Extent to Which Core Competencies Address an ODL Institution's Attainment of Its Goals and Objectives

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ABSTRACT

The study identified the key success factors in the open and distance learning (ODL) through literature review. Having identified the core competencies of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), the researchers rated how the University was performing in the various areas. The study also evaluated the alignment of the University's goals and objectives with its core competencies. The study employed the qualitative research methodology. The case study research design was used with the Zimbabwe Open University providing the practical context of the study. Primary data were gathered from a sample of 20 employees from the ten Regional Centres of the University and the National Centre. The researchers also gathered data through document survey. The study, to a greater extent revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University had the competencies which sufficiently addressed the key success factors in the open and distance learning industry. The competencies of the Zimbabwe Open University were to a greater extent aligned with the University's its goals and objectives. The study, however, concludes that the University was still to meet international standards on its deployment and use of information communication technologies related to learning. The study recommended that the University should fully utilize its competencies and strive to maintain their relevance through continuous improvement.

Key words
Open and Distance learning, Key success factors, Core competencies, Goals and Objectives

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Every industry has its own unique issues that players must adequately address if they wish to succeed in that industry. These are generally referred to as key success factors of the industry. Companies build skills and capabilities that allow them to effectively compete in the industry. These unique skills and capabilities are generally to as core competencies. The ODL industry has not been spared from this competition. Throughout the world, higher education has been characterized on the one hand by a significant reduction in government funding while on the other hand, there have been more demands to widen access to, and democratize higher education. Accordingly, there have been strong initiatives to privatise higher education, leading to serious competition amongst individual universities as they compete for quality students whose fees are the major source of revenue for the institutions. This is where the issue of core competencies and strategic plan goals and objectives nicely fit in the ODL industry.

An ODL institution should clearly identify its core competencies and ensure that these competencies are in sync with the key success factors of the ODL industry. The development of competencies for organizations in any industry therefore should be informed by the key

success factors of the respective industry (Hamel and Prahalad 1990). It is however imperative to note that core competencies are not a guarantee for success. Success in any organization depends on the development of an appropriate strategic plan and the successful implementation of the plan. The strategic plan document among other details presents an organization's goals and objectives. The successful realisation of these goals and objectives depends on the relevant skills and capabilities in the organization which are embodied in the competencies of the organization. Goals and objectives in any strategic plan therefore have to be substantiated by the relevant competencies which would enable the successful achievement of the targets.

Where the strategic plan is not crafted on the basis of the institution's core competencies the achievement of the goals and objectives may not be possible. Hamel and Prahalad (1990), who introduced the concept of core competence, defined it as a harmonised combination of multiple resources and skills that distinguish a firm in the marketplace. The implication therefore is that, before an ODL institution starts work on crafting a new strategic plan it should take stock of the institution's core competencies, list these down and decide on the areas of institutional performance which these core competencies can be employed for maximum benefit to the institution.

The strategic plan crafted should then be in sync with the core competencies of the institution. A properly managed institution should fill the vacancies it finds itself with according to roles and duties required to perform the roles effectively. These roles and responsibilities should be a reflection of the institutional core competencies. In other words the recruitment, performance management, promotions, placements and training needs identification should all be based on the required core competencies of the institution. The job skills of new employees should strengthen the articulated core competencies of the ODL institution. The possession of the right core competencies, in the right mix, forms the greatest contributor to the success of the attainment of an institution's goals and objectives. The study establishes the extent to which core competencies are aligned to the goals and objectives of the institution.

1.2 Statement of the Study
Research on strategic management has mainly focused on developing competencies that would sustain the implementation of the strategic plan. Competencies themselves however may not be decisive in sustaining a competitive advantage if they not strongly aligned to the key success factors of the industry. At ZOU, is has not been established whether the core competencies of the University adequately address the key success factors of the ODL industry and also whether the competencies are in sync with the goals and objectives of the University.

1.3 Research Objectives
1. To identify the core competencies an ODL institution would need to be competitive
2. To explore the alignment of the core competencies to the goals and objectives of the University

1.4 Research Questions

1. Which core competencies are essential for the competitiveness of an ODL institution?
2. To what extent are the ODL institution's core competencies aligned to its goals and objectives?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The study seeks to break the boundaries between the development of competencies by an ODL institution and its ability to satisfy the key success factors of the ODL industry. The study clearly identifies the key success factors required in the ODL industry. This is important for all ODL practitioners and administrators who seek to develop the ODL industry and make it as competitive as conventional institutions. The study also marries core competencies and the goals and objectives of an ODL institution. It is important to develop goals and objectives that are supported by an organization's core competencies and at the same time it is also important to develop competencies that are relevant to the organization's goals and objectives.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The presence of only one ODL institution in the country imposes a fair amount of limitation on the study. A wider consideration of ODL institution would have been most desirable.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

The study is delimited to identification of core competencies for an ODL institution and the relationship between the attainment of strategic plan goals and objectives and the core competencies in an ODL institution. In geographical terms the study confines itself to the only ODL institution in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Open University.

2.0   REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1   What is a core competence

A core competence is defined as a combination of specific, inherent, integrated and applied skills and attitudes of an institution; the definition is of core competencies at institution level. The Tec Target Network defines a core competency as a fundamental knowledge, ability or expertise in a specific subject area or skill set; it is a company's unique characteristic or capability that provides a competitive advantage in the marketplace, and delivers value to customers, and contributes to continued growth and sustainability of the institution. This definition complements the one by Hamel and Prahalad (1990) who say core competence is communication, involvement and a deep commitment to work across institutional boundaries. It involves many levels of people and all functions of the institution that give it value in the market.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is borrowed from the work of Hamel and Prahalad (1990) who argued that any institution needs to have a brain, which renders it intelligent to perform the necessary roles and responsibilities that enable the institution to achieve its vision, by attaining its stated goals and objectives. The brain of the institution is the summation of all the collective intelligence and imagination of the institution's management and employees. This brain makes it possible for the institution to possess an enlarged perception of the

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strategic vision of the institution. The picture is completed by marrying the individual competencies of these managers and workers to give the institution the core competencies which enable it to achieve its goals and objectives. The over-riding goal should be to occupy the high ground in tomorrow's industry. The institution like a tree grows from its roots. Core products are nourished by competencies and grow business units, whose fruits are end products.

Hamel and Prahalad (1990) contend that institutional core competencies enable the institution to competitively engage in the following strategic pursuits: craft reengineering processes, regenerating strategies, organizational transformation, and industry transformation, compete for market share and compete for opportunity share. The institution with well identified and articulated core competencies is also able, without much effort, to: compete to shape the future through shaping the industry in which it operates, compete for mastery of industry core competencies, use its parts to compete as a coalition in the industry, maximise its rate of new market learning and minimise the time it takes for global preemption. The institution's major preoccupation, before any new strategic plan is crafted, is to identify its core competencies which it should then use to chart the direction of the institution and to re-structure the vision of the institution. In short its strategic process should be centred on the identified core competencies.

The institution must envision the future of its industry then proceed to create it, using its strategic plan. If a strategic plan has not been crafted on the basis of the core competencies of the institution, which are an amalgamation of individual workers' core competencies, it may be difficult for the institution to achieve the strategic goals and objectives it set for itself. The amalgamated core competencies are responsible for the production of core products and services that satisfy and exceed the expectation of the market.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research methodology. The case study research design was used, with data being generated from the Zimbabwe Open University. The research population was composed of Zimbabwe Open University Employees. Data were generated through document survey, interviews and direct and participant observation. A sample of 20 ZOU employees was selected using purposive sampling for the interviews. The sample was made of employees from middle management upwards. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling. Data were gathered through interviews. Data presentation was in the form a narrative and charts.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Essential core competencies for the competitiveness of an ODL institution
The first objective of the study was to identify the competencies required by an ODL institution in order to be fully competitive. These are the key success factors of the ODL industry. The respondents, from their experience with the Zimbabwe Open University, identified the following competencies as pre-requisite for the competitiveness of an ODL institution and also rated the extent to which ZOU had developed the competencies;

Table 1: List of key success factors in the ODL industry and the rating of ZOU

Key success factors/ core competences	Average rating of ZOU by respondents
1. The ability to deploy in different geographical locations	90%
2. Reputable programmes	70%
3. The ability to produce high quality learning materials in multi-media form	80%
4. An effective quality assurance Unit	85%
5. Robust and cutting edge ICT for administration and learning purposes	55%
6. A sound corporate governance system	80%
7. An efficient and effective learner support system	88%
8. An effective examinations management system	95%
9. An aggressive research culture	90%
10. Resource mobilization and stakeholder support	40%
11. A well resourced online library system	60%
12. Benchmarking against internationally recognized organizations	80%
13. World-class infrastructure	65%
14. An effective Alumni body whose members act as ambassadors of the University	70%
15. An effective staff attraction and retention regime that attracts top professors	90%
16. An effective customer care and loyalty programme	70%

The key success factors in the ODL industry as identified above are essential for any ODL institution to develop as competencies. The competencies, however, are not an end but a critical means to the end, which is the achievement of goals and objectives. It is therefore important that an ODL institution aligns its competencies with its goals and objectives. The study therefore analyzed the alignment of the Zimbabwe Open University's core competencies with its goals and objectives as presented on table 2 below.

4.2 Alignment of ZOU core competencies and the institutions' goals and objectives

Table 2: Relating ZOU core competencies with goals and objectives

Core competencies of ZOU & key success factors in ODL	ZOU's goals and objectives
1. The ability to deploy in different geographical locations	• Growth • Market Reach
2. The ability to produce high quality learning materials in multi-media form	• Strengthening Product Development
3. An effective quality assurance Unit	• Total Quality Management

4. **Robust and cutting edge ICT for administration and learning purposes**	• *ICT Infrastructure Development and Utilisation*
5. **A sound corporate governance system**	• *University Governance* • *Strengthen ZOU brand* • *Strengthening Financial Management Systems* • *Strengthening ZOU Policies, Systems and Processes* • *Strengthening Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting*
6. **An efficient and effective learner support system**	• *Student Satisfaction*
7. **An effective examinations management system**	• *Strengthening ZOU Policies, Systems and Processes*
8. **An aggressive research culture**	• *Research, Development and Community Engagement*
9. **Resource mobilization and stakeholder support**	• *Enhance resource mobilisation*
10. **A well resourced online library system**	• *Strengthen ZOU Products and Services*
11. **World-class infrastructure**	• *Home for ZOU*
12. **An effective Alumni body whose members act as ambassadors of the University**	• *Stakeholder Satisfaction*
13. **Reputable programmes**	• *Strengthen ZOU Products and Services* • *Strengthening Product Development*
14. **An effective staff attraction and retention regime that attracts top professors**	• *People Empowerment and Performance*
15. **A supportive/ conducive legal-economic & political environment**	• *Strengthen Public Relations* • *University governance*
16. **Benchmarking against internationally recognized organizations**	

The study as indicated in table above reveals that the University's competencies were to a larger extent aligned to the goals and objectives of the institution in its 2015-2020 strategic plan. There were however other competencies which were without relevant goals hence were underutilized. The competencies without corresponding goals and objectives also received inadequate budgetary support. The University was therefore at risk of underutilising these competencies thereby receiving a low return on investment.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the ODL industry has its own key success factors which shape the competencies that an ODL institution should possess and develop in order to be competitive.

The ODL industry has faced challenges on the credibility of its programmes and the quality of its products thereof. The competencies of the ODL industry therefore are institutional capabilities which strengthen the brand of the institution, enable effective delivery of service and enable cost effectiveness. Having analysed the competencies of the Zimbabwe Open University, the study concludes that the University has what it takes to succeed in the ODL industry. The University, to a larger extent, has managed to align its goals and objectives with its competencies. There were, however, other competencies which had no corresponding goals and objectives hence the competencies were being underutilized. Competencies that had no corresponding goals and objectives were also not receiving adequate funding hence the University could lose these capabilities.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and the conclusions above, the study made the following recommendations.

- The University should accelerate investment in information and communication technologies capabilities and should have the ability to deploy these capabilities to its online library services. To ensure commitment to ICT library competencies, the institution could have specific goals and objectives relevant to online libraries.

- The University should strive to maintain a leading status on the production of learning materials. The institution should maintain as part of its goals and objectives, the development and continuous improvement of world-class learning materials.

- The University though primarily being an ODL institution should develop competencies to counter the competitive maneuvers of conventional Universities which are encroaching in its competitive sphere.

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