



**CLOSING STATEMENT FROM  
THE VICE CHANCELLOR,  
PROF. PAUL H. GUNDANI:  
ZIMBABWE OPEN  
UNIVERSITY.**

**Introduction**

**GREETINGS!**

It is an honour and privilege for me to give a closing statement as the curtains come down on the year 2020. It is a no brainer that the year 2020 was a challenging year that no doubt will stand out as a memorable year in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As our academic year closes on

the 18 December 2020, it is apposite for me to share my reflections on major highlights, particularly those, that left footprints which made the year 2020 such a historic year.

## **1. CHALLENGES**

### **(i) The COVID-19 threat**

The onset of the COVID-19 virus was a game-changer in terms of the plans that the university had for the year 2020. As from the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, to date, the University was forced to come up with swift measures to mitigate the ravages of the pandemic through its Health and Safety Committee that enforced safety measures at the National Centre and at all University campuses across the length and breadth of Zimbabwe. I would like to thank each one of you for doing the right thing by adhering to all precautionary measures introduced by the Government, in line with

the World Health Organisation (WHO) protocols. Where numbers and space breached social distancing, meetings were conducted virtually instead of the traditional face-to-face encounters. Similarly, an assortment of advertisements on COVID 19 pandemic awareness were placed at strategic points throughout the University campuses and at the National Centre. ZOU has so far recorded zero fatalities although a few staff members were directly or indirectly affected by the pandemic.

## **(ii) ICT infrastructure**

It is now common knowledge that the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is gearing itself towards becoming a fully-fledged ODeL University. The COVID-19 virus turned out, however, to be a blessing in disguise. As the adage goes, “Every dark cloud has a silver lining.” The COVID-19 virus forced us out of the comfort zone of procrastination with regards to “going e”. For ZOU to continue delivering Teaching and Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was incumbent on us to put in place a robust operational ICT infrastructure. It dawned on Management that lack of cutting-edge technology would heavily compromise access to myVista by both staff and students, with the potential of undermining Teaching and Learning, as well as the writing of examinations, among other issues. Moreover, the infrastructure upgrade that we made came with a cost that we had not planned for.

Furthermore, the high cost of licences for the virtual communication platforms such as ZOOM, Microsoft Teams and Google classrooms, among others, affected our bottom line and impeded a seamless delivery of technology-enabled Teaching and Learning. This was further compounded by the unavailability of requisite national telecommunications infrastructure in some areas with poor quality network coverage. Consequently, many of our students were not able to afford internet data bundles. Regrettably, Mobile Network Operators were unwilling to offer real discounted data bundles to staff and students or offer zero-rated browsing for academic web sites/e-learning services. This situation was and continues to be inimical to ODeL delivery which requires a 24-hour digital presence. To counteract the myriad challenges associated with the ICT challenges, Management decided to provide academic staff with data bundles to enable the University to complete the first semester with minimum disruption.

### **(iii) Registration problems**

The Academic Registry unit experienced a wide range of challenges during the registration process of 2020 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester, particularly for new students. The new ZIMCHE Minimum Bodies of Knowledge and Skills (MBK/S) regulations which needed to be implemented across all programmes adversely affected all new students' registration. New students who had been captured under the old degree programmes could not be registered correctly to the new degree programmes and courses as these were not availed early enough to enable uploading onto the myVista learning Management System. Furthermore, the Academic Registration Information System (ARIS) experienced problems in updating the affected students' accounts to enable the subsequent registering of the correct degree programmes and courses. Data synchronization and bank transfers made by students to ZOU accounts after making payments at the bank took too long. Most of these challenges which needlessly contributed to the late registration of students were, in some cases, exacerbated by a lack of skill among students to register online. They were further compounded by unnecessary delays in coming up with a new fees' ordinance. Though the enrolment target remains at 20 000, as of 14 December 2020, 13 739 students had successfully registered, of which 1 555 are new students spread across all ZOU's ten Regional Campuses as well as the ZOU Virtual Campus.

## **2. SUCCESSES**

### **(i) First semester examinations**

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 threat, your University managed to provide Teaching and Learning services to its students, and successfully delivered exams for all registered students, not just final year students as in the cases of sister contact universities. About 90 percent of our students managed to sit their first semester exams. This was no mean achievement considering the transport constraints attendant to the lock-down environment prevailing in the country. I would like to congratulate our students and staff, both academic and non-academic, for their resilience and understanding in the face of difficulties during the difficult period.

## **(ii) The ZIMCHE Staff and Skills Audit 2019**

In response to the ZIMCHE Staff and Skills Audit carried out in 2019, Management presented a plan of action to the ZIMCHE CEO in July 2020. The response we got will go down as the best news in 2020. Prof Kuzvinetsa P. Dzvimbo, C.E.O. of the ZIMCHE, wrote to the Mrs C. Mtasa, the ZOU Council Chairperson, stating that, ZOU had addressed all issues and concerns raised in the Audit Report. I had the occasion to read an excerpt of the contents of the letter at the 2020 Graduation ceremony to our Chancellor, H. E. President E. D. Mnangagwa and to the Hon. Minister Prof. dr. Amon Murwira. The letter was not only an affirmation of our good standing and reputation as the premier ODeL University in the country but is a good omen for the journey that we are committed to travel in the delivery of quality education to all our students in Zimbabwe and in the sub-region. As such, the letter put paid to some unfortunate shenanigans and perception running riot out there that ZOU's standards were below par. I am pleased to put it on record that the letter from the ZIMCHE CEO is available for all to see. Without fear of contradiction, I aver that ZOU means business and is ready to be counted as one of the most competitive flagship ODeL institutions in Africa.

## **(iii) Solarization of regional campuses**

In support of e-learning, the phased approach to solarization project has successfully been completed for Mashonaland West and Masvingo Regional campuses. This project speaks volumes of how the University is determined to go green in its drive towards providing solar power at all its regional campuses. Solarization is meant to ensure uninterrupted and sustainable supply of electricity to staff and students in the face of occasional outages of electricity power supplied by the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA).

## **(iv) Reading desks and chairs**

In addition to the solarization of Mashonaland West Regional Campus, cubicles and desks were delivered on Friday, 30 October 2020 to its library whilst chairs were delivered on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2020. Similarly, five hundred (500) chairs and desks were purchased and delivered to the Harare/Chitungwiza regional campus. The provision of ample furniture at the ZOU regional campuses may appear so banal but for an ODeL institution such as ZOU, such humble efforts go a long way towards transforming regional campuses into more congenial spaces for study.

#### **(v) Land acquisition**

The year 2020 goes on record as the year the University purchased a 4.5-hectare piece of land from the Bulawayo City Council. The transaction was sealed by the signing of the agreement of sale on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2020. In the coming year, the University intends to construct a boundary wall to secure the land and design a suitable Master plan in line with the University's infrastructure requirements for the Matabeleland Regional Campuses as well as the introduction of income generating initiatives at the campus. On another note, the University looks forward to securing a piece of land in Masvingo Province following the positive response received from the Honourable E. Ruvai Chadzamira, Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution confirming receipt of ZOU's application for land to carry out agricultural projects in that province.

#### **(vi) 2020 Graduation**

A total of 2 513 graduates from the seven ZOU Faculties, inclusive of 39 students from affiliate colleges, were conferred with different degrees during the blended graduation ceremony held on the 13th of November 2020. Historically, 2020 will be remembered as a year of virtual graduation transition. Feedback received from the Regional Campuses confirm that with thorough preparations this is the way to go. As your Vice Chancellor, I am also pleased to announce that our Chancellor, His Excellency, President E. D. Mnangagwa, committed a US\$2000.00 prize money towards the overall best two female and two male performing students. The Chancellor's prize was a far-reaching development and marked a first in ZOU history.

#### **(vii) Community service**

As far as community service is concerned, the University concludes 2020 on a high note when it followed through its donation pledge to the Chancellor, H. E., President. E. D. Mnangagwa, of six tons of maize meal which your Management successfully handed over as 6 196.05 kgs to the Sally Mugabe Children's Hospital. The donation was highly appreciated. Going forward, we would like to keep the brand of the University aloft through more Community Service gestures such as the one rendered to the underprivileged and vulnerable children at the Sally Mugabe Children's Hospital.

## Conclusion

The challenges and achievements referred to above are only a few among many deserving mentions. However, space and time do not allow me to chronicle all the challenges and successes we encountered in 2020. However, I am delighted to say that we did our best under very difficult conditions, and I would like to acknowledge your never-say-die spirit. Your spirit-de-corps and collegiality made us sail through one of the most difficulty years of our generation. Thank you!

As the academic year winds down, giving way to a deserved festive season, I would be remiss if I forgot to remind you that the second COVID-19 wave is upon us. We thank the Heavens for having survived the first wave, but there are no guarantees that X or Y will survive the second wave. I take it as my responsibility and duty, therefore, to appeal to you to conscientiously adhere to the WHO protocols. Keep yourselves and your families safe. Don't overindulge to your detriment.

I look forward to seeing you all in good health come January 2021.

All the best.



**Professor Paul Henry Gundani**

**I wish you and your families  
a very merry Christmas and  
a prosperous 2021!!!!!!**