

## CHALLENGES AFFECTING FACULTY IN RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION WORKS: A CASE OF THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Richard Bukaliya, Barnabas Muyengwa

National Centre Harare, Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland East Region  
Marondera, ZIMBABWE.

bukaliar@gmail.com, : muyengwabb@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*This study was aimed at establishing the hindrances that faculty in universities meet in an attempt to bring about research and scholarly works. The study was survey concerned with the lecturers' perceptions of the factors affecting their attempts to research and publish. A questionnaire was used to solicit data from a sample of 20 lecturers drawn from two participating regions of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Results of the study show that there is little or no support from the university on research and scholarship work in terms of resources as evidenced by the number of recipients of research conference funding. Lecturers were not staff developed fully enough and the majority lacked the ability to carry out research work. Internet access and use among the lecturers is still a problem area and lecturers are not aware of the e-libraries available for research and scholarship work. It was therefore, recommended that the university should seek means of funding research work if lecturers are to undertake research and scholarship work seriously. The university should also come up with clear funding policies that will motivate the lecturers to carry out research and scholarship work. Where possible lecturers could seek for funding from academic institutions and the private sector for whom the research could be of benefit. Academic staff needs to be trained in Internet usage as an aid to research and scholarship work.*

**Keywords:** Challenges, faculty, research, publication

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of knowledge as a critical element of sustainable development in today's competitive global economy is well known. It is also well known that the prime creators of this knowledge are the faculty in universities and colleges of higher and tertiary education. One of the duties of an academic is to conduct research in their area of interest and specialisation. However, while universities are creators of knowledge and communities look up to them for solutions to problems affecting society, experience has shown that finding resources for doing research has been a very serious impediment for most universities in Africa and other not so well to do Third Countries. Besides the much needed resources, there is also the need to disseminate the research findings in international conferences and other appropriate fora. Faculty members, therefore, have the obligation to fulfill this mandate to justify the institution's existence regardless of the existing obstacles. To bring to light the devastating effects of the levels of the existing challenges, ZOU has called for applications for tenure and promotion to senior lecturer and professorship but out of a possible candidature of 26 lecturers in Mashonaland East and West Regions, only 3 members have succeeded in submitting their applications whose acceptance is based on research and publications. Minutes of research and scholarship meetings held in the two regions show that only a few individuals have had their research and scholarship work published in international refereed journals thereby further strengthening the view that there are serious impediments to the research and scholarship work. This study therefore sought to establish those challenges confronting faculty at ZOU, in their research studies and provide solutions and strategies to be adopted in an attempt to make provisions for the researchers.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

ZOU is the only state Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, established on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1999 through an Act of Parliament (Chapter 25:20). Initially the university operated as the Centre for Distance Education at the University of Zimbabwe before its transformation to the University College of Distance Education. After this transformation, ZOU was granted its own charter to operate as a fully fledged university. ZOU is the largest university in the country and second largest in Southern Africa compared to the University of South Africa. Currently, in 2012, ZOU has four faculties; the Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, offering over 60 diploma and degree programmes. Students are drawn from the country's ten geo-political provinces as well as the Virtual Region encompassing students outside the country, wherever they may be in the world. With this diverse background and sound upbringing, one would have expected that there would be vibrancy in the research and scholarship at all levels and in all departments and faculties of the university. This has however, been not the case as a sizeable majority of faculty has failed to come up with a single research article published in refereed journals. This has therefore, prompted the researchers to carry out this study which attempts to establish the challenges these lecturers are facing in their research and scholarship works.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For the faculty member, getting one's research or academic work accepted is no mean achievement and quite often the news of a research paper having been accepted for publication or presentation at some international conference is received with joy by the researcher. However, the task to be accomplished by the academic is fraught with a lot of hindrances. It was therefore the intention of this paper to unearth those challenges that have given rise to the low rate of publications in Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning and in particular at ZOU.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study aimed at addressing the following research question:

1. Are there adequate human and material resources for research work?
2. How accessible are publishing houses and journals to the lecturers?
3. What faculty characteristics inhibit the successful completion of research and scholarship work?
4. What strategies can be put in place to overcome the impediments in research and scholarship work?

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study was confined to only two out of the ten regional centres of ZOU and while findings can be generalised to the other regions of the university, the same cannot be said of the other universities in the country and elsewhere. Furthermore, the data collected for the study was only solicited through a single data gathering tool, the questionnaire which despite having been subjected to rigorous scrutiny, could have had its own weaknesses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the impediments to academic work appear scanty more so in the third world countries where the environment is not conducive to carry out even the most wanted studies on the deadly

epidemics. However, it would appear from the existing meager research that economic factors and faculty characteristics are some of the factors inhibiting research and scholarship in universities.

### **Economic Factors**

A number of economic factors have been attributed to success or lack of it in a number of activities (Kiriuki, 2000; Zeleza & Olukoshi, 2004; Oyowe, 2009). Research and scholarship may be hampered or facilitated by economic factors. Literature reviewed in this section shows that resources are critical if any research and scholarship work are to be successfully accomplished.

Kariuki (2000) established that African universities are financed from the government budget. As such one of the problems of funding is that the university competes with other demanding needs in the economy. The governments are concentrating their spending in the development of other areas of the society. The funds disbursed to higher education are relatively constant but the contribution per capita is declining due to the increasing enrolment of students in this section of education. The universities are too budget-dependent without other areas of fundraising. As the budget cuts are demanded, the universities reduce research budget.

Zakri (2006) outlines what he believes to be three main challenges affecting the research process, namely research capacity, research productivity and research utility. Research capacity refers to the availability of research facilities and the availability of trained human capital. Research utility focuses on the relevance of research outcomes as they relate to the national development agenda or priorities. Research capacity refers to the availability of research facilities and the availability of trained human personnel.

Oyewole (2009) notes that with the funding problems affecting public universities in Africa, it is obvious that research funding is not on the priority list. According to Oyewole (2009), it is known that sub-Saharan Africa spends less than 0.3% of its GNP on research and the region has been identified as the region that contributes the least to research funding in the world. Manyika & Szanton (2001) concur by remarking that research studies are curtailed in African universities because of inadequate resources and they go on to ascribe the failure of research to bureaucracy in the approval process, which involves departments, faculties and universities.

The research problem is also coupled with poor teaching conditions making the most of the scholars operate businesses or part-time jobs to “make ends meet”. When there are budget cuts, mostly the research component affected. If universities cannot excel in research, they cannot therefore, provide or create new knowledge. Lack of sufficient research undermines the very core business of the Africa Universities and undermines sustainable development (Kariuki, 2000; Oyewole, 2009; Zeleza & Olukoshi 2004).

Kariuki (2000) established that another problem facing the funding of research in Africa is corruption and embezzlement on the part of higher institutions authorities, which reduces the amount of resources, set aside for research activities. Besides, the method of allocation of the meager resources is not transparent and does not always get deserving proposals.

Accounting for research funds is not adhered to and in a number of cases, the funds allocated to researchers are used to “make ends meet”, and hence, no results to show for the funds outlaid. Most universities are not self-financing and even if there is cost-sharing in the financing of higher institutions, the part of the higher institutions do not meet a significant amount to support research activities.

Most research in Africa is carried out in the tertiary institutions set-ups. These research institutions are limited by poor infrastructures, ill-motivated staff, incessant and inadequate power and water supply, outdated equipment, poor funding and poor connectivity to the rest of the world. The last problem of poor connectivity is due to the poor state of telecommunication infrastructure in the continent.

Kiriuki (2000) further argues that most of the research applications or proposals do not meet the necessary criteria of the funders or the end results of the research will not meet the expectation of the funders. Hence, many proposals get rejected. This at times, is due to inexperience. Most of the time, adequate or detailed reports on the research carried out are not produced and adequate follow up of research activities are not done by the authorities of higher education. This hinders further research grants from the same funders.

### **Faculty Characteristics Inhibit the Successful Completion of Research and Scholarship Work**

#### ***Human Resources***

Oyewole (2009) established that lack of skilled human capacity in many countries is a limitation to the use of IT connectivity for research. Human resources are needed to evolve the necessary vision and policy frameworks for ICT.

#### ***The Lecturers' Internet Knowledge Base and Access***

Adika (2003) analysed Internet use among faculty members of universities in Ghana and found that in spite of the benefits of the Internet in research, its use among faculty is still very low. The main reasons for this are lack of access to the Internet and the need for training. Biermann & Jordaan (2007) carried out a study on research skills in South African universities and found that researchers at graduate level experienced lacked information retrieval skills. They also found that the state of research at the universities of technology was poor because of the scarcity of research expertise, resulting in low research outputs. Gakio (2006) has described the state of Internet connectivity in tertiary institutions in Africa as 'too little, too expensive and poorly managed'.

#### ***Cooperation among Lecturers in Research and Scholarship Work***

Kariuki (2000) blames lack of success in research work on lack of cooperation among faculty. This is so because when writing research proposals, different experts are not called to write different parts of their expertise. This lack of collaboration is a major challenge to researchers. Inadequate record keeping by higher institutions, of research activities and details of research to actually follow up the reasons why some research proposals are funded and others rejected. Hence, the problems or causes of research not being funded continue. Oyewole (2009) concurs by remarking that inadequate cooperation and collaborations among academic and research in Africa limits experience sharing and promotes uncoordinated programmes on ICT programmes.

#### ***Poor Networking and Lack of Regional Collaborations and Cooperation***

Inadequate cooperation and collaborations among academic and research in Africa limit experience sharing and promotes uncoordinated programmes on ICT programmes. It is to meet this challenge that the National Educational and Research Networks are being formed. Their existence has been helping to facilitate high speed broadband links among partner universities and research institutions. They have also been useful in helping institutions to access cheaper and high capacity bandwidth as well as help member institutions to design, build or lease, operate, maintain, support and manage their physical telecommunication networks.

#### ***Strategies to Overcome the Impediments in Research and Scholarship Work***

One of the much touted strategies to overcome challenges of research has been to seek external financing. However, the dependency syndrome has come with its own challenges as consultancy work at the bequest of foreign institutions and organisations has taken a rise. This has left the local researcher being exploited by foreign donors. The outsider has a tendency to use the local for research which whose benefit they do not enjoy they do see where the results go, and do not profit from the research at all (Zezeza *et al.*, 2009, Kariuki, 2000).

Kariuki (2000) established that administrative structures of universities need to be revised with the aim of providing viable self-sustaining management teams to steer the universities through their new status. Other cost cutting measures would include the abolition of student bursaries and raising of student registration fees. Also expenditure per student should be drastically reduced all in the need for making provisions for adequate funding for research.

Due to the harsh economic situations experienced by the region over the recent past, government support of these institutions has seen a steady decline, and the universities have been forced to operate under very tight budgets. The universities have therefore been forced to rethink their strategy, and possibly look for extra sources of financing including establishing income-generating activities (Zezeza *et al.*, 2009).

Kariuki (2000) argues that it is important to consider the possibility of reallocating expenditures. Universities may have to redirect expenditures from other less important expense items. Mutula (2009) advocates for capacity building through the training of researchers would enhance the research environment.

Literature also shows that it is also important for universities to work closely with industry in research endeavours in order to address market needs (Mutula, 2009). This collaboration could enable research and scholarly publications. Some of the companies in the various sectors of the economy have very high potential for collaboration with universities and research institutions and should make occasional grants for specific purposes. To enhance this private sector contribution, the state may institute into law the compulsory payment of say 2% of profits of all limited liability companies registered (Kariuki, 2000).

With the challenges here to stay, universities must come up with entrepreneurial strategies of funding the research and scholarship works. They have to devise innovative income generating strategies and raised funds to sustain academic programmes parallel programmes/block release programmes to fund raise for research

According to Oyewole (2009), in order to improve the effectiveness of African research and educational systems, the Information Communicational Technology (ICT) of these institutions need to be improved. Oyewole (2009), further argues that this is especially necessary today, when there are many research related electronic educational and scientific contents, such as African Digital library, HINARI, AGORA, PERI and JSTOR, which can only be accessed when the research institutions have adequate and good internet connectivity.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive survey design, since the thrust of research was concerned with the faculty perceptions on the factors that affect lecturers` attempts to research and publish their work in international refereed journals and undertake scholarly activities. A questionnaire was used to solicit data from the respondents. The study also used secondary data in form of documents such as quarterly and annual reports on research and scholarship activities in the two regions under study, and research

articles, monographs and books which had been published by faculty in the two regions. From a sample of 20 lecturers, all the questionnaires were returned giving a 100% response rate.

### Population and Sample

The population for the current study was made up of 26 lecturers based in the two regions of Mashonaland East and West at ZOU. The lecturers were drawn from all the four faculties of ZOU. In order to accord each member an equal chance of being selected into the sample, simple random was adopted. Because of their manageable number, the hat method was used to select 20 out of the 26 lecturers. The sample was representative enough for the population accounting for 77% of the targeted population.

### DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Data were presented in themes in tables as these are given below.

**Table 1. Adequacy of resources for research work (N=20)**

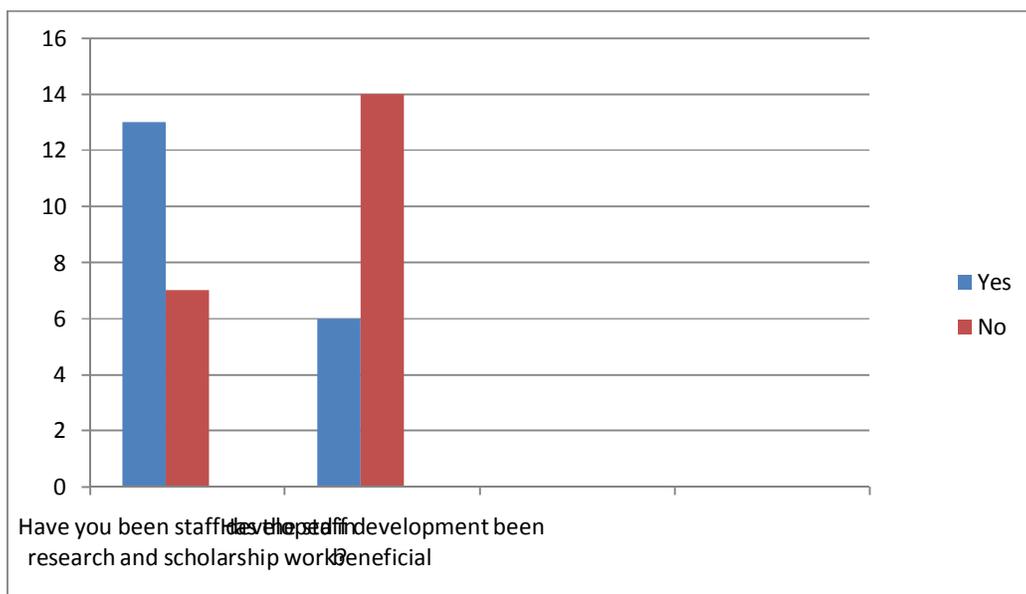
Variable	Response			
	Yes		No	
	Number	%	Number	%
1. Have you at one stage applied for research funding from the university?	11	55	9	45
2. Have you received the funds?	2	10	18	90
3. Have you been funded to present a paper at a conference?	1	5	19	95
4. Has the funding been adequate?	1	5	19	95
5. Is your library equipped with helpful books for research work?	2	10	18	90
6. Do you have resource persons to assist in research and scholarship work?	4	20	16	80

Table 1 shows that the majority of 11(55%) had at one stage applied for research funding from the university and 9(45%) had not. Asked if those who had applied had received the funds, only 2(10%) said yes. Only 1(5%) had been funded to present a paper at a conference and according to the respondent the funding been adequate. The majority of 18(90%) indicated that their libraries were not equipped with helpful books for research work. Only 2(10%) thought otherwise. Only 4(20%) asserted to the view that they had resource persons to assist in research and scholarship work against a majority of 16(80%). These results would therefore, point to a situation where research is being curtailed owing to the difficulties under which the lecturers are operating. Results are not an isolated finding as they tend to tally with what literature in the subcontinent has revealed (Kariuki, 2000; Oyewole, 2009, Mutula, 2009; Zeleza et al)

**Table 2. The Lecturers' internet knowledge base and access (N=20)**

Variable	Response			
	Yes		No	
	Number	%	Number	%
1. Do you have access to the Internet?	20	100	0	0
2. Are you internet literate?	13	65	7	35
3. Have you ever used the Internet for research purposes?	9	45	11	55
4. Are you familiar with digital libraries such as AGORA, EBSCO and JSTOR?	1	5	19	95

Table 2 shows that all the 20(100%) lecturers indicated that they had access to the Internet. Asked to comment on the internet availability and use, the majority stated that the network was normally a problem and this hampered access to the net most of the times. There was also the perennial problem of electricity blackouts and since there were no generators they rarely used the internet. Connectivity speed was also a serious challenge owing to system overload more so during working hours. Thirteen (65%) stated that they were internet literate against 7(35%) who had no idea of the facility. One therefore wonders how in today's academic world one would attempt to carry out research work without the knowledge of the Internet. Nine (45%) had used the Internet for research purposes while 11(55%) had used the facility for other purposes or had not used it at all. Asked if they were familiar with digital libraries such as AGORA, EBSCO and JSTOR, only 1(5%) said yes. With importance of identifying genuine sources from unauthentic ones, it was hoped these le-libraries could have been known to the lecturers.



**Figure 1. Orientation and staff development for the new lecturers in research and scholarship work**

Figure 1 shows that 13(65%) said that they had received staff development for the purposes of undertaking research work and when asked if the staff development been helpful in assisting them to carry out research and scholarship work, only 6(30%) said yes against the majority of 14(70%).

**Table 3. Accessibility of publishing houses and journals to the lecturers (N=20)**

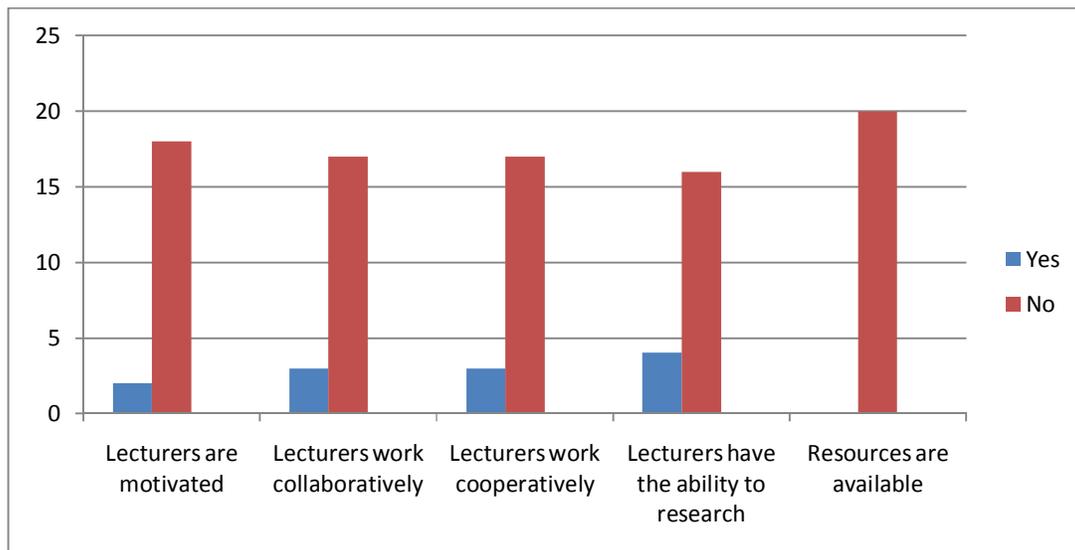
Variable	Responses			
	Yes		No	
	Number	%	Number	%
1. Do have access to online journals?	11	55	9	45
2. Are these numerous such that you have a variety to publish in?	2	10	18	90
3. Is the Research and Scholarship department providing you with information on prospective publishers?	2	10	18	90
4. Is the information being helpful?	1	5	19	95
5. Have you ever attempted to publish with the any publisher?	5	25	15	75

Table 3 shows that the majority of 11(55%) have access to online journals. Some of the journals indicated by the lecturers were IJONTE, TOJDE, WOJDE, African Symposium and IJSSE. According to the majority of 18(90%) lecturers, these journals were not numerous enough such that they could have a variety to publish with. Only 2(10%) affirmed to the adequacy of the journals. Two 10%) said yes when asked if Research and Scholarship department was providing them with information on prospective publishers and only 1(5%) stated that the information provided by the department was helpful. The data also shows that the majority of the lecturers, 15(75%) had never attempted to publish with the any publisher while only 5(25%) had made some attempt to publish.

**Table 4. Cooperation among lecturers in research and scholarship work (N=20)**

Variable	Responses			
	Yes		No	
	Number	%	Number	%
1. Lecturers cooperate in research work	5	25	15	75
2. The cooperation is such that the less experienced benefit from the experienced.	1	5	19	95
3. As a result of the cooperation more researches are beginning to be carried out.	0	0	20	20

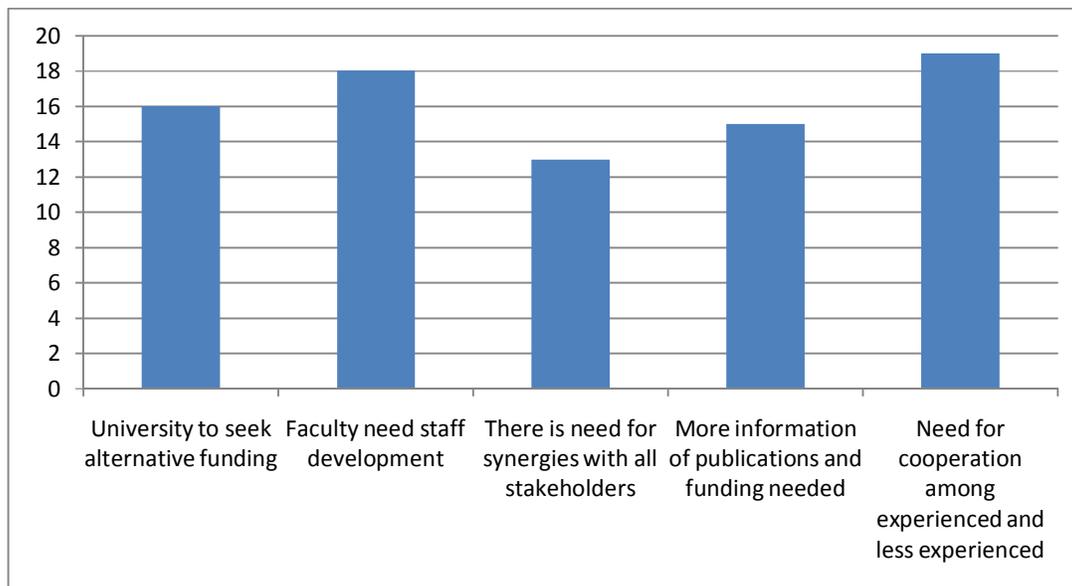
Table 4 shows the lack of cooperation among lecturers in research work. Only 5(25%) stated that there was cooperation among the lecturers when the majority of 15(75%) did not agree. There was also no cooperation between the experienced and the less experienced such that the less experienced could have benefitted from the experienced. All the 20(100%) said no when asked if the cooperation resulted in more researches beginning to be carried out. Asked how they rated the level of cooperation among lecturers during research work, most had the feeling that the experienced paired amongst themselves and those inexperienced were grouped together and thus no progress was made resulting in the majority giving up.



**Figure 2. Some characteristics of faculty inhibiting research and scholarship**

Figure 2 above shows that only a minority of 2(10%) of the lecturers were motivated to carry out research whereas the majority of 18(90%) had no motivation at all. Asked to explain their response, major issues raised were that some had attempted to write and their papers were accepted for

presentation but could not get funding to attend. Some had no idea of where to publish whereas some had sent their few papers to publishers but got no responses at all. From the results in Figure 1.1, the majority 17(85%) of the lecturers indicated that there was no collaborative in research work within the university. This probably answers the question why some had as many as fifteen publications when some had nothing to their credit. The same goes for cooperation. Lecturers were not cooperative in research work according to 17(85%). Asked if the lecturers had the ability to carry out research, only 4(20%) agreed against a majority of 16(80%). All the 20(100%) respondents indicated that they did not have adequate resources to carry out the research. Strategies have to be found therefore, in order to provide the lecturers with the strategies and ideas on how to go about undertaking research and scholarship work.



**Figure 3. Strategies can be put in place to overcome the impediments in research and scholarship work**

The strategies provided in Figure 3 above were suggested by the respondents. According to the figure, 16(80%) indicated that universities should seek alternative means of funding. The questionnaire probed the respondents to explain further on the alternative means. Prevalent among the responses was the view that the Alumni Association could be roped in to spearhead fundraising activities in the form of sponsored walks and fun days. Figure 1.2 also shows that 18(90%) faculty needed staff development in researching and producing scholarly. From the demographic data of the respondents it would appear that the majority of the lecturers had between 2-3 years of experience in the university indeed justifying the need for staff development. Formation of synergies with all stakeholders to finance research work was suggested by 13(65%) respondents. These synergies would include private sector firms. For example, the banking sector would be approached to fund research and scholarship work in the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the agro-based industries would fund the researchers in the Faculty of Science and Technology and so on. Fifteen (75%) lecturers indicated that the research and scholarship department of the university should be providing more information on publications and funding opportunities. According to 3(15%) lecturers, the department had sent in such information only on two occasions. They therefore felt suffocated of the much needed information and guidance. Above all, the majority 19(95%) felt the need for cooperation among the experienced and less experienced faculty. This was because while a few were publishing and presenting papers at various fora, the majority was just spectators.

## MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

According to the results presented above, the following are the findings of the study:

2. There is little or no support from the university on research and scholarship work in terms of resources as evidenced by the number of recipients of research conference funding.
3. Lecturers were not staff developed fully enough to be able to undertake research work.
4. The majority were not motivated enough did not have the ability to carry out research work.
5. Lecturers are not cooperating in research activities and where there has been cooperation, it has involved the experienced cooperating amongst themselves sidelining the inexperienced.
6. Internet access and use among the lecturers is still a problem area and lecturers are not aware of the e-libraries available for research and scholarship work.
7. Lecturers have a limited number of journals in which to publish their works. Where these journals are charging publication fees, the lecturers cannot afford to pay.
8. Being an ODL institution, the lecturers are sometimes short of time due to numerous responsibilities of coordinating their programmes and other university services.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Since there is little or no support from the university on research and scholarship work in terms of resources as evidenced by the number of recipients of research conference funding, lecturers have been de-motivated to carry out research and scholarship work.
2. Lack of staff development among the lecturers is a contributing factor towards their inability to carry out and publish research.
3. Lack of motivation and the inability contributed to lecturers` failure in carrying out research work.
4. Lack of cooperation among lecturers has curtailed research and scholarship work more so where the experienced are cooperating amongst themselves sidelining the inexperienced.
5. Internet access and usage among the lecturers has hampered research and scholarship as lecturers are not aware of the e-libraries.
6. Because of the limited number of journals in which to publish their works and the high publication fees charged by some journals, the lecturers have failed to publish.
7. Due to shortage of time, the ODL lecturers are unable to fully attend to research and scholarship work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

1. The university should seek means of funding research work if lecturers are to undertake research and scholarship work seriously. On the other hand, government should also take the responsibility for funding of research and scholarship in universities as there has been a tendency to abdicate the obligation.
2. The university should also come up with clear funding policies that will motivate the lecturers to carry out research and scholarship work. Where possible lecturers could seek for funding from academic institutions and the private sector for whom the research could be of benefit.
3. The lecturers on the other hand should seek alternative funding from the corporate world and work collaboratively with them in research that benefit these corporate.
4. There is need to staff develop the lecturers on research and scholarship work so that they have the ability to carry out research and scholarship work.

5. The researchers need to pool their resources together and come up with strategic groups in which they assist each other and work collaboratively in research and scholarship work.
6. Academic staff needs to be trained in Internet usage as an aid to research and scholarship work.
7. Some of the responsibilities and duties carried out by ODL lecturers can be assigned to non-academic staff to enable the lecturers to have enough time for research activities.

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