Programme-Based Assessment Mechanisms for Establishing a Culture of Excellence in Open and Distance Learning at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)

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Abstract

This study sought to interrogate programme-based assessment mechanisms (PBAMs) for establishing a culture of excellence in open and distance learning (ODL) at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study utilized a qualitative research methodology and adopted the case study research design. A population comprising Regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs) of the ZOU from two Regional Campuses was considered from which a sample of 20 (N=20) was selected. The purposive sampling technique was utilised in selecting the participants. The study used Questerviews as the primary research instruments. Data collected from the study was analysed based on the different thematic areas which were designed by the researchers as well as ranking specific service areas for programmes. The major findings of the study were that the ZOU academic programmes have official assessment documentation at Regional Campus level and are provided with maximum administrative support. The study further revealed that the programmes are assessed in a benchmarked way basing on the trends and standards of leading international universities. The study recommended that higher education open and distance learning (HEODL) institutions should generally have in place a standard and broad framework of programme-based assessment mechanism which covers key areas including programme design, implementation, review and assessment.

Key Terms: Programme-based assessment, higher education, open and distance learning, culture of excellence in education

Introduction

The word “assessment” has been understood from various perspectives and thus assumed on a variety of meanings within the higher education context. It has been generally applied with reference to the process faculty in universities use to evaluate and grade student course assignments, standardized testing imposed on institutions as part external accountability and activities designed to collect information on the success of a program, course, or University curriculum.

Assessment has also been defined as the systematic collection and analysis of information to improve student learning. Defined in this manner, assessment asks you to think about the following questions: What should students be learning and in what ways
should they be growing? What are students actually learning and in what ways are they actually growing? What should you be doing to facilitate student learning and growth? (University of West Nicholson, 2000)

Program based assessment focuses on assessing student learning and experience to determine whether students have acquired the skills, knowledge, and competencies associated with programme of study.

In recent years, the subject of quality education has gained increased significance in response to a wide range of challenges and paradigm shifts. Assessment in education is indeed one key process that has been utilised to promote quality in education. According to the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL 2004:73), “Educational assessment gives educational institutions credible and verifiable evidence that guides their efforts in establishing programme and institutional goals towards the improvement of teaching processes, learning outcomes and general quality in education”. Thus, as noted by Liston (2009), educational institutions including institutions of higher learning, the world over, are increasingly becoming involved in conducting assessment within their academic programmes and administrative support systems; all in an effort to attain educational excellence.

The desire to know how well the institution and its programmes are doing and to improve student learning outcomes and service to stakeholders are critical motivators for conducting educational assessment (Stassen et al, 2012). This is particularly so with universities and other institutions of higher learning, which of late are facing internal and external pressures to develop a culture of excellence in their work. In this regard, educational assessment becomes a key component of quality improvement, which may be realised through programme-based assessment (PBA); also referred to as programme-focused assessment. It is in this light that the current study sought to explore programme-based assessment mechanisms (PBAMs) of establishing a culture of excellence in ODL at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

With a diversity of programmes at different levels, the ZOU assesses its programmes and institutional practices (i.e. PBA) through different processes including coursework or assignments and examinations. It is against this broad backdrop that the current study sought to explore PBAMs of establishing a culture of excellence at the ZOU as a world class ODL learning university.

Statement of the problem

While PBA in higher education institutions is one of the major forms of promoting quality in education, it has not been established through research the extent to which PBAMs have been effective for establishing a culture of excellence at the ZOU as a world class ODL institution.

Purpose of the study & research questions

The major purpose of this study was to interrogate programme-based assessment mechanisms (PBAMs) for establishing a culture of excellence or tradition of quality at the ZOU. The study was guided by the following research questions:

• What are PBAMs in the context of open and distance learning (ODL)?
• What official documentation of specific programmes is available at ZOU’s Regional Campuses?
• Are the programmes provided with maximum academic and administrative support at regional level?
• Are the programmes offered and assessed in a clear and benchmarked way at regional level?
How best can programme experiences be improved at the ZOU for learners and stakeholders?

Significance of the study

Researchers are of the view that the primary importance of the study is the need to ascertain conventional PBAMs the ZOU is utilizing in its thrust of establishing a culture of excellence. This significance is premised on the understanding that PBA as a component of educational assessment in higher education has become one key facet that is being utilised to give educational institutions credible and verifiable evidence of practicing quality education (CoL, ibid). It is envisaged that the findings will also promote quality improvement at the ZOU and other HEODL institutions; as well as its stakeholders including the expansive job market within which ODL graduates are absorbed.

The ZOU is also expected to capitalize on the findings of the current study to effect programme quality improvements in areas including programme design, delivery and assessment. Thus, the findings of the current study are also expected to benefit the ZOU as a world class ODL institution in as much as she endeavours to offer ODL of the highest quality.

Review of related literature

‘Programme-based Assessment’ and its relevance to the ZOU

In his preliminary conceptualisation of what a ‘programme’ and ‘assessment’ is, McDowell (2012:2) says that “in Higher Education, by ‘programme’, we generally mean a course of study such as a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree while by ‘assessment’, we mean the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development”. Elements within programmes may basically be called courses or modules. In practice, the ZOU offers ODL programmes which include Certificates, Diplomas, Undergraduate degrees, Master’s degrees, Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy degrees.

The University of Florida (2005) says that the word ‘educational assessment’ (EA) is somewhat fluid in meaning and has, thus, taken on a variety of meanings within the educational fraternity including in higher education. Primarily, it focuses on assessing student learning and experience to determine whether students have acquired the expected skills, knowledge and competencies necessary for market acceptability. Thus, in education, the term ‘assessment’ refers to the wide variety of methods or tools that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, educational needs and outcomes of students. According to Melrose Training conference paper (2015), assessment in education entails the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and institutional practices. The term as well refers to the process faculty uses to grade educational aspects like student course assignments and examinations, in-class tests and oral presentations as well as standardized tests imposed on institutions as part of increased pressure for both internal and external accountability, or to any activity designed to collect information on the quality and success of a programme, course, or curriculum (Knight & Yorke, 2009).

Higgins, R., Hartley, P. and Skelton, A. (2002) note that educational assessment in higher education (HE) is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving educational experience as well as satisfying
customer needs. It also involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting educational evidence. The evidence is used to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve educational quality (Melrose Training conference paper, ibid). When educational assessment is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, it can help educators focus their collective attention, examine their assumptions, and create a shared academic culture; dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of education, including the quality of its graduates (Levin and Lockheed, 2009).

A major aspect of EA in HE is PBA; which is generally considered to be the systematic collection and analysis of programme-focused information to improve student learning and related educational outcomes. McDowell (2012) notes that, PBA focuses on what and how an academic programme is contributing to the learning, growth, and development of students as individuals and groups, which has a direct bearing on the quality of the education they receive and their acceptability by stakeholders. The same source further clarifies that the process of PBA is essentially heightened through the process of academic programme review (APR); which is a transparent, collaborative, and comprehensive process that provides institutional faculty and administration with information needed to support and guide continual programme design, planning, implementation, innovation, quality improvement, and resource allocation.

PBA in education is, therefore, central to educational assessment, more so in the context of HEODL where learners’ are largely interested in their personal development and professional value addition to the job market that utilizes their knowledge, skills, expertise and experience. While most higher educational institutions (HEI) simply make an effort to implement EA including PBA, the current study endeavours to explore apparent PBAMs of establishing a culture of excellence at the ZOU, in a bid to foster programme quality improvement for the satisfaction of clients (students) and other stakeholders who include external quality regulatory bodies, government and employers of ZOU graduates.

‘Open and Distance Learning’ and its historical development

The concept of ‘Open and Distance Learning’ (ODL) which may also be referred to as ‘Open and Distance Education’ (ODE) or simply ‘Distance Education (DE) has variously been defined by different authorities. It is generally considered to be a mode of delivering education and instruction through open teaching and distance learning, often through tutorials on an individual basis or to small groups of students who often learn at a distance and are often not physically present as the situation is like in a traditional educational set up such as a classroom, hall or lecture theatre. According to Gallagher and McCormick (2009), the concept of ODL generally describes the process of providing education where the student is learning at a distance, which often implies being geographically separated from the tutor.

The ZOU 2012 Annual Report avows that ODL is an educational process where all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone geographically removed from the learner, with all or most of the communication between tutors and learners being conducted through print or electronic media or both. The report further notes that it implies ‘approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities’. Cropley and Kahl (2003) clarify that one of
the essential characteristics of ODL is that the tutor is separated from the learner by distance in the form of both space and time. For Letseka & Pitsoe (2012), the concept of ODL, therefore, suggests a flexible educational approach designed to reach learners in their diverse environments, such as homes and offices; providing flexible learning resources for them to qualify without attending full-time formal classes in person, or create opportunities for lifelong learning, no matter where or when they want to study.

The concept of ‘Culture of Excellence’ in education

One computer synonym of the term ‘culture’ is ‘tradition’ while that for ‘excellence’ is ‘quality’, hence; a ‘culture of excellence’ may be described as a ‘tradition of quality’. Liston (ibid) says that excellence or quality conveys difference in worth, in relation to what is common or ordinary and is related more to the relevance and value of an organisation’s mission, purpose, goals and objectives, as well as the achievement of identified student outcomes.

Gabi (2011:1) views ‘quality’ or ‘excellence’ as a broad concept which essentially entails the ability to satisfy customers’ needs and expectations on both price and non-price factors or the total effect of the features of the process, or service on performance, or the customer’s or client’s perception of that performance. Hoy et al (2001:93) resonate that:

Excellence in education is an evaluation of the process of educating which enhances the need to achieve and develop the talents of the customers of the process, and at the same time, meets the accountability standards set by the clients who pay for the process or the outputs from the process of educating.

Thus, any effective PBAM should involve programme monitoring and evaluation; as well as ensuring that a consistent and acceptable level of excellence is being achieved in goods or services delivered to its customers and key stakeholders.

The CoL (2004) asserts that evaluating the quality of any education system essentially involves examining the extent to which the:

- products or the results of the education provided meet the standards or benchmarks stipulated in the system’s educational aims and objectives,
- knowledge, skills, values and attitudes acquired by learners in the learning process are relevant to human and environmental needs,
- acquired education is generally utilised by individuals and groups to solve pertinent micro and macro problems in society.

Contemporary trends and benefits of PBA in HE institutions

Every HE institution including HEODL institutions are increasingly confronting the issue of the need to design an effective, efficient, inclusive and sustainable assessment strategy to deliver key and relevant programmes and course outcomes to the satisfaction of its clients (Knight & Yorke, 2003). According to Biggs and Tang (2007), the strategy and resolution is to focus on efficient programme -level rather than any other form of assessment. For them, PBA is both a major driver to student learning and significant source of student and stakeholder satisfaction. Currently, programme leaders in many HE institutions across the globe cannot access suitable evidence-based guidance and exemplars to develop and implement effective PBA strategies (Biggs & Tang, ibid). Higgins et al (2002) remark that it is, therefore, of paramount importance that HE institutions including ODL institutions like ZOU identify essential principles of PBA and use these to implement and test the effectiveness of their programmes.
In their cursory appraisal of good practices in PBA and measurement of student learning outcomes, Bresciani (2003) notes that considering that government agencies, legislatures and regulatory bodies are increasingly observant of institutional practices and are involved in institutional decision-making, programme quality accountability has become a prevalent concept and programmatic initiative in HE. Thus, in order to respond to growing demands for institutional accountability with regard to student learning outcomes and satisfaction of clients and stakeholders, HE institutions desperately require an articulated definition of and way of implementing PBA in order to foster quality education (Ewell, 2013).

As noted by Lopez (2002), the scrutiny of quality in HE is not diminishing, in fact, educators are facing growing pressure to produce evidence of effective student learning, while faculty on the other hand is increasingly getting frustrated that their disciplinary expertise is under-appreciated or unrecognized (Ewell, ibid). In this regard, Lopez (ibid) presents a few pertinent issues regarding how HE institutions may institute effective PBAMs. These are;

- clearly define programme goals and objectives it seeks to accomplish
- report in a meaningful way data on student learning, development and achievement
- convey details about individual student learning so that constituents of the learning process can understand the quantity and quality of learning
- inform decisions at a higher or managerial level while maintaining faculty autonomy and investment in teaching and learning; and
- ensure that a tradition of excellence is in place and associated with the delivery and assessment of programmes.

Pike (2011) contend that educators engaged in the quality of HE programme assessment discourse traditionally have used institutional persistence and graduation rates as reliable indicators of quality education. However, though such indicators are easy to define and measure, some of the questions to ask include:

- Whether these indicators identify the quality of the education experienced by students?
- Can one understand how well a student has learned the content and mechanics of his or her discipline or programme?
- How well does faculty know whether a student has mastered problem solving or application of theory to practice?

Indicators of persistence and graduation may indicate institutional vision and mission, but they often neglect more meaningful questions of programme quality and student learning outcomes (Pike, ibid).

Schray (2013) identifies five major objective indicators in PBA whose thrust is quality improvement, namely;

- **Clearly defining student learning outcomes**: require institutions and programmes to define their learning outcomes based on their own vision, mission, and co-values
- **Performance outcome measures**: the strongest emphasis is placed on the demonstration by institutions and programmes that they are producing results, especially evidence of effective student learning and success
- **New process standards**: promotes more open and flexible process standards that encourage innovation and diversity in higher education and do not necessarily have to prescribe specific input and process principles in programme-based assessment
- **Valid and reliable programme assessment**: institutional standards establish some requirements for valid and reliable programme assessment so that accrediting institutions or bodies can provide the public with some assurance that students receiving specific
qualifications and other types of credentials have the knowledge, skills, expertise and other dispositions that institutions and programmes claim to be imparting

- **Continuous programme improvement.** This involves requiring HE institutions to move toward world-class quality and measurable progress in relationship to their national and international aspirations.

### Research methodology

The current study adopted the case study design under the qualitative research paradigm. A case study design was considered appropriate because of its perspicuity in eliciting participants’ perceptions through their lived experiences, knowledge, observations and assumptions (Babbie, 2004; Frankel & Wallen, 2006). It was also considered on the basis that it observes phenomena in real contexts, and recognizes that context is a powerful determinant of day to day processes and activities, as well as their causes and effects (Nisbet and Watt, 2004). In this regard, the case of the ZOU was be used.

A population, which according to Best and Khan (2003:13) is “any group of individuals that have one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher”, comprised of Regional Programme Coordinators (RPCs) who are full-time Lecturers of the ZOU. These were drawn from two Regional Campuses of the ZOU, namely Matabeleland North and Mashonaland East. From this population, a sample of 20 (N=20) was selected. A study sample entails “individuals who participate in the study and are included in data collection; hence, are strategically selected from the whole population in order to be representative of the population” (Denzin & Lincon, 2005). The sample was, thus, considered representative enough of ZOU full-time lecturers who are based in the institution’s Regional Campuses; whereupon the ZOU has 10 of them.

Purposive sampling technique was utilised in selecting the participants. Consistent with Bailey (2004) and Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007), this sampling strategy involved choosing the most qualifying individuals to serve as participants; ensuring that all the sample’s elements had similar or related characteristics. The key to purposeful sampling is to select cases for systematic study that are knowledgeable about, have experience with and are often affected by the situation under study. Thus, this sampling technique was adopted considering the advantage highlighted by Grayson (2005) echoed by Creswell (2007) that the logic and power behind purposive selection of participants is information appropriateness and richness. Hence, the technique was preferred as it was chosen on the basis of its expediency in coming up with well-informed and data rich participants for the study; who in this case were ZOU full-time lecturers at Regional Campuses.

The views of the selected lecturers from the different faculties were considered helpful as their purposive selection was essentially necessitated by the fact that they are best placed to provide reliable data pertaining to PBAMs prevailing at the ZOU. The study used Questerviews as the primary research instruments and these were pretested through a pilot study involving two lecturers who were not part of the actual study. The consolidated Questerviews were printed and distributed to participant in the two Regional Campuses, who filled them at their spare time and returned to the researchers. Data collected from the study was analysed through use of PBA thematic areas which were designed by the researchers. Thus, consistent with Johnson & Christenson (2014)’s view regarding Questerviews’ data analysis, Thematic Content analysis (TCA) technique was utilised. Further data analysis was done...
using specific service areas for programmes which were each ranked from 1 to 10 (Table 4).

**Study findings**

**Participants’ gender, age, educational qualifications and faculties**

A total of 13 (65%) of the participants were male while 7 (35%) were female. This shows that male lecturers were almost double the number of female participants. From this range, 3 (15%) were below the age of 30 years, 9 (45%) were aged between 30-40 years, 6 (30%) were aged between 41-50, with the remaining 2 (10%) being aged above 50 years. With regards to educational qualifications, all participants were degreed and from the 20, a total of 3 (15%) had first degrees, 15 (75%) had master’s degrees (where 2 of them were Associate Professors), while the remaining 2 (10%) had doctoral degrees.

The study also determined the 20 participants’ faculties. Of these, 7 (35%) were from the Faculty of Arts and Education, 5 (25%) from Applied Social Sciences, 4 (20%) from Science and Technology, 2 (10%) from Commerce and Law, while the remaining 2 (10%) were from the Faculty of Agriculture. However, the researchers considered that the implications of the participants’ gender, age, educational qualifications and faculties on the study findings were negligible.

**Participants’ views on PBAMs for establishing a culture of excellence at the ZOU**

Table 1 shows that all participants (100%) agreed that the programmes have academic regulations in place at the regional campus, have documented course composition (courses on offer) and that course outlines for each programme are available. This implies that there is a culture of excellence with regards official programme documentation at the ZOU.

Table 2 shows that 15 (75%) of the participants agreed that programmes have

| Table 1: Does the programme have official documentation at regional level? N=20 |
|-----------------|-----------------|------|------|
| Item | Description | Yes | % | No | % |
| 1. | Does the programme have Academic regulations? | 20 | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| 2. | Does the programme have a documented Course composition? | 20 | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. | Are course outlines for each Programme course available? | 20 | 100 | 0 | 0 |

| Table 2: Is the programme provided with maximum administrative support? N=20 |
|-----------------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| Item | Description | Yes | % | Rarely | % | No | % |
| 1. | Does the programme have enough modules? | 15 | 75 | 4 | 20 | 1 | 5 |
| 2. | Are tutorial and examination venues available and suitable? | 13 | 65 | 7 | 35 | 0 | 0 |
| 3. | Do tutors for the different courses always attend tutorials and attend in time? | 15 | 75 | 5 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
enough modules while 4 (20%) were of the view that programmes rarely have enough modules. Only 1 (5%) indicated that programmes do not have enough modules. When probed further, participants indicated that a certain module may not be available on hard copy but would be available on soft copy, which is accessible to students through the MyVista platform. A total 13 (65%) agreed that tutorial and examination venues are available and suitable, while 7 (35%) believe that they are rarely available and suitable. A total of 15 (75%) indicated that tutors for the different courses always attend tutorials and attend in time while 5 (25%) were of the view that they rarely do so. These findings showed that ZOU programmes are generally provided with reasonably maximum administrative support.

Table 3 above shows that 16 (80%) of the participants agreed that tutorials are conducted according to set standards (e.g. number of tutorials, time taken for each tutorial), while 4 (20%) thought that this is rarely done. A total of 15 (75%) believed that programme coursework and examinations typically assessed students’ mastery of course concepts and their application while 4 (20%) thought that this is rarely done. All participants (100%) were convinced that the mode or method of the examination meet institutional set standards and those of regulatory bodies. These results generally showed that ZOU programmes are generally offered and assessed in a benchmarked way.

A glimpse at findings from the above service-area ranking-table shows that tutor attendance, tutor punctuality, content quality of tutorials, number of tutorials and suitability of tutorial venues were all ranked from 5 to 10, with the number of participants generally increasing towards 10. Adequacy of programme academic regulations and modules were both ranked from 7 to 10, while the content quality of modules, provision of documented course composition and availability of programme’s course outlines were ranked highest as they were all ranked from 8 to 10, with the number of participants also generally increasing towards 10. Thus, service areas at the ZOU were generally ranked from 5 to 10, with the number of participants increasing towards ranking 10 in all cases. This showed that the generality of ZOU PBAMs are characterised by a culture of excellence, with the content quality of modules topping the rankings by showing a striking 12 (60%) participants ranking the service area 10 over 10 which implied outright excellence in the service area.

Table 3: Is the programme offered and assessed in a benchmarked way? N=20

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Are tutorials conducted according to set standards?</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Do the programme coursework and examinations typically assess students’ mastery of course concepts and their application?</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Does the mode of examination meet institutional set standards and those of external regulatory bodies?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</table>

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on the above findings, the study concluded that:
• Official programme documentation at the ZOU is generally characterised by a culture of excellence as programmes...
have academic regulations, documented course compositions and course outlines for each programme in place;

- Programmes are provided with reasonably maximum administrative support including enough modules, availability and suitability of tutorial and examination venues as well as tutors for the different courses generally attending tutorials and attending in time;
- Programmes are offered and assessed in a benchmarked way including meeting the ZOU set standards and those of regulatory bodies, such as the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE);
- The generality of PBAMs at the ZOU, are generally characterised by a culture of excellence as reflected by the different service area rankings.

The study, therefore, overall concluded that there is generally a culture of excellence at the ZOU with regards its PBAMs. Based on their wide experience in HEODL, the researchers were convinced that findings from the current study will make valuable contributions towards quality improvement of PBAMs at the ZOU and other HEODL institutions.

Accordingly, the researchers recommended that:
- The ZOU should maintain high standards of its practices and continue improving in academic and administrative PBAMs and other service areas in which it still needs to attain the highest level of excellence;
- Considering that the current study covered only two of ZOU’s ten regional campuses, university-wide research should be conducted in order to establish a holistic picture of the nature and extent of PBAMs for establishing a culture of excellence;
- Other HEODL institutions are urged to examine their programme-based assessment mechanisms (PMAMs) in order to ensure they establish a culture of excellence in their practices.

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