

## **The Post Graduate Diploma in Education of the Zimbabwe Open University as a tool for socio-economic transformation**

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**Abstract:** *The Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) at the Zimbabwe Open University is offered over one and half years to holders of university degrees teaching as unqualified teachers. This study sought to explore learners' perceptions of how the PGDE distance education programme is tool producing socio-economic transformation of the learners and the nation. The study used qualitative research methodology and the interpretivist perspective. Data was generated through questerviews administered to seven purposively sampled PGDE learners. Convenience sampling was used to select 5 students for focus group discussion, three of whom had also responded to the questionnaire. Data was analysed textually drawing themes according to which data was presented. The results show that learners viewed the PGDE programme as a tool for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, experiences and attitudes necessary for them to become teachers who are more productive and can contribute to the technological advancement of the nation, roles that are critical to national economic development. Besides, the programme was designed as a capacity building programme to meet a specific national developmental need for qualified teachers from a large pool of unqualified teachers teaching in the secondary schools of the nation. The programme also raises learners' aspirations for promotion and other opportunities paving way for advancement both academically, socially and professionally. Graduates of the programme escape the poverty trap and have higher social esteem. The programme can be viewed as a human capital development programme that contributes to the socioeconomic transformation of the graduates enhancing their contribution to national development.*

**Key Words:** *economic transformation, distance education, development*

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### **I. Background to the study**

The employment of unqualified teachers in the education system raises many questions that relate not only to the provision of quality education but also to the need to use education as a tool for socio-economic transformation. There are a lot of concerns by parents and all of society that are being raised in the media about poor pass rate at O-level and A-level and blame has always been shifted to the teacher. To that end, UNICEF through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has engineered teacher capacity development programmes in order to equip the unqualified teachers with the necessary pedagogical knowledge and skills that make them relevant to the system.

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) has come as a vehicle to transform unqualified teachers who are teaching in secondary schools. It has become the highway through which avenues have been opened up for unqualified teachers to professionalise themselves. Many people have now realised the world over that economic well being and productive efficiencies are engineered by man's intellectual and professional capabilities. The world is now a competitive village and environment that demands a good quality human resource base to survive. Many researchers acknowledge the role of open and distance learning in socioeconomic transformation. Rupande (2005) argues that open and distance learning imparts knowledge and skills that are critical to national development and high quality technological education necessary for national technological advancement. In many distance education institutions, the programmes offered match national developmental needs. Rupande further argues that distance education prepares people for work and society and that it opens access to education for all people. Vioreanu (2016) highlights the six characteristics of open learning as open access, freedom to choose when to study, where to study, pace of study and what courses to study. In addition just as in fulltime programmes, the learners acquire useful and transferable skills such as planning and research which assist them in their lives and also in national development.

Nielsen (2006) argues that distance education produces high calibre human resources due to its flexibility, accessibility and ability to enrol large numbers of people. Through distance education, learning societies are able to produce scientific, technological and economic development for a nation. Like Rupande, Nielsen (2006) contends that the distance education programmes designed directly address issues of national development. Kurasha (2006) echoes the same benefits as those cited by Rupande and Nielsen, provision of professionals required for national development. Open and Distance Learning has managed to remove illiteracy of the

teaching ethics from unprofessional teachers. Illiteracy is regarded as the root cause of all the evils as well as inequality in society (Pandey, 2016).

Other benefits of distance education are providing new ways of interaction among learners cost effectively, acquisition of high quality professional development, new learning cultures, new and alternative learning opportunities and upgrading of skills (UNESCO, 2002).

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) is offered by the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) to university graduates teaching in schools. Currently, the programme has about 2000 learners. It is one of the most popular programmes of the ZOU. As noted in the literature above, open and distance education plays a critical role in socioeconomic transformation. The study seeks to establish how the PGDE programme benefits learners economically and socially.

## **II. Statement of the problem**

A lot of concerns were being raised over the media about high failure rate at O-level in Zimbabwe. Parents were worried about the root cause of this kind of failure rate. The blame game was the order of the day with parents blaming teachers, teachers blaming the government for poor salaries and teachers blaming parents for lack of support. Various measures like incentives were put in place in a bid to motivate teachers. Little did the society realise that motivating an unprofessional teacher is like giving children's food to the dogs. The problem can be stated as follows: **To what extent does the Post Graduate Diploma in Education impart social and economic benefits to learners?**

### **Purpose of study**

The present study seeks to explore the extent to which the Post Graduate Diploma in Education by distance education is a suitable tool for imparting social and economic benefits to learners.

### **Research objectives**

The objectives of the study are to: -

- identify the economic benefits of the programme to learners
- Establish the social benefits of the programme to learners
- Explore the extent to which the PGDE programme equips learners with knowledge and skills that transform them and society

### **Research questions**

- a) What are the economic benefits of the PGDE programme to the learners?
- b) In which way do learners get social benefits from the PGDE programme?
- c) To what extent does the PGDE programme equip learners with knowledge and skills that transform them and society?

### **Conceptual framework:**

#### **Socio-economic transformation**

Socio-economic development is a process that involves economic output and employment increase in industries other than Agriculture (Mpango, 2013). It hinges on indicators which include, among others, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), life expectancy, literacy levels and levels of development in a society. The evidence of socio-economic transformation is change in individuals and/ or all of society in such areas as freedom of association, personal dignity, high levels of participation in society, changes in physical environment, among others.

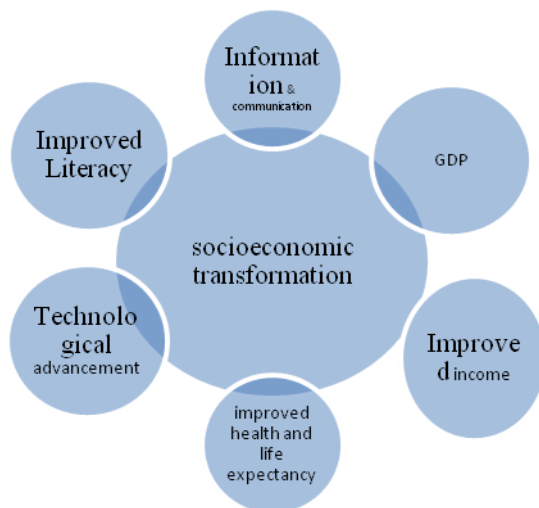
#### **Human Capital**

Human capital refers to the abilities and skills of the human resources of a country (Okojie 1995). Such skills and abilities may be the stock of knowledge or characteristics the worker has (either innate or acquired) that contributes to his or her productivity. Human resources are all the people who are currently employed or who will be employed at some point in future. Yesufu (2000: 321) contends that this implies that the employed people need to be continuously upgraded and retrained to meet the new challenges in the country's environment. OECD (2001:18) defines human capital as "the knowledge, skills, competencies, and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being"

#### **Theoretical framework: Human Capital development theory**

This research is informed by the human capital theory. Schultz (1961) and Becker (1962) as cited in Burnell (2015) are the main advocates of human capital as a determinant of economic growth. The theory advances the argument that the stock of knowledge, characteristics or skills the worker acquires through education contributes to his or her productivity. Egbiremolen and Anaduaka (2014) view human capital development as a process during which people acquire and increase knowledge, skills, experience and education that are critical for the economic growth and development of a country. They go on to argue that human capital refers to the human factor in development which is made up of the knowledge, skills or competencies and abilities of a nation's workers.

The human capital theory emphasises that investment in education brings with it returns that result in change in the livelihoods of the individual and society. Rosen (1999) views human capital as an investment that people make in themselves in order for them to become more productive. The individual who invests in education becomes value added and gets more returns in the world of work than one who has invested very little. Investment in education is considered as a tool in the task of social transformation. It opens up access and puts an end to social slavery. Education thus enables people to be real servants of the nation and all of society (Pandey, 2016). The diagram below shows the different aspects related to socio-economic transformation. In a community or nation, socioeconomic transformation is evidenced by changes in the Gross National development (GDP), improved incomes, improved health and life expectancy, technological advancement, improved literacy and access to information.



The human capital theory therefore stresses the importance of education in the process of acquiring the knowledge, skills and experiences required in propelling the development of a community or nation (Harbison, 1973). Human capital development plays a significant role in achieving the socioeconomic transformation of a nation, what Harbison (1973) terms the ultimate basis of the wealth of nations. He argues that human beings are the agents who are actively involved in development through exploitation of natural resources, and building social, economic and political organisations.

In a developing community or nation, the results of human capital development is change which occurs in individuals and all of society so that there is freedom of association, personal dignity, high levels of participation in society, changes in physical environment, among others, all of which are evidence of socio-economic development.

### **III. Materials and Methods**

The study used the qualitative research methodology and the interpretivist philosophical perspective which enabled us to generate data on the PGDE students' perceptions of how the programme has affected their socioeconomic status. The study intended to generate intensive and in-depth data from the learners on the PDGE programme. The qualitative research method enabled the researchers to probe deeply and delve into often hidden meanings and feelings of participants. It allows use of open-ended questions which free participants to respond in their own words without any limitations (Family Health Guide, 2005). It can facilitate production of complex textual descriptions of an issue under study. Another benefit of qualitative research is its ability to explore such human issues as behaviours, feelings, emotions, socioeconomic status.

The researchers adopted the interpretivist philosophical perspective that views data from the perspectives of the participants and their understanding of their lived experience. In this case, the PGDE programme was understood according to the perceptions of the students who were undergoing it.

Convenience sampling was used to select seven PGDE learners of Masvingo Region from those who visited the regional campus. Two data generation techniques were used so that we could confirm and cross validate data from the techniques – open ended questionnaires and focus group discussion.

Trochim (2006) describes the ethical issues to be considered in research as voluntary participation, informed consent, right to withdraw at any point during the process, confidentiality and privacy. We also assured participants that the data would be used only for the purposes of the study and we would use pseudonyms to protect the participants (Trochim, 2006). Care was taken to ensure that those who participated did so willingly after the researchers explained what the research was about, how it was going to be carried out, the effect of the study on the participants and what the results were going to be used for (informed consent) (Trochim, 2006).

### **Data generation**

An open - ended questionnaire was administered to five learners. In addition, three of these learners and two other learners were conveniently sampled to take part in the focus group discussions. Data for the study had to be viewed from the perspectives of the learner participants in line with the interpretivist philosophical perspective. Data was triangulated to ensure that it was consistent, well-developed and comprehensive (Biddix, undated).

From the inception of data generation, we used content analysis to analyse data, making reflexive field notes, as we reviewed questionnaire responses and transcripts of the focus group discussions. We adopted an emic focus which prioritised the meanings participants placed on the Diploma programme and its value to them. We watched out for patterns and relationships across data from different sources and came up with the themes used to present the data. Qualitative data analysis is iterative (Schutt, 2011) so we had to go keep going back over all the data to ensure that we did not lose any meaningful data. The result was a thick description of how learners perceive the socioeconomic benefits of the PGDE distance education programme which they were undertaking.

## **IV. Results**

There were seven (7) participants in this study, 4 male and 3 female all in Intake 15 of the PDGE programme. The results are presented according to the themes that emerged during data analysis. The themes fall into three groups- economic, social and distance education in general.

### **Economic benefits**

The major benefit identified in both questionnaire data and focus group discussions was that the programme accorded learners professional development as teachers, to the extent of affecting even the way they interacted with other qualified teachers in the schools. Through the programme learners acquired new pedagogical approaches, new knowledge and skills such as handling of pupils and their differences which were relevant for their jobs as teachers. They also earned increased salaries. One learner specifically referred to the knowledge of how to handle different groups of pupils, as shown in the excerpts below: -

- *I am becoming a professional teacher (male learner)*
- *I am acquiring new delivery methods which are benefiting my pupils (Male learner)*
- *I am able to decide methods that are relevant to different groups of pupils (Female learner).*

The knowledge and skills that learners referred to are those Shulman (1986) termed as pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. The PGDE programme seems to be emancipating students from the bondages of mental slavery and is putting them on a stone pedestal where they can display professionalism.

The second benefit highlighted by all the participants was that after completing the programme, they would have security of tenure, opportunities for advancement and promotion within the service, as shown below: -

- *In my school, unqualified graduates are replaced as soon as a qualified teacher is found. Through this programme, I will have security of tenure (Male learner).*
- *Through this programme, I am assured of job security and promotion prospects (Female learner).*
- *I will be more marketable (male learner)*

The third benefit was that the programme imparts technological knowledge and skills which they can use in their communities to advance community technological advancement. Only one female learner raised this issue.

*We are acquiring technological knowledge as well (female learner)*

### **Social benefits of the PGDE programme**

Learners were generally agreed that the PGDE programme had social benefits the first one being that as holders of the Diploma, the learners would be recognised as professionals in their communities able to positively influence others.

- *We are recognised as professionals in the community and by our fellow teachers (Female learner)*
- *Recognition by the community (Male learner)*

In identifying the role of education as an agent for widening an individual's participation in community development, Burchi (2006) argues that education can play an instrumental role through economic production and through social change. The knowledge they acquired in such courses as Psychology, Sociology and Critical Thinking Skills enabled them to understand people better, influencing even the way in which they raise their children. Even the manner in which they relate to their social contacts has been positively affected by the programme.

- *Knowledge from such courses as Psychology and Sociology of Education is relevant to raising of my own children (Male learner)*

The programme also has the benefit of social equity in that previously disadvantaged people can study and improve their lives, thereby escaping poverty. As a result society is better off because of the graduates of the programme.

- *Provision of opportunities to previously disadvantaged people- social equity (Male learner)*

The programme opened their understanding to such issues as the code of ethics for teachers which helped them to appreciate the roles of the employer and school authorities. In addition, they acquired knowledge on school ethos and their roles in the schools in which they are teaching.

- *We were exposed to the code of ethics for teachers which explained our relationship with the Public Service Commission and Government (Female learner)*

#### **Benefits of studying by distance education**

The learners also raised the benefits accruing to them as open and distance education learners. They argued that studying by distance was convenient as they could work and study; the fees were affordable and manageable. They also felt that the arrangement to have examinations written during school holidays was very convenient to them, as the excerpts below demonstrate: -

- *Studying the programme through distance education is financially viable, especially as we can pay by instalments (Male learner)*
- *I can combine work and study (Female learner)*
- *Fees payment by instalment makes studying manageable (Male learner)*
- *Exam time convenient for teachers (Male learner)*

### **V. Discussion**

The study aimed to explore learners' perceptions of the role of the open and distance learning Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme in their socioeconomic transformation. The results of the study confirm that the Post Graduate Diploma in Education is a human capital development programme in that it imparts knowledge, skills and experiences to learners, improving their capacity to contribute to the socioeconomic development of the individuals, their communities and the nation of Zimbabwe. Through acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (the programme), the learners' positions as unqualified graduates change to qualified teachers enjoying the benefits of security of tenure, increased salary and opportunities for advancement and promotion in the Education sector (Kurasha, 2006, Nielsen, 2006 and Rupande, 2015) (economic benefits). In addition, learners also get recognition as experts in their communities and among colleagues in the schools. As members of the learning society, learners are able to contribute to the technological and economic development of the nation (Nielsen, 2006 and Rupande, 2015) (Social benefits). The programme, therefore imparts the necessary knowledge, skills and experiences for learners to become productive members of the nation with different social norms, work ethos and professional etiquette (Mpango, 2013).

Learner participants emphasised the importance of distance education in that while they acquired requisite pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986), their practice was changing positively, as they put these into practice even before completion of the programme. They argued that as they implemented the new pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge, their practice was changing resulting in improvement of their pupils' learning. This is one area where the benefits of distance education are closely linked with the socio-economic benefits. In distance education, learners implement what they learn as soon as they start their study programmes. The pupils in their care reap immediate benefits from learners' adoption of new knowledge, methods and skills, which all lead to changes in their economic and social standing in the community. From the above, it is evident that the distance education programme is a suitable tool through which socio-economic transformation occurs in the lives of the learners.

The economic benefits highlighted by the students agree with those presented by Rupande (2015), Khalid (2009), Nielsen (2006) and Kurasha (2006). Important to note is that the professionalisation of the learners plays a significant role in national development as teaching is at the root of development of human resources necessary for national development. The learners become the vehicle of transforming the lives of other people socioeconomically. The social benefits of recognition, improved self esteem and eradication of poverty (Khalid (2009) are closely linked to the economic changes occurring in the lives of the learners. These changes also influence their job performance.

### **VI. Conclusions**

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education offered through open and distance learning was viewed as a tool that brought about changes in learners knowledge, skills and experiences – human capital development- which enabled the learners to play a more meaningful and productive role in the social, economic and technological development of the nation. Different aspects of their lives, such as incomes, standard of health, technological capabilities and access to information were changed through the programme - clear evidence of socio economic transformation. One major reason why the programme could produce such results was the flexibility and openness of the delivery mode which ensures that learners practise what they learn, as they learn. Besides open and distance learning is affordable and institutions devise policies that make fee payment even more manageable.



## Recommendations

The Post Graduate Certificate is offered to holders of university graduates. Ideally, these should be teaching in schools so that they have experiential learning. There is need for the ZOU to ensure that all learners of the programme are practising teachers. Some aspects of the programme cannot be successfully completed by learners who are not teaching. Regional campuses could negotiate attachments for learners who are not teaching to ensure they accrue maximum benefit from the programme.

There is also need to carry out more research into the Programme in other regional campuses to garner evidence on the utility value of the programme across the nation. Participants for such research could be pupils in schools, education officers at provincial level and heads of schools.

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