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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHALLENGES FACED BY ODL INSTITUTIONS IN MEETING QUALITY STANDARDS SET BY UNIVERSITY REGULATORY AUTHORITIES: A CASE FOR THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The present study was a cross sectional survey carried out to establish the views of ZOU lecturers on the quality expectations of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). Open and closed questions were asked to accord the respondents variety. Documents on the accreditation of institutions of higher education were analysed and items for the questionnaires were derived from these documents. Out of a potential lecturer complement of 200 at the 10 Regional Centres and National Centre, a stratified sample of 100 lecturers was selected. Lecturers were grouped into strata according to the four faculties. Out of the four strata, 100 lecturers were selected through the simple random technique based on proportional representation. The study established that ODL institutions face a number challenges in an attempt to meet the quality standards set by ZIMCHE, the higher and tertiary regulatory body. The challenges include the lack of support in terms of financial, material and physical infrastructure from central government, extra functional and operational activities undertaken by ODL lecturers which affect the quality of service offered, inadequate ICT gadgets for information dissemination as a handicap and staff and student competence in the use of ICTs, among other findings. It was therefore, recommended that there is need for heavy capital investment from government through Public Sector Investment Programme for infrastructure development to cater for building construction. There was also need for change in perceptions towards ODL by all stakeholders among which are the politicians who need to conscientise their constituencies on the important role of ODL in sustainable development. Staff and students needed to be trained thoroughly in ICT usage for communication and research purposes to boost research work and the workload of the lecturers should be reduced so that the lecturers focus more on research and teaching which are their core businesses. There was also need to draft and implement an exclusively ODL policy which takes into consideration the peculiar characteristics of ODL institutions.

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Introduction

Quality concerns the whole spectrum of context, partners, people, methods and stages of an activity (DYSCE, 2007). The notion of quality is socially, institutionally and culturally marked and, therefore, not always understood by all partners in the same way. In Zimbabwe, higher education quality regulatory body, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education, has come up with quality benchmarks to

be adhered to by all institutions. A blanket quality assessment for both Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and conventional systems has been received with mixed feelings in ODL owing to the differences in operation between the two modes. The quality requirements of ZIMCHE have been viewed as not being value-neutral. This study interrogates the challenges presented in quality standards propounded by ZIMCHE in ODL.

Background of the Study

ZIMCHE is a statutory body created through an Act of Parliament, Chapter 25:27 of 2006 with the mandate to register and accredit institutions of higher education in Zimbabwe. As regulator, ZIMCHE determines and maintains standards of teaching, examinations, academic qualifications and research in institutions of higher education. These are critical areas which invariably impinge on quality outcomes in higher education. Thus, quality assurance is a critical function of ZIMCHE and entails the regular and objective evaluation of courses, programmes and degrees offered by higher education institutions. Consistent with this thinking, ZIMCHE is therefore responsible for recommending institutional quality assurance standards to the Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education. It was precisely in the context of enforcing this mandate that ZIMCHE closed some institutions and suspended some degree programmes including the ones alluded to in the foregoing.

ZIMCHE was established to advise Government on all issues pertaining to higher education and to ensure the maintenance of appropriate standards with regard to teaching, courses of instruction, examination and academic qualifications in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. The council was also established to process applications for the establishment of private universities and university colleges and establish common student admission procedures for institutions of higher education. Above all, ZIMCHE also advises the Minister concerned on the establishment, maintenance and expansion of universities and university colleges; the co-ordination of training at institutions of higher education; the standardisation, recognition and equation of degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic qualifications conferred or awarded by institutions of higher education whether in Zimbabwe or elsewhere.

ZIMCHE also arranges and conducts visitations and inspections of institutions of higher education and liaises with Government and universities and university colleges on matters of policy and mutual interest. It also plays an advisory role to universities on issues affecting them. It is against this background that the present study sought to unearth the challenges faced by ODL institutions against the blanket requirements set by ZIMCHE for all higher and tertiary institutions.

Statement of the problem

A common question raised in higher education circles is "Should standards for quality assurance in Open and

Distance Learning be different from quality assurance in conventional education?" In order to maintain equivalence and credibility of programme offerings, it is generally agreed that while standards and benchmarks should be the same, the assessment framework should reflect the special features of ODL. In light of this, the present study aimed at establishing the challenges confronting the Zimbabwe Open University in meeting the quality standards set by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education. This is against a background of a blanket document entitled "Institutional Accreditation of Universities in Zimbabwe".

Research questions

The following sub problems stood as research questions:

1. What is the extent of the support given to ODL in relation to conventional tertiary institutions?
2. Which extra functional and operational activities undertaken by ODL lecturers affect the quality of service offered?
3. What challenges affect campuses in quality attainment in ODL?
4. How can the challenges affecting ODL institutions towards attainment of quality standards set by ZIMCHE be overcome?

Literature Review

Conceptual frame work

In this section, we define quality in as far as it relates to education. We also define related concepts such as quality assurance and quality assessment, all in an attempt to place the concept in the context in which it is implied in the study.

Quality education

UNICEF (2000) defines quality education in the context of learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities; environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities and content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace. Quality is also viewed by UNICEF (2000) as imbedded in processes through which trained

teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities and outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

According to Belawati and Zuhairi (2007), quality has always been an issue in distance education and distance learning. Since DE's inception and subsequent widespread diffusion, DE has been increasing access to education, a reality that has compelled many countries to adopt DE as part of their educational system (Garrison, 1993). Further, this paradigm of 'access to education' is in line with the belief of student autonomy and independence, as students studying at a distance often do so alone (Moore, 1993). In the context of education, 'quality' has been placed high on the agenda of educational leaders, policy makers, and practitioners, and is in line with consumers' ever increasing demand for quality education. In many countries, stakeholders have been placing high expectations on their educational systems, compelling institutions to produce higher quality products, services, processes, and by extension, students and graduates. In Zimbabwe, the situation has not been different. As more and institutions of higher and tertiary continue to be established, there are more options to the prospective students. This has therefore forced the institutions to improve on the quality of services they offer with the guidance of quality assurance bodies such as ZIMCHE.

Governments have also been seeking increased levels of accountability from their publicly funded educational institutions through the establishment of quality assurance institutions. Faced with the globalisation of the world economy, coupled with associated challenges of producing high-caliber human resources needed to effectively participate in the global economy, national stakeholders have voiced serious concerns about the 'quality' of their educational provisions to ensure their competitiveness. Thus, it is clearly imperative that educational institutions continuously improve the quality of their educational provision (UT, 2002).

Quality assurance

Quality assurance has been defined as "systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements" (Harman, 2000). Quality assurance

facilitates recognition of the standards of awards, serves public accountability purposes, helps inform student choice, contributes to improved teaching learning and administrative processes, and helps disseminate best practices with the goal of leading to overall improvement of higher education systems. Setting common standards and evaluation criteria, however, must take into account diversity and plurality of higher education within national, as well as regional systems. Higher education institutions are challenged to develop new visions, new forms of collaboration across institutions and nations (Harman, 2000). Brennan and Shah (2000) use the term 'quality assessment,' whose common methods and elements include 1) a national coordinating body; 2) institutional self-evaluation; 3) external evaluation by academic peers; and 4) published reports. They further identify four main types of "quality values" they determine to underpin different approaches to quality assurance: academic, managerial, pedagogic, and employment focus.

Quality assurance is, therefore, a process of defining and fulfilling a set of quality standards consistently and continuously with the goal of satisfying all consumers, producers, and the other stakeholders. Quality control and quality assurance are viewed as a set of measures undertaken to ensure that defective products or services are not produced and it always 'do it right the first time'. According to COL (1997), quality assurance programmes typically include peer or utilisation review procedures to remedy any identified deficiencies in quality.

In terms of products, the quality of ODL varies from one institution to another, depending on priorities, resources, size, and the student body of which it aims to serve (COL, 1997). For instance, ODL institutions in developed countries typically use ICT-based courses, while institutions in developing countries use printed materials as its primary medium of instructional delivery. The use of ICT in ODL in the developing country such as Indonesia is still at experimental stages, and even though many institutions are ready to experiment with modern ICT-based courses, access and participation by students is still relatively low (Belawati, 2005). It is the challenge for institutions in the developing country such as Indonesia to socialise and educate students, educators and the society in using ICT facilities for ODL enterprise (Belawati, 2005).

Previous studies

Challenges in the implementation of quality education systems in ODL

Implementing quality assurance principles and systems in an open and distance education institution is a monumental task (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007). It takes a great deal of effort, patience, socialisation and training to ensure that innovation is a productive effort. Research has established a number of factors that have given rise to the challenges affecting the full implementation of quality systems in ODL institutions. These include among others geographical dispersion of ODL learning centres and campuses, policy issues, lack of political support and legitimacy and so on. Below, we discuss some of these factors.

Geographical dispersion of ODL learning centres and campuses

People in ODL organisations will talk about quality, but may not know exactly what 'quality' means, specifically how to initiate, provide, and improve upon quality processes, products, and services continuously. This is often the case with geographically scattered ODL centres which then calls for change in the organisation's mindset. Implementation of QA implies change of work culture of staff at all levels. With the geographical dispersion of campuses in ODL, this then becomes a challenge, more so in the context of poor communication links in most Third World countries. Everyone in the organisation must think about – and more importantly, do something – to effect quality improvements in every step of their work activities. Drafting organisational change and improvement could be easy (Daft, 2006). In practice, however, leading people towards quality systems for quality improvement is a formidable task more so in a fragmented organisation where campuses are scattered all over the country as is the case with ODL institutions (Daft, 2006; D'Aprix, 1995).

Policy issues

Most African countries lack policies needed to guide the development and implementation of ODL programmes at national and international levels. This has been a major setback to many ODL institutions in Africa (Igwe, 2009). It is an established fact, that open and distance learning is successfully sustained where there are clear and unambiguous policy directives governing its application and implementation (Igwe, 2009). In Zimbabwe, policy guidelines used in the assessment of quality for higher and tertiary education are the same for both ODL and conventional institutions. The ideal scenario would have been to have a quality policy document tailor-made for the different types of institutions. However, press reports reveal that a national ODL policy has been crafted to with the

intention of elevating ODL to the same status as the face to face mode of tutoring. It also seeks to promote non-discriminatory access to education.

Lack of political support, sustainability and legitimacy

Lack of understanding about both the potential and limitation of ODL is widespread in many African countries. Harbours the belief that ODL cannot possibly offer the same quality of education as conventional campus-based education, many educational policy makers and planners remain sceptical about the legitimacy and quality of ODL (Igwe, 2009). According to Igwe (2009), many ODL programmes fail because they are not fully integrated into mainstream education systems. Consequently, ODL programmes tend not to attract the political support required for their successful implementation. This also has had a negative impact on the quality of education offered through ODL.

Physical infrastructure in ODL

According to Igwe (2009), lack of infrastructure and professional competencies in ODL remain important barriers. In many African countries there is a dire shortage of qualified staff required for guiding and influencing the development of ODL policies and for planning, developing, managing and evaluating ODL programmes. In addition, most ODL institutions are handcuffed by financial constraints. Several open and distance learning institutions in Africa were started without adequate provision for funds and many of the institutions grew and expanded so rapidly beyond the available resources, and as a result they have been unable to maintain both the quantity and quality of their services as well as the efficiency of their operations (Igwe, 2009).

Problems with Equipment

Equipment and hardware malfunctions can be a great detriment to the effectiveness of open and distance learning. Where ODL is provided through electronic media such as on-line, CD-ROM, confravision and compressed video presentation, such gadgets may present challenges of mul-functioning and when a problem occurs, everything comes to a standstill and the learning environment is interrupted. This scenario results in the entire ODL programme being affected. This then has a huge bearing on the quality of the ODL graduate being churned out of the system. An ODL programme studied by Teaster and Bliesner (1999) found that unanticipated technical problems with the system shortened the class time and discussion that negatively affected the overall

quality of the presentation. Those students used to the traditional face-to-face instruction and who do not have a tolerance for ambiguity will have a difficult time.

Concerns of the ODL faculty

In ODL, faculty members are burdened with a lot of other university activities such as marketing of programmes, assisting in the registration of students and processing of examination results. According to Sherritt (1996), tenure and promotion usually does not place high priority on these excellent off campus activities which, in fact, take valuable time from faculty agendas. This puts the lecturers behind when trying to publish to get their department recognised. The increased amount of time necessary to adequately prepare for distance learning takes away from the activities they will be evaluated on, such as publishing (Sherritt, 1996). Many of the ODL lecturers concerns are valid since the extra load piled on them is in clear contrast with that of their counterparts in the conventional systems. Disparities are therefore expected in terms of quality systems; hence an umbrella quality policy may not be a fair option for ODL organisations.

Research Methodology

The present study is a cross sectional survey that employed the use of questionnaires and document analysis to come up with the views of ZOU lecturers on the quality expectations of the higher education watchdog. The questionnaires asked for the lecturers' views on the accreditation requirements by ZIMCHE. Open and closed questions were asked to accord the respondents variety. Documents on the accreditation of institutions of higher education were analysed and items for the questionnaires were derived from these documents.

Population and sample

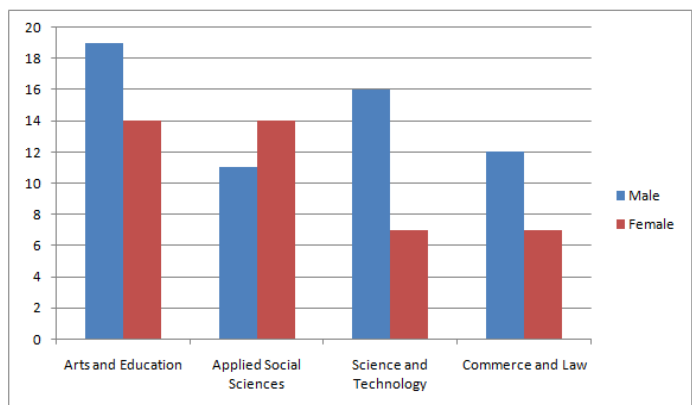
Out of a potential lecturer complement of 200 at the 10 Regional Centres and National Centre, a stratified sample of 100 lecturers was selected. Lecturers were grouped into strata according to the four faculties. Out of the four strata, 100 lecturers were selected through the simple random technique based on proportional representation.

Data presentation and discussion

Figure 1 shows that the sample for the study was made up of 100(100%) respondents. The Faculty of Arts and Education had 33(33%) respondents which included 19 male and 14 female lecturers. The Faculty of Applied Social Sciences had 25(25%) respondents consisting of 11 male and 14 female lecturers. The Faculty of Science and Technology

had 23(23%) made up of 16 males and 7 females while the Commerce and Law faculty had 12 male and 7 female lecturers giving a faculty total of 19(19%). The data show that there were more male lecturers in the Faculties of Arts and Education, Science and Technology and Commerce and Law. The Faculty of Applied Social Sciences is the only faculty with more female lecturers than males.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by faculty



Data in Table 1 shows that institutional financial support is low for ODL and it is high in conventional tertiary institutions. The majority of the respondents, 87(87%) felt that remuneration for part time tutors was inadequate and very often it was paid late. This could be attributed to the fact that ODL relies heavily on more part time tutors to cater for the geographically dispersed students. Respondents also indicated that student financial support was non-existent in ODL as evidenced by the exclusion of ODL students in the cadetship programme. Material support was also low for ODL institutions as evidenced by the absence of motor vehicles that are visible in conventional tertiary institutions. ODL support for building infrastructure was rated as very low as compared to the support given to conventional institutions. Arguments proffered by respondents were that some of the relatively new tertiary conventional institutions already boast of state of the art buildings when the Zimbabwe Open University established way back in 1999 still operates in rented buildings. The majority of respondents argued that in some regions there were lock outs and regular movements from one rented building to the other thus wasting a lot of time in relocation. The rentals also were costly, depriving the university of the much needed financial resources for other academic activities. This therefore, compromised the quality of education offered through the university. According

to Igwe (2009), lack of infrastructure in ODL remains important barriers in the attainment of quality.

There was general consensus among the lecturers that the better of their time was being spent on other extra and operational activities like marketing ODL programmes and recruitment and selection of both students and part time lecturers. All the 100(100%) respondents felt that marketing ODL programmes, module and materials development, recruitment and selection of part time tutors, induction of part time tutors and student recruitment and selection were some of the activities which tended to consume most of their valuable time to the detriment of quality service. Fifty-six (56%) respondents indicated that they processed examination results whereas 73(73%) stated that invigilation of examinations was also an activity which was wasting their time. These felt that

these activities were the responsibility of non-academic staff. The respondents felt that valuable time could be spent on core academic business such as research and scholarship work. The same findings were unearthed by Sherritt (1996), who established that tenure and promotion usually does not place high priority on the off campus activities which take valuable time from faculty agendas. This was not the case with lecturers in the conventional system whose responsibilities were mostly academic. This therefore, gave them the urge over their ODL counterparts when it came to research and scholarship work. A sizeable number of respondents, 23(23%) indicated that the lack of time also hindered their quest towards attainment of tenure and promotion (Sherritt, 1996).

Table 1: Extent of the support given to ODL and conventional institutions

Type of support	ODL	CONVENTIONAL
1. Institutional financial support	Low	High
2. Student financial support	nil	Very High
3. Material support	low	High
4. Building infrastructure	Very low	High

Table 2: Extra functional and operational activities undertaken by ODL lecturers which affect the quality of service offered

ACTIVITY	Number	%
1. Marketing ODL programmes	100	100
2. Module and materials development	100	100
3. Recruitment and selection of part time tutors	100	100
4. Induction of part time tutors	100	100
5. Student recruitment and selection	100	100
6. Examination results processing	56	56
7. Invigilation of examinations	73	73

Table 3: Challenges affecting campuses in quality attainment

CHALLENGES	Number	%
1. Lack of uniformity in regional operations	83	83
2. Inadequate ICT gadgets for information dissemination	94	94
3. Student competence in the use of ICTs	88	88
4. Staff competence in ICTs	89	89
5. Staff meet on regular basis to share ideas	90	90
6. Staff and students interact on face-to-face basis	89	89
7. Students meet on regular basis to share ideas	74	74
8. Geographical dispersion of campuses	85	85
9. Lack of national policy frame work governing ODL	100	100
10. Lack of political will	82	82
11. Poor perceptions of the quality of ODL graduates	80	80

Table 3 shows that 83(83%) stated that lack of uniformity in regional operations was a challenge whereas 94(94%) indicated inadequate ICT gadgets for information dissemination as a handicap. According to 88(88%) respondents, student competence in the use of ICTs was a challenge whereas 89(89%) stated that staff competence in ICTs was also a challenge. Possible reasons for poor ICT competence among the students can be attributed to the fact that the majority of ODL students are from the rural areas where ICTs are rarely in use save for cellular phones (Teaster and Bliesner, 1999). However, where there is network reception students have tended to use the cellular phone not beyond communication purposes. Staff meeting on regular basis to share ideas and staff and students interacting on face-to-face basis were also challenges according to 90(90%) and 89(89%) respondents respectively. Cross pollination of ideas in academic circles is very important but this is difficult in an ODL institution as pointed by the 90(90%) respondents. Students also need to meet on regular basis to discuss issues and concepts but this is hindered by the geographical

dispersion of campuses. This is in line with the arguments proffered by Daft (2006) and D'Aprix (1995) who argued that leading people towards quality systems for quality improvement is a formidable task due to the fragmentation of ODL where campuses are scattered all over the country.

According to 100(100%) respondents, lack of national policy frame work governing ODL was a challenge as the tertiary institutions in the country were governed by one umbrella policy guideline. This has been a major setback to many ODL institutions in Africa (Igwe, 2009). Eighty-two (82%) of the respondents felt that lack of political will was a big challenge and this could be attributed to the fact that most of the people occupying higher offices went through conventional education. Igwe (2009) also established that ODL programmes tend not to attract the political support required for their successful implementation. The poor perceptions of the quality of ODL graduates held by 80(80%) of the respondents can be attributed to the colonial mindset that those who went to ODL were rejects of the conventional system.

Table 4: Measures to overcome the challenges in ODL towards attainment of quality standards set by ZIMCHE

Measure	Number	%
1. Need for heavy capital investment from government through Public Sector Investment Programme	87	87
2. Need for change in perceptions towards ODL by all stakeholders	80	80
3. Thorough training in ICTs for both staff and students	91	91
4. Availing high tech equipment for communication among regional centres and students.	93	93
5. Reducing of workload for the lecturers so for them to focus on core business	95	95
6. Incentivising ODL lecturers for the extra duties they undertake	61	61
7. Drafting and implementation of an exclusively ODL policy	72	72

Table 4 indicates that 87(87%) were for the need for heavy capital investment from government through Public Sector Investment Programme whereas 80(80%) suggested that there was need for change in perceptions towards ODL by all stakeholders. Thorough training in ICTs for both staff and students was suggested by 91(91%) respondents. Ninety-three (93%) thought that availing high tech equipment for communication among regional centres and students would help bring about quality education since technology is very crucial in the communication between tutors and students and among students themselves (Teaster and Bliesner, 1999). Ninety-five (95%) indicated that reducing of workload for the lecturers would see them focus on core business more and possibly improving the quality of ODL graduates (Sherritt, 1996). Incentivising ODL lecturers for the extra duties they undertake was suggested by

61(61%) respondents while 72(72%) were of the idea of drafting and implementing of an exclusively ODL policy. These felt that there was need to separate the two modes of education since the systems were quite different.

Conclusions

From the above findings, it is concluded that ODL institutions face a number challenges in an attempt to meet the quality standards set by ZIMCHE, the higher and tertiary regulatory body. The challenges include the following:

- lack of support in terms of financial, material and physical infrastructure from central government;

- extra functional and operational activities undertaken by ODL lecturers which affect the quality of service offered;
- lack of uniformity in regional operations was a challenge;
- inadequate ICT gadgets for information dissemination as a handicap;
- Staff and student competence in the use of ICTs;
- staff meeting on regular basis to share ideas and staff and students interacting on face-to-face basis were also challenges;
- students also need to meet on regular basis to discuss issues and concepts but this is hindered by the geographical dispersion of campuses;
- lack of national policy frame work governing ODL was a challenge as the tertiary institutions in the country were governed by one umbrella policy guideline and;
- lack of political will and negative perceptions of ODL graduates.

Recommendations

From the above conclusions, it is therefore recommended that:

- There is need for heavy capital investment from government through Public Sector Investment Programme for infrastructure development to cater for building construction.
- There is also need for change in perceptions towards ODL by all stakeholders among which are the politicians who need to conscientise their constituencies on the important role of ODL in sustainable development.
- Staff and students need to be trained thoroughly in ICT usage for communication and research purposes to boost research work.
- The workload of the lecturers should be reduced so that the lecturers focus more on research and teaching which are their core business.

- ODL lecturers need to be paid more for the extra duties they undertake over and above their normal responsibilities.
- There is need to draft and implement an exclusively ODL policy which takes into consideration the peculiar characteristics of ODL institutions.

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