

# Opportunities and Challenges for the Adult Learner in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Case Study of One Tertiary Education Institution in Zimbabwe

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v1i3.148>

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## ABSTRACT

Quality education in Zimbabwe has remained one of the major demands in the system. This has therefore seen the majority of both academic and non-academic staff in institutions of higher learning advancing themselves in various courses and programmes. This study hence was conducted to explore opportunities and challenges experienced by adult individuals as they further pursue their studies. It was a case study of one tertiary education institution conducted within the framework of a qualitative research paradigm and also influenced by the human capital theory. Semi structured questionnaires and interviews were used to generate data from 20 participants that were purposively and conveniently targeted for the study. The major findings revealed that staff in tertiary institutions envy to advance themselves education wise. However, their efforts are being derailed by several challenges which unfold themselves socially, academically and economically, among others. The results further revealed that issues of institutions policy on manpower development were a cause of concern. Ultimately the study concluded that continued adult education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is quite pivotal despite the challenges that these adults encounter. Recommendations put forth in the study, therefore include reconceptualization of institution policy on manpower development, availing financial resources and a variety of schemes for adult education

## KEYWORDS

Adult education; 21<sup>st</sup> century; opportunities; challenges

## INTRODUCTION

Adult continued education has become quite significant world over. Thus, several programs have been availed in the education system of various countries to afford adults opportunities to improve their education statuses. For instance, in Zimbabwe a number of tertiary institutions offer educational courses on block releases, open distance learning (ODL) and even on fulltime basis. This critical demand on adult education has been necessitated by the need for a quality and efficient educator who will display quality performance. Despite this, not all adult learners reach their target points. Thus, some become dropouts at the initial stages, some at the middle while others do so at the final stages. So many reasons have been attributed to that. The purpose of this study therefore has been to explore opportunities and challenges regarding adult education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One tertiary institution has been targeted for the study.

Both academic and non-academic staff members in tertiary education institutions continuously enroll for various courses and programmes for the purposes of improving

themselves academically. Such endeavors are notably to be quite significant for quality performance at work. Despite these noble intentions, staff members seem to lack the moral, social and economic support which has seen a few pursuing their further studies and some becoming adult dropouts at various levels. Hence this research article explores opportunities and challenges for adult education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The following research questions were crafted and sorting answers to them guided the whole research process.

- To what extent do staff in tertiary education institutions enroll for adult education?
- How does adult education benefit staff in tertiary education institutions?
- What is the nature of the challenges that staff in tertiary education institutions encounter in endeavours to advance their studies?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Rationale for Adult Education***

Adult education is an important aspect of the society that helps individuals to become aware of their rights and duties towards the state. Kil, Motschilnig and Geyer (2013) have identified several benefits that are aligned to adult education initiatives. These include personal and professional development, boosting one's independent thinking and confidence, reducing illiteracy, improving one's good health practices and widening networking opportunities, among other things. Concerning the personal development of an individual, Diamond (2008) argued that, a lenient person knows his/her potential responsibilities and how he/she has to relate with the significant other for the benefit of the organization. Thus, an educated person will also create health personal and professional relationships with others despite their background, culture and political affiliation. Hinzen (2007) on the other hand has also observed that adult education helps to enhance the intellectual capacity levels of an individual. According to Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2007) an educated person can logically analyse the situation and improve the quality of life. In a nutshell, therefore, adult education helps an individual to be accountable of his / her actions and the relationship that he / she makes with the significant others.

### ***Challenges in Adult Education***

There are numerous challenges that are encountered by adult learners during the process of learning. Cross (1981) in Wanyama (2014) has identified them as situational, institutional and dispositional challenges. In addition, Potter and Alderman (1992) have added academic factors as the fourth barrier in adult learning (Thumbadoo, 2008).

### ***Situational Challenges***

According to Mackeracher, Severt and Potter (2006) situational challenges are circumstantial conditions that hinder the adult learner's ability to access and pursue learning opportunities. Tuijnman (1990) notes that situational barriers include multiple responsibilities at home, family, children, lack of affordable children services and lack of support from others. Regarding these situational barriers, most research had revealed that the seriously affected category is the working women. Hence, Heenan (2002) in Wanyama (2014) has echoed that women are the primary careers of young children and older people. They are responsible for the majority of domestic work such as cooking and cleaning. At the same time, these women are found to be very keen in advancing themselves education wise and no wonder why the majority are adult learners.

### ***Institutional Challenges***

Institutional challenges describe a set of limitations that are a result of the methods used by institutions to design, deliver and administer learning activities (Tuijnman1990, Wanyama 2014). There are related to the manner in which an institution provides the necessary social and financial support to the adult learners as they pursue their studies. According to Wanyama, these may include the paying of tuitionfees, provision of the material resources for learning activities and giving the moral support to the learners. Diamond (2008) has also observed that it is lack of the above and recognition of previously obtained academic credentials that pause serious challenges to the adult learners.

### ***Dispositional Challenges***

According to Wanyama (2014) these are also referred to as attitudinal challenges and they relate to the learners' inner feelings and their perceptions of their ability to register, attend and successfully complete their studies. Dispositional challenges include low self-esteem, negative attitudes about being an adult learner e.g. being too old, too busy, too tired, too sick and not having adequate language skills.

### ***Academic Challenges***

These challenges are related to the skills that are essential to successful learning, for example, listening and computer skills. Mackeracher Stuart and Potter (2006) in Wanyama (2014) also add that lack of the ability to access and understand information, critical and reflective thinking skills and skills in writing essays, examinations and tests are some of the serious academic challenges among adult learners. Thus, what these learners did not master at childhood, remains a sensitive problem at adulthood. Aitchison and Alidou (2009) have also observed that issues of pedagogy are affecting the adult learner. For instance, most adult instructors and facilitators lack the appreciation of the use of the learner-centred and active learning approaches when dealing with adult learners. Furthermore, they do not take cognizance of the need to diversify and accommodate different learning styles of the adult learners.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research article was guided by the assumption of the qualitative research paradigm. Chiromo (2006) observes that in qualitative research, the researcher develops interest in collecting data from his / her respondents in an interactive manner and in their natural setting. With regards to this view and taking cognizance of the phenomenon under study, the qualitative approach was therefore found to be quite ideal. In addition, a qualitative case study and descriptive survey research designs were adopted in this study. This allowed the researchers to gather in-depth knowledge about the feelings, views and opinions of the participants (Chiromo,2006, Denscombe, 2007). In this regards the study utilized open ended and semi structured questionnaires and interviews to generate data from 20 staff members that were purposively targeted for the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents data that has been generated for this study through the use of questionnaires and interviews. The data has been presented under the three sub thematic areas that provided the framework for the entire research process.

### ***To What Extent Do Staff in Tertiary Education Institution Enroll for Adult Continued Education?***

This study established that the majority of staff members in tertiary institutions are registered candidates in adult education and this was regardless of one being an academic or non-academic staff member. For instance, 70% of the respondents were non-academic staff members at the studied institution. It also came out from this study that 95% of the respondents were aged between 31-50 years whilst 5% of them were in the age range 21-30 years. Overall, all the respondents were quite mature and were likely to be having some critical family responsibilities. Whilst staff in tertiary education institutions advance their studies, the majority who do so are females. Hence this study established that from the entire respondents 83% of them were females, whilst 17% were males. Regarding the nature of the programmes being pursued by these adult learners, the study established that some were doing 'O' level studies, others undergraduate and postgraduate studies in various relevant fields of their work demands. Thus, all this demonstrated the large extent to which staff in tertiary institutions enroll for continued adult education, despite the fact that the majority of them are females.

Issues reflected under this sub-thematic area seem to confirm literature put forth by various authorities in their endeavors to clarify the concept "adult education". Thus, Glanz (2008) has confirmed in his literature that this concept involves all sorts of people and it is not always labelled adult education. On the other hand, Thumbadoo (2008) has also echoed that it involved the education process of mature men and women who want to develop themselves. Hence it is not by coincident that all sorts of staff members in tertiary institutions enroll for adult education. At the same time, all these appear to be mature people who are concerned with transforming themselves socially, economically and politically (Wanyama, 2014).

### ***How Does Adult Continued Education Benefit Staff in Tertiary Institutions?***

Concerning this sub question, respondents were first asked whether there was any need for them to continue with their education as adults. All (100%) concurred that adult education was a necessity. Since they were asked to comment on their responses, this research captured some of the following incepts.

- *If you stop learning you become illiterate. Continuing with my education as an adult will help me to become an intellectual and improve my standard.*
- *Continuing with education empowers me and I also become marketable in terms of job.*
- *Being an educated adult makes me become a role model in my community.*
- *I continue with my education for self-actualization and to keep abreast with technological changes globally.*

The above, sentiments echoed by respondents in this research seem to confirm some of the findings made by scholars such as Glanz (2008), Thumbadoo (2008), Diamond (2008) and Wanyama (2014) among others. According to Wanyama (2014) adult education helps to eradicate illiteracy and reduce poverty. Hinzen (2007) has also argued that a learned person knows his / her potential responsibilities and how he / she has to relate with the significant others for the benefit of the organization.

Regarding the benefits of adult education studies to the respondents' everyday work duties, this research further established that, this programme was quite pivotal in several ways. The respondents made some of the following comments:

- *It helps me make well informed decisions in life and to be a competent professional.*

- *It enables me to implement at work the new knowledge and skills that I will have gained from my studies.*
- *It assists me to become a highly effective worker who also understands the entire work environment.*

According to Knowles (1984), adult education facilitates personal and professional development of any individual and further boosts one's independent thinking and confidence. Wanyama (2014) has also observed that adult education helps to enhance the intellectual capacity levels of an individual. The programme also helps an individual to be accountable of his / her actions and the relationship that he / she makes with others. Thus, therefore, the sentiments noted from the respondents in this research seem to confirm the quoted literature by the here-named scholars.

### ***What Is The Nature Of The Challenges That Staff in Tertiary Education Institutions Encounter as They Advance in Their Studies?***

Concerning this sub-research question, all the respondents (100%) concurred that there are numerous challenges that they encounter as they pursue their further studies. Asked to comment on the nature of the challenges, the respondents were quick to point out that these challenges covered the social, economic and the technological aspects of their everyday life. They also pointed out the challenges were also being experienced at their work places, homes and even at their learning centres. Since respondents were asked to identify some of the encountered challenges, the research captured of the following that are being categorized below.

#### *Social Challenges*

- There is little time to attend to social life because of the workloads. As a result, workmates also start making some negative comments.

#### *Economic Challenges*

- Too many expenses for the studies especially when one has enrolled with private institutions.
- Fees for the studies too high, taking into consideration that there are other family matters which have to be taken care of by these bread-winners.

#### *Technological Challenges*

- Issues of ICT remain a threat to the adult student. For example, researching, writing, posting, and accessing assignments online.
- Problems of internet and network availability also remains a cause for concern.

#### *Work and outside work related challenges*

The worker loads and supervisors' expectations do not change, that is, these are not reduced. To balance up with the demand of the course remains a cause for concern. Family chores also have to be prioritized. Thus, all the duties that one has to be accountable to, remain fixed to the adult learner, despite the studies that are being pursued.

#### *Institutional Learning Centre Challenges*

- Lack of clear institutional policy on manpower development.
- Workloads given and the due dates given for the submission do not take cognizance of the other pressures that are met by adult learners in general.
- Lack of hardcopy material for further reading cause for concern. For instance, one has to solely depend on the scanty notes given by the tutor which sometimes are even hard to follow.

- Pedagogy to deliver lessons to the adult learner are a “one size fit all”. For example, lecture method and the “research and present” approach.

## CONCLUSION

This research sought to explore opportunities and challenges that are being faced by tertiary education staff as they further advance their studies. From the findings, the study concluded that adult education was quite pivotal as it promotes one’s professional growth, improves his /her independent thinking and confidence and even the intellectual capacity, among other things. As a result, staff in tertiary institutions envy to advance themselves education wise. Despite the above opportunities, it came from the study that there are numerous challenges being encountered by the adult learner and these unfold themselves socially, economically, technological and institutional policies among other issues. Hence the study concluded that addressing the above challenges becomes very critical for tertiary education staff to enjoy the benefits of adult education.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were proffered:

- College administration body (academic body) to draft institutional policy guidelines on manpower development.
- Ministry to work towards coming out with a scheme of association that will facilitate adult continued education at all levels and sister institutions. This could see the adult learner being offered with grant loans for their further studies.
- Colleges through the responsible ministry to lobby for incentivizing of staff members who engage in continued adult education.
- Exchange programmes on adult education to be conducted locally, regionally and internationally.
- Several similar researches to be conducted in other tertiary institutions.

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