

## **Open and Distance Learning: The Cornerstone of Economic Transformation**

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**Abstract:** *Most successful economies in the world are the ones that invest heavily in their human resources and the vehicle for this human capital development is the open and distance learning. Trinidad and Tobago stand out as typical examples of countries which were radically transformed by human capital development from the once “plantation economy” to an exporting industrialised nation. Education and sustainable development are intricately woven, but what is obvious is that basic education is the backbone of a nation’s ability to develop and achieve economic and sustainability targets. Higher education principally links workforce development to economic development by matching instructional programmes to the needs of industry. Work related learning opportunities need to be availed so as to drive the economy, and this is the niche that Open and Distance Learning ought to fill in. The advent of knowledge-based economies are giving comparative advantages to nations that thrive more on technical innovations and the competitive use of knowledge than the ones that depend on natural resources or cheap labour. Resource rich countries such as Nigeria still languish in the lower echelons of economic development because of high illiteracy rates, which subsequently lead to high poverty levels among its people. It is the intention of this article to examine how higher and tertiary education and ODL in particular can be used as a driver to socio-economic development as noted by Aristotle, centuries ago; who pointed out that the fate of empires depends on the education of the youth.*

**Keywords:** *Open and distance learning, economic transformation, natural resources*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

A compelling body of research links primary and secondary education to economic development and growth. Scheweke (2004) noted that increased investment in health, skills, and knowledge provides future returns to the economy through increases in labour productivity. Education increases workers’ average earnings and productivity, and it also reduces the incidence of social problems such as drug abuse, crime, welfare dependency, and lack of access to medical care, all of which can weigh heavily on the economy. Research confirms the value of investing in educational programs, curricula, technologies, skills, and infrastructure.

Rabie (2007), pointed out that in the 1980s, the most industrialised societies, especially the United States of America began to enter a transitional period leading to the age of knowledge where scientific and technological knowledge is increasingly becoming the most valuable individual as well as societal asset. This new economy which has emerged is dependent on information and communications than any other factor. Knowledge based jobs which require as submitted by Peter Drunker, a good deal of formal education and the ability to acquire and apply theoretical and analytical knowledge are the most rewarding in this era. Rabie (2007) asserted that knowledge has become more valuable than all factors of production, enabling people to produce more products and services more efficiently, using less space and resources. People with the right knowledge and right attitudes are able to seize their opportunities, make more money and move upwards. Rabie (2011) argued that people with economic means have resources to get the right knowledge and expand the range of opportunities open to them and people with neither knowledge nor wealth are left behind, with nothing to enable them to compete and move upward in society. It is critical to note that open and distance education is the affordable and most accessible means of carrying out

social and economic transformation. ODL's accessibility and affordability makes it the only vehicle through which ordinary people can get educated and contribute to the economic transformation.

## **2. HIGHER AND TERTIARY EDUCATION AS THE ECONOMIC BACKBORN OF THE GLOBAL SOCIETY**

According to Drucker (1994) knowledge society is the first society in which ordinary people--and that means most people--do not earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow. It is the first society in which "honest work" does not mean a callused hand. It is also the first society in which not everybody does the same work, as was the case when the huge majority were farmers as was the case only forty or thirty years ago. Drucker(1994), pointed out that the newly emerging dominant group is "knowledge workers." By the end of this century knowledge workers will make up a third or more of the work force in the United States--as large a proportion as manufacturing workers ever made up, except in wartime. The majority of them will be paid at least as well as or better than, manufacturing workers ever were and the new jobs offer much greater opportunities. After world war II, economists such as Milton Friedman, Gary Beaker and Jacob Mincer developed the human capital theory to examine the benefits education for individuals and society. Bloom, Canning, and Chan (2006), argued that previously higher education was viewed as an expensive and inefficient public service that largely benefited the wealth and the privileged, but now it is understood to make the necessary contribution, in concert with other factors to the success of national efforts to boost productivity, competitiveness and economic growth. According to the World Bank's African Action Plan for 2006 – 2008, the roles for higher education in building skills for growth and competitiveness includes the provision of relevant skills to the labour market, a capacity to understand and use global knowledge in science and technology, particularly for agriculture, a capacity to assess existing information and generate new understanding through research. A balanced and strategic approach to human capital development should be adopted so as to boost economic growth in Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular.

Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006) carried out a study to review what is known about the conceptual underpinnings for higher education role in development, output performance, and improved national income. The findings suggest that African higher education can assist countries with technological catch – up and thus improve the potential for faster growth. Higher education is a determinant as well as result of income and can produce public and private benefits. Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006) submitted that higher education may create greater tax revenue, increase savings and investment, and lead to a more entrepreneurial and civil society. It can also improve a nation's wealth, contribute to reduced population growth, improve technology and strengthen governance. With regard to the benefits of higher education for a country's economy, many observers attribute India's leap on to the world economic stage as stemming from its decades – long successful efforts to provide high – quality, technically oriented tertiary education to a significant number of its citizens.

The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan once argued:

“The University must become a primary tool for African's development in the new century. Universities can help develop African problems, strengthen domestic institutes, serve as a model environment for the practice of good governance, conflict resolution and respect for human rights and enable Africa academics to play an active part in the global community of scholars’

Tertiary education is a vehicle for bolstering teacher training and therefore the education sector as a whole, with long term effects on the economy. Higher education can contribute to economic growth in Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular by providing high quality education which matches the developmental needs of a country in areas such as infrastructure development, that is road construction, railways construction, power plants and telecommunications. The quality of knowledge generated within higher education and its availability to the wide economy is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness.

Higher earnings for well – educated individuals raise tax revenues for governments and ease demands on state finances. These higher earnings also translate into greater consumption, which

benefit producers from all educational backgrounds. Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006) pointed out that in a knowledge economy, tertiary education can help economies keep up or catch up with more technologically advanced societies. Higher education graduates are likely to be more aware of and better able to use new technologies. They are also more likely to develop new tools and skills themselves. Their knowledge can also improve the skills and understanding of non graduate to co – workers. Graduates can also created jobs through entrepreneurship. By training physicians and other health workers, it can improve a society's health, raising productivity at work. Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006) asserted that a study in Taiwan showed that higher education played a strong role in the country's economic growth. It found out that a one percent rise in higher education stock, that is those who had completed higher education, including junior college, college, university or graduate school, led to a 0, 35 percent rise in industrial output and that a one percent increase in the number of graduates from engineering or natural sciences led to a 0, 15 percent increase in agricultural output.

Scheweke (2004) pointed out that there is a growing consensus that money spent wisely on education pays off not only for workers but also for communities and businesses. Educational attainment raises incomes and increases productivity, while failures in educating the workforce are associated with higher levels of crime and welfare dependency. The same author argued that investing wisely in education generates real, quantifiable results for workers, businesses, and society. If people are tied to low-paying jobs and unable to acquire skills needed by employers, productivity grows more slowly. If businesses do not have a workforce that is appropriately educated, they will be less competitive with their overseas rivals. If citizens do not have what it takes to succeed in today's economy, they will feel threatened by economic change and are much more likely to recycle back and forth between unemployment insurance, welfare, and poorly paid, insecure employment. The knowledge worker requires a good deal of formal education and the ability to acquire and to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge. They require a different approach to work and a different mind-set. Above all, they require a habit of continuous learning. This continuous learning can best be achieved through distance and open learning where the worker is able to learn while he is earning. For developing countries, the shift to knowledge-based work poses enormous social challenges.

Knowledge has become the key resource, for a nation's military strength as well as for its economic strength. And this knowledge can be acquired only through schooling. It is not tied to any country. It is portable. It can be created everywhere, fast and cheaply. Finally, it is by definition changing. Knowledge as the key resource is fundamentally different from the traditional key resources of the economist that is land, labour, and even capital. That knowledge has become the key resource means that there is a world economy, and that the world economy, rather than the national economy, is in control. Every country, every industry, and every business will be in an increasingly competitive environment. Every country, every industry, and every business will, in its decisions, have to consider its competitive standing in the world economy and the competitiveness of its knowledge competencies. Every country and every industry will have to learn that whatever decision it takes, it has to consider the implications it has with regards to the competitive position in the world economy. Altogether, the fact that knowledge has become the key resource means that the standing of a country in the world economy will increasingly determine its domestic prosperity. Since 1950 a country's ability to improve its position in the world economy has been the main and perhaps the sole determinant of performance in the domestic economy. The primacy of foreign affairs is now acquiring a dimension which looks at a country's competitive position in the world economy. Knowledge knows no boundaries. There is no domestic knowledge and no international knowledge. There is only knowledge. And with knowledge becoming the key resource, there is only a world economy, even though the individual organization in its daily activities operates within a national, regional, or even local setting.

According to Rabie (2007) education is the principal method through which societies transmit knowledge from one generation to another, preserve certain values and transform others .It is education that brings in the desired socio cultural transformations in society through installing the right knowledge and right attitudes in students. Rabie (2007) pointed out that for development to take place, it needs much more than traditional education or the abundance of cheap labour but it needs a society whose values are conducive to change, whose human resources are skilled and disciplined. Rabie (2007) submitted that resources that a nation may have are useful only if people

know how to evaluate them, how to use them and how to employ them where they are most needed or where the benefits are most rewarding.

Aderinoye and Ojokheta (2004) quoting the United Nations Development Programme (1991) described development as a process that goes beyond the improvement of life ,it encompasses better education ,higher standards of health and nutrition ,poverty reduction ,increasing access to and equality of opportunity among other variables. Schultz (1961) started that education not only improves individual choices available to mankind but an educated population provides the type of skilled labour necessary for industrial development and economic. Aderinoye and Ojokheta (2004) submitted that when development is being viewed from the capability approach, it means development occurs when people are more able to achieve what makes their lives valuable to them .The Capability Approach shifts the goal of development from more income or economic growth as ends in themselves but to that of growth as ends in themselves but to that of growth of people and enhancing the quality of human conditions.

### **3. ODL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

The broad objectives of the reform are the acceleration of economic transformation and reduced poverty and social inequalities Sean McGovern (1999) noted that there are 9 concepts associated with development, which are:

- Education as the social institution through which people are prepared for society and work;
- Equality of opportunity for individuals and nations to compete for economic rewards;
- Participation of people in programmes to help advance the development process;
- Planning as the decision making process to encourage social change and economic growth;
- Production as the efficient processing of commodities to increase economic growth;
- Science as the objective creation of knowledge for greater production and productivity;
- Standard of living as the amount of goods and services which represent a country's level of development;
- State as the institution which supersedes cultural differences and organized to protect citizens and promote progress; and which increases prosperity”.
- The application of technology to establish efficient production

Aderinoye, Siaciwena and Write (2009) pointed out that there is increasing demand for all levels and forms of education coupled with local and regional governments’ limited capacity to expand provision of education through traditional bricks and mortar institution, that leaves ODL as a viable option to address and match growing demand for education. ODL is one way to increase the capacity of educational systems without incurring the cost of building facilities by allowing learners the flexibility to remain in their communities or in their duty post. (Aderineye et. al 2009).The same authors went ahead to regard ODL as one of the solution to training education and health services personnel who are working full-time and who are unable to attend and afford to register in a full-time residential institution. Distance education is vital in countries where there is shortage of qualified teachers, especially in remote rural areas. ODL makes teacher preparation and professional development programmes accessible to indigenous peoples, and others located in remote areas that do not have access to higher education institutions. UNESCO (2000) pointed out that development of local educators by ODL may also play a significant role in contributing to the economic development of that area. ODL has also responded well in vocational and technical education by meeting the demands of working adults who had difficulties in getting training in conventional education because of lack of flexibility in the timing and location of courses and to provide an opportunity for the empowerment of those disadvantaged by existing provision, that are the disabled, the women, and ethnic minorities.

According to UNESCO (2000), the need for recurrent and continuous upgrading of knowledge and skills is recognised as a fundamental demand in society today, and due to ODL’s nature of decentralised and flexible delivery modular structure of courses and curricula, it has become the preferred way of meeting this need. Teacher education is an important area, where distance

learning has been used extensively to provide pre service teacher preparation, upgrading of academic qualifications and in-service continuing professional development in particular subjects. China, Chile, India, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe have ODL programmes for teacher training. In Zimbabwe, Midlands State University, Bindura University of Science Education and Zimbabwe Open University are some of the colleges which are providing distance education to thousands of teachers and recently many teachers who are being sponsored by UNICEF have enrolled with various universities in Zimbabwe studying various educational programmes.

### **4. OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN ZIMBABWE**

Perraton (2000), pointed out that open and distance learning is found to make valuable contributions to the socio-economic development of those countries that utilize the mode and according to the Zimbabwe Open University website, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is a unique institution of higher learning offering Open and Distance Learning to students in Zimbabwe, in the region and in the international arena. It started off as an offshoot of the University of Zimbabwe and has since grown into a fully fledged University. A Centre for Distance Education was established in 1993 by the University of Zimbabwe, in the Department of Educational Administration. This was in line with the Government's realisation, after independence, that the majority of the people in Zimbabwe was hungry for tertiary education and had missed the opportunity of going to college when they were still young, due to the colonial restrictions that had denied them the chance. The government, facilitated the development of distance learning to accommodate those people who would not have been in a position to go to conventional, residential tertiary institutions for an education because of lack of sufficient funding and other commitments, for example, work commitments. In 1996, the Centre became the University College of Distance Education headed by Professor Graham Hill. Three years later, on 1st March 1999, through an Act of Parliament, the University College became the first open and distance learning University in Zimbabwe. The first Vice Chancellor for the University was Professor Peter Dzvimbo. Professor Primrose Kurasha took over as the head of the Zimbabwe Open University in 2003 and she made history by becoming the first female Vice Chancellor in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwe Open University is a multi-disciplinary and inter-faculty institution of higher learning offering Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. ZOU offers degree and non-degree programmes through distance teaching and open learning to youth and adult learners. With a combination of cutting edge technology, print materials and face-to face tuition, the Zimbabwe Open University provides knowledge, competencies and dispositions necessary for the development of competitive human capital. In a dynamic and fast changing global village, a philosophy of lifelong learning for social inclusion is our guiding beacon!

At inception, then in 1993, the Centre for Distance Education was offering one programme only, i.e. the Bachelor of Education to 652 students. Today, ZOU offers more than 30 degree programmes to over 10000 students each semester. Since its first Graduation Ceremony in 2003, ZOU has graduated 27 074 students. ZOU Graduates are found in every sector of the economy in Zimbabwe, in the region and worldwide. The Zimbabwe Open University confers Certificates, Diplomas, Undergraduate Degrees, Masters Degrees, Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) and Doctor of Philosophy (D.Phil) Degrees. This year ZOU graduated the second M.Phil and D.Phil cohorts, making a total of 14 Doctoral graduates to date. To support all these quality programmes, ZOU employs both full time members of staff and part time staff members. It should be noted that open and distance learning activities are not only offered by ZOU, but other universities in Zimbabwe are offering distance learning through various programmes and universities like Bindura University of Science Education National University of Science and Technology, Chinoyi University of Technology and Midlands State University are among other universities that are offering distance and open learning through programmes such as block release, Weekend classes, Parriell programmes and visiting school.

### **5. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ODL TO ZIMBABWE'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

According to Zimbabwe Agenda for sustainable socio-economic transformation (Zim Asset 2013) document, despite Zimbabwe being endowed with abundant natural resources, the country continue to face multiple environmental management challenges that include pollution, poor

waste management, deforestation, land degradation, veldt fires, poaching and biodiversity. ODL becomes a key cog in the success of Zim Asset in the sense that the acquisition of requisite skills and scientific research and development are to be done by the workers who are already in the field and that is where open and distance learning fits in very nicely as it allows human capital development to take place while at the same time there is no interruption of production. ODL allows the economic transformers to learn while they work which is very crucial for the country. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) can support the Zim Asset programme by enhancing the human capital development through participating in the acquisition of requisite skills, scientific research and development. ZOU can support the mining sector through partnering with the ministry of mines in producing highly qualified graduates in Geo-Sciences, mining and extractive metallurgy. ZOU together with other agricultural colleges can buttress the Zim Asset programme by producing highly qualified personnel who be able to provide quality extension services and support the farmers in their farms. ODL has the capacity to bring education to the doorstep of the farmer through conducting workshops and field days especially in recently settled farmers. ODL can improve entrepreneurial skills for tertiary students and graduates by conducting short practical courses for example in piggery, broiler production, and horticulture in the various districts of the country.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Zimbabwe is abundantly endowed with natural resources such as mineral deposits, arable tracks of land, flora and fauna which can best be utilised if Zimbabwe has a strong highly qualified human resource base which can best be achieved through ODL. Efficient utilisation of ODL can place Zimbabwe on a pedestal for economic growth, development and prosperity, as well as social cohesion. Zimbabwe needs to accurately identify the community economic needs and then develop matching curricula so that various educational players such as polytechnic colleges, vocational colleges, conventional universities and ODL institutions can participate in addressing the identified community needs.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Decentralise open and distance learning institutions in the country so that access to education is increased.
- Make primary, secondary and tertiary education affordable to the general people.
- Avail more programmes which assist students who are in need eg providing educational loans/cadetship to ODL students
- Students should also be posted to other countries in exchange programmes so that they also learn practically how other countries are utilising their natural resources.
- Expand the scope of ODL centres by enabling them to offer secondary education.

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Gift Rupande holds a masters degree in educational psychology (Midlands State University) and is currently a DPhil candidate with the Zimbabwe Open University.