a place where university communities collaboratively engage and learn with and from each other to solve their problems and to reach their goals more effectively (Lambert 1998; Graven 2004; Schechter and Feldman 2010). The university can apply organisational learning concepts in dealing with uncertainties and discontinuity through functioning as a "learning organization" for instance: providing continuous learning opportunities; fostering inquiry and creativity, encouraging collaborations, professional learning and sharing ideas; as well as open interactions with and within their environment. Scholars (Bandung 1999; Doherty 2008; Tee Ng 2008) point out that such systematic attempts, deliberately and purposefully enhance knowledge, understanding, behaviour, skills, values and beliefs in handling uncertainties and discontinuity. Guskey (2002) talks of systematic professional learning where individual learning and organisational learning need simultaneous focus given that any development made in one component may be annulled by challenges in the other.

Findings also suggest intellectual stimulation, autonomy and shared accountability and collective responsibility as vital for dealing with uncertainties and discontinuity in ODL institutions. Silins and Mulford (2000) concluded that teacher encouragement to reflect on their work by their line managers promotes stimulation of professional learning and development. Concomitantly, findings suggest a need for the university to develop a quality assurance framework based on the principles of critical reflection, reflexion and self-evaluation. In rapidly changing environments with uncertainty and discontinuity, processes may be enhanced by critical reflection in practice, on practice and about practice. It is from self-interrogation, stepping back, evaluating and 'replaying' processes within rapidly changing environments that new knowledge and beliefs may be developed (Haton and Smith 1995).

With regard to autonomy, shared accountability and collective responsibility, Godwin (2008) notes that, limitations in these areas stifle leadership practices in institutions. Findings from this study point to a gap in autonomy in ZOU leadership practices, consequently heads of sections grant limited autonomy to their subordinates. On the contrary, promoting staff autonomy, accountability and shared responsibility often creates a sense of ownership and fosters effectiveness in their practice and job satisfaction.

### CONCLUSION

Findings suggest that ODL institutions are more than centres of instruction but pivotal communities for effective collaborative engagement to address problems and meet institutional goals. There is need for application of organisational learning concepts in dealing with uncertainties and discontinuity by functioning as “learning organizations”. This requires fostering life-long learning, promoting research and creativity and encouraging effective collaboration within the university community. Other emerging issues to be addressed include; transformational leadership and autonomy, intellectual stimulation, collective accountability and responsibility. Findings also illuminate the value of appropriate incentive schemes, innovation and continuous professional development collaboratively and individually as organisational learning concepts that may be effective in assisting the university to get out of mucky waters and navigate its way in the uncertainties and discontinuity environment it is operating in.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This research argues for and supports the existence of and the capacity for systematic learning through institutionalized structures and procedures in an ODL and teaching context. There is need to address issues of incentive schemes and promote enquiry and creativity, innovation and collaborative continuous professional learning and development. Through the social interactions, the staff constructs shared interpretations of events and collective representations of knowledge (Kelly 2006). Where practices lack organisational support, even the most promising attempts may not suc-

ceed. A clear, methodical and regular approach to enquiry, creativity professional development through collective structural activities enhances both individual and organisational development.

Findings also suggest that organizational learning is imperative for survival and competitiveness in dynamic, complex, and uncertain environments especially in an open and distance learning environment. Hence, developing and upholding an ODL university as a learning organization needs a number of facilitating factors, related to university leadership, individual and team learning, quality of university personnel, and positive university atmosphere, practices and cultures. Against this, a need for building capacity for systematic learning through institutionalized structures in ODL becomes critical. Further, adopting organisational learning philosophies may better position the ODL university in navigating its way past the unfriendly environment given the pivotal location of organizational learning for survival and competitiveness in dynamic, complex, and uncertain environments (Senge 1990). Similarly, building a learning organization requires the establishment of forums-networks-mechanisms and the facilitation of a learning culture. Institutions committed to implementing a diversity initiative conduct pre-assessments before engaging in the formal institution-wide process. The purpose is to develop an understanding of the culture, its receptiveness to diversity initiatives, and willingness to embrace change.

The study thus suggests redesigning the ODL university leadership to ensure conformity to the dictates of the modern learning organisation. However, this is a small piece of research based on 20 lecturers and 120 students. But given the centrality of applying learning organisation concepts in dealing with a rapidly changing environment under conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity in the ZOU, more comprehensive work is required. Possible questions for further research could include: How does the university view their responsibility to student and staff with regard to conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity? How does the Ministry of Higher Education view their responsibility with regard to conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity in institutions? How do lecturers and students experience and conceive these conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity? What

conditions foster organisational learning in ODL contexts. Perspectives from such studies may assist in reconceptualising the application of learning organisation concepts in dealing with a rapidly changing environment under conditions of uncertainty and discontinuity in the ZOU.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The major limitation emanates from limited transferability of findings due to the paradigmatic, and methodological location of the study. Transferability would therefore be considered on the understanding that findings may be limited only to similar specific groups, communities and/or circumstances (Cresswell 2008). However, given that the decision will be left to the researcher and reader to confirm findings based on their understanding and experiences, the strength of the findings from this case study lies in the fact that the study involved two distinct groups: lecturers and students. Secondly, transcription of data was neither neutral nor value free. What passed from the transcription to into the document was a result of what should go there, the researchers' decisions and choices. Throughout data analysis, value based decisions were being made. Further the epistemological stance of the design clearly implies the presence of values and biases given that the data was subjective in nature (Cohen et al. 2000). Finally, our direct involvement with the institution may have resulted in restraint in the way in which participants answered some questions. Along that vein, the absence of significant negative discussion about the university which we noted might suggest some sense of discomfort on the participants to raise such issues. While we could not detach ourselves from our connections with the institutions, this is only speculative.

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