Quality Assurance and E-learning in a competitive Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context: A customer driven blended learning environment at the Zimbabwe Open University-Manicaland Region.

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Abstract:

With the rapid increase in the use of E-learning technologies in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) world wide (Daniel 2004; Inglis 2005; Delpwell 2007; Jara & Mellar 2007), Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is focusing on Quality Assurance as a crucial factor in implementing a quality based E-learning system. While (ZOU) like other (ODL) universities in developing countries has to compete globally with online systems emerging from developed countries targeting the local Open and Distance learner population (Juma 2005; Murphy 2008), the quest for developing customer driven E-learning systems has become a challenge in areas such as instructional methods, content and technologies. This paper sought to find out how best a customer driven E-learning system can be implemented at (ZOU) with flexibility that meets the diverse needs of students and tutors. The study was an evaluation research that made use of a mixed methods research design. Data was collected from students and tutors through focus groups, interviews and questionnaires. The study recommends a customer driven E-learning system that is blended and flexible to tutors and students.

Key words: Quality Assurance; E-learning; Blended learning

Background to the study

The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context in Zimbabwe where (ZOU) is viewed as an exclusive platform for increasing access to university education through life long learning, is increasingly becoming a competitive E-learning environment influenced by E-learning technologies (ICTs) emerging from the developed world targeting the African (ODL) ‘market’ (Inglis 2005; Jara & Mellar 2007; Delpwell 2007). These E-learning platforms are coming in the form of online programmes or in strategic partnerships with local (ODL) systems (Juma 2005; Van Dijk 2007; Murphy 2008). It may appear as if (ODL) is increasingly becoming a commodity imported from developed countries destined for African learner population through E-learning platforms.

E-learning can be viewed as learning that is delivered through electronic technologies (Jara & Mohammad 2007; Shank (Eds). Donnelly (2010) identifies a range of E-learning delivery technologies such as computers, mobile phones, CD-ROM, interactive televisions, audio/video satellite, radio and the Internet. E-learning can take many dimensions such as, web based learning where presentation of content is done via the Internet or Computer based learning where presentation of content is done through media such as CD-ROMs and USBs (Barbour 2005; Keppel 2005).

In developed countries, E-learning is now a huge sector and has transformed the (ODL) context into online learning (Jara & Mohammad 2007; Donnelly 2010). Studies in the developed world indicate that E-learning carries with it benefits of cost efficiency, easy access and timeliness (Barbour 2005; Shank eds). Other studies have shown that online education has improved (ODL) by overcoming geographical and time constraints (Uden & Beaumont 2006). This study therefore sought to explore (ZOU) students and tutors’ readiness in utilizing E-learning technologies available at (ZOU) and their awareness of benefits of teaching and studying using (ICTs).

(ZOU) also appears to be competing with emerging virtual campuses most of which are driven by the donor regime. Donors seem to be influencing E-learning implementation in Africa by putting more emphasis on creating virtual campuses (Juma 2005). Some virtual systems originating from the developed world are forming strategic partnerships with local universities, the later becoming hosts of imported online learning programmes (Mohan & Daniel 2004). The African Virtual University (AVU) for instance started as a world Bank Project with an uplink in Maryland, USA (Murphy et al 2008; Juma 2005). Some of these online courses developed outside Africa are capital intensive with little or no needs assessments (Daniel 2004). Projects such as the ‘Virtual University for Small States in the Commonwealth and EC/UNESCO’s ‘Avicenna Project’ use network systems with modularized content mainly delivered from outside user countries (Vigliano 2003; Mohammad & Daniel 2004; Abuzi 2006). Taphisa et al (2004) observes some ‘fly by night’ online providers that are destined for profit rather than academic, offering programmes that are quicker to complete with ‘attractive’ admission requirements (Daniel 2004; Van Dijck 2007). Perhaps there is need for quality assurance systems such as that at (ZOU) to monitor such programmes and possibly brew home grown flexible customer focused E-learning models.
The general trend worldwide seems to be of blending as an option where E-learning alone is unsustainable (Brelawski & Metcalf 2005; Abuzir 2006; Athanasiou et al. 2008). Through blending, content is delivered using a combination of on-line and traditional teaching practices (Garison & Kanuta 2004). Alternatively, blending can be viewed as a systematic integration of traditional face-to-face tutoring with E-learning pedagogy (Allen et al. 2007). In some cases, blending is inclined towards on-line learning while in some it is inclined towards traditional face-to-face teaching with options for E-learning (Barbour 2005). It may seem as if blended learning in a continuum where on one end it has a full on-line curriculum with options for face-to-face instruction while on the other instruction is traditional supported by online resources. It was in the light of these views that this study sought to explore (ZOU) students' perceptions of blending levels that are flexible and sustainable in their local settings.

In developed countries, blending has transformed traditional face-to-face instruction into pedagogies where tutors utilize E-learning technologies in flexible and personalized learning environments (Graham 2006). Studies in developed countries indicate that blending has provided learners benefits of flexibility, independence and experience with online tools which in turn has developed critical thinking and research skills (Brelawski & Metcalf 2005). Other studies indicate that project based and experiential learning has been facilitated through blended learning by giving students opportunities to conduct research online and showcase their projects to the world (Barbour 2005). Some studies have established that instruction and students' expectations of quality in blended environments has emerged so far from African (ODL) contexts, in developed countries, research has explored student engagement and students' expectations of quality in blended environments.

While teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin there are conceptual complexities in defining 'blended learning.' For example, Mabizela (2008) argues that blended learning has been poorly defined and inappropriately perceived as 'blended learning' instead of 'blended teaching.' Blending seems not to be about learning per se but rather about teaching (Oliver & Trigwell 2005). Graham (2006) argues that the concept of blending can assume contrasting meanings depending on the context for example, 'blended pedagogies', 'blended teaching' or 'E-pedagogies' (Oliver & Trigwell 2005; Graham 2006; Allen et al. 2007). It maybe worthwhile to tackle these conceptual and quality complexities within a Quality Assurance domain.

Quality Assurance can be viewed as a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to assure that E-learning systems meet and maintain acceptable standards (Harvey 2005). The relationship between Quality Assurance and E-learning can be analysed in the context of monitoring, evaluating and building in procedures for blending to improve practice (Davis 2005; Hendel 2005). The Quality Assurance domain can generate evaluation mechanisms in E-learning systems to ensure that standards are raised when E-learning pedagogy is infused into traditional instructional systems (Smith & McGregor 2009; Lucena & Losanda 2005). However, monitoring quality in blended learning environments appear to be perplexing. As pointed out by Deming (1982), Crosby (1984), Juran (1992) and SAUVCA (2002), there are arguments that Quality Assurance itself is not the panacea when blending. For example, some arguments claim that Quality Assurance in E-learning only addresses technical aspects and does not adequately cover pedagogical and social aspects (Davis 2005). Some studies have established that Quality Assurance in E-learning is more scientific than collaborative (Delpwell 2007; Maris & Apostolaski 2008). Other research findings show that monitoring quality in blended environments has been found lacking in engaging users in identifying what E-learning services can be mixed with traditional modes of delivery. (Jara & Mohammad 2007; Raban 2007). Many quality assessments in E-learning systems appear to be restricted to monitoring inputs, processes and outputs than focusing on cognitive flexibility and restructuring knowledge in response to changing learner demands. It was against these complexities that this study sought to explore the customer focus dimension by analysing (ZOU) tutors and students' expectations of quality in blended learning environments.

While little research on pedagogical dynamics in blended learning environments has emerged so far from African (ODL) contexts, in developed countries, research has explored student engagement in evaluating learning in both traditional and technologically enhanced learning environments (Nathan & Barrett 2004; Grinns & Ellis 2007). Some of the studies have shown that while combining face-to-face and online teaching have potential for increasing
learning opportunities, in many cases it fails to develop to more than just combining methods (Uden &Beaumant 2005;Dilialiogu & Yildrin 2007). There are arguments that blending has never been learner centered as the term blended learning exist not in the learning domain but in the teaching (Oliver & Trigwell 2005; Keppell 2005 Donelly 2010). It was against this background that this study sought to find out how a customer driven and flexible blended learning system can be implemented at (ZOU) in ways that meet the diverse needs of students and tutors.

Statement of the problem
With the proliferation of transnational E-learning providers targeting the (ODL) market (Tait 2000; Yawan & Linshu 2003; Yavas 2004; Mills 2008), (ZOU) now view its students as customers with options for choosing learning modes that suits them. As (ZOU) seeks to maintain its world class quality benchmarks such as ISO 9000:2008, it also aims to create customer focused E-learning environments guided by diverse needs of its local and international students. This study therefore sought to find out how a customer driven and flexible E-learning system can be implemented in a way that meets the diverse needs of students and tutors without compromising (ZOU)’s traditional modes of (ODL) delivery.

Purpose of the study
The study sought to find out how a customer driven and flexible E-learning system can be implemented in a way that meets students and tutors’ needs at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Research Question
How can a customer driven and flexible E-learning system be implemented in a way that meets students and tutors’ needs at the Zimbabwe Open University?

Research Questions
1. What is the extent of students and tutors’ readiness in utilizing E-learning technologies?
2. What are students’ views on factors inhibiting utilization of E-learning services?
3. What are tutors’ perceptions on factors inhibiting infusion of E-learning pedagogy into traditional tutoring systems?
4. What are students’ expectations from flexible customer based blended learning services?
5. What are tutors’ expectations from a flexible customer based blended learning system?

Research Objectives
1. To assess students and tutors’ readiness in utilizing E-learning technologies.
2. To explore students’ views on factors inhibiting utilization of E-learning services.
3. To explore tutors’ perceptions on factors inhibiting infusion of E-learning pedagogy into traditional tutoring systems.
4. To explore students’ expectations from flexible customer based blended learning services.
5. To explore tutors’ expectations from a flexible customer based blended learning system.

Research Methodology
The study was rooted in the pragmatism paradigm that favors starting with the research question to determine what qualitative or quantitative methodology works best to solve the problem (Guba & Lincoln 2005). Quantitative methods used questionnaires to collect data from students and tutors on factors inhibiting utilization of E-learning services and infusion of (ICTs) with traditional teaching modes. Qualitative methods used interviews to explore students and tutors’ expectations of flexible customer based learning services.

Research design
The study was an evaluation research that made use of a mixed methods research design. According to Dix (2006), a mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting, analysing and ‘mixing’ both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a single study to understand the problem. The study was a situational analysis where the problem was studied from the viewpoint of the subjects (students and tutors) in their natural settings and their views pulled together to provide an in-depth perception that contributed to understanding the problem (Borg and Gall 1994; Guba & Lincoln 2005).

Target population
The population was all students from all faculties enrolled at the region during the semester period under study. Fulltime and part time tutors in all faculties at the region were part of the population. It was assumed that tutors were a rich source of data because of their day to day experiences in tutoring.

Data collection procedures
The researchers first sought permission and introductory letters from the Regional Director to carry out the research at the Regional Centre. Questionnaires for students and tutors were administered by researchers during weekend tutorials. Researchers conducted interviews with tutors during weekend tutorials.

Research Instruments
Focus group discussions
The first stage of data collection was focus group discussions. The discussion group consisted of 14 randomly selected students (7 male and 7 female) drawn from across all faculties. The purpose of the discussion was to explore students’ understanding of E-learning and blended learning, their previous, current experiences and expectations. Data from the group discussions was used to construct questionnaire and interview instruments.

The interview
The interview technique was used to collect data from randomly selected students and tutors. Random sampling was done systematically to cover all faculties. The interviews were structured with wording and sequencing of questions fixed to ensure that variations that appeared between responses were attributed to actual differences between responses.
and not to variations in the interviews. However the interview schedules had some open ended questions that gave the respondents liberty to express their opinions.

The questionnaire

Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from randomly selected tutors and students. The questionnaires enabled collection of data from many tutors and students. Both questionnaires for students and tutors had closed and open ended questions. Questionnaire data was triangulated with data gathered from interviews to eliminate bias that could have resulted from personal dimensions inherent in interviews.

Data Presentation and Analysis
Bio-data for students
A total of [170(100%)] students [105(62%)] male and [65(38%)] female responded to the questionnaire. The majority of the students 110(65%) were in the (35-45) year age range. Out of the 170 (100%) students, 110 (65%) resided outside the city where the Regional Centre is situated. Out of these, [92(54%)] stayed and worked in rural areas. This shows that the majority of students who took part in the study were mature adults coming from rural backgrounds.

Results from focus group discussions

The results show that students viewed E-learning as the use of computers in studying. Blended learning was defined as infusing ICT technologies into course modules and face-to-face tutorials. The students expected the internet to play a major role as a source of information in their studies. Students also expected the internet to improve the platform for interaction with their tutors and other students. Students from rural areas expected the university to do a lot more in developing students’ ICT skills and to widen internet access in district service centers.

1. What Is The Extent Of Students And Tutors' Readiness In Utilizing E-learning Technologies?
A large majority of tutors [55 (69%)] were proficient in tutoring through the internet using E-mail. Only [5(6%)] and [4 (5%)] were proficient in utilizing discussion boards and web based instruction respectively. None of the tutors were proficient in using chat rooms, tele- and video-conferencing. A large majority of students [170(65%)] were able to utilize Internet services. However only [9(5%)] were proficient with web-based instruction. No students were proficient in participating in discussion boards, chat-rooms, Tele and video conferencing.

2. What Are Students' Views On Factors Inhibiting Utilisation Of E-learning Services?
The majority of the students [120(70%)] were of the view that lack of (ICT) skills was an inhibiting factor. A large majority [162(95%)] cited extra fees that may be required for E-learning services. All students [170(100%)] said that they had no money for purchasing required hardware such as laptops and accessories. A large majority [120(70%)] cited proximity of University internet services as a mitigating factor.

3. What Are Tutors’ Perceptions On Factors Inhibiting Infusion Of E-learning Into Traditional Tutoring Systems?
The majority of tutors [74(92%)] were discouraged by lack of monetary incentives in teaching through E-learning. A large majority [70(88%)] were of the view that increased workload compromises their participation in E-learning programmes. A large majority of tutors [73(91%)] were discouraged by extra time involved in planning and delivering tutorials through E-learning technologies. All tutors [80(100%)] agreed that they lacked skills to plan and deliver tutoring through the E-learning pedagogy. Half of the tutors doubted whether their current course curricular was appropriate to teach through E-learning.

4. What Are Students’ Expectations From Flexible Customer Based Blended Learning Services?

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Students Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved access to learning materials</td>
<td>Modules, tutorial letters, assignment questions, tutorial and exam time tables must be availed to students through the electronic platform at registration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved face-to-face tutorial services</td>
<td>[Tutors must avail additional study materials on the internet]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Tutors must provide feedback from marked assignments through the internet]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Tutorial material arising from face-to-face tutorials held in all regions must be availed to all students through the internet].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded opportunities for student/student interaction</td>
<td>[The internet must provide a platform for students from all regions to interact with each other.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[The internet must provide a platform for local students to interact with students in the virtual region].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded opportunities for student/tutor interaction</td>
<td>[Programme experts at the national centre must contribute in tutorials by putting additional tutorial materials on the internet]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Programme experts at the national centre must disseminate examination skills to all students by putting examination preparation material on the internet]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. What Are Tutors’ Expectations From A Flexible Customer Based Blended Learning System?

Table 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provision of incentives for developing E-learning/ teaching materials.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased opportunities for developing E-teaching/learning skills.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased opportunities and tools for research.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded platforms for networking with tutors in other regions.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded platforms for interacting with students in other regions and the virtual region.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation of research and development of indigenous E-learning pedagogies.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased comfort levels when teaching</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 shows themes of expectations expressed by interviewed tutors ranked according to frequency of tutors’ comments on each theme. Tutors seem to prioritize extra payment in the form of incentives for the extra teaching load and development of E-learning pedagogy. Comments in section [5.1.2] were on the highly rated expectation.

5.1.2. Tutors comments on extra incentives for developing E-learning materials.

[Incentives that are currently provided for writing modules must be given to tutors who write E-learning materials.][Tutors who produce research based E-learning materials must receive financial support.][Regular training workshops on production of E-learning pedagogy must be conducted to equip all full time tutors.]

Recommendations

The study recommends creation of a customer based flexible blended learning environment with the following quality dimensions:

i) Expanded training opportunities for tutors in utilizing E-learning technologies and producing materials on E-learning pedagogy.

ii) Incentives for tutors who take extra teaching loads in E-learning and produce E-learning materials.

iii) Compulsory programmes for equipping all first year students with (ICT) skills as a foundation for E-learning curricular in further courses.

iv) Blending current course curricular with relevant E-learning pedagogies that are flexible to changing learner needs.

v) Varied options for students to access learning materials electronically or in print media.

vi) Expanded academic E-platforms for students in all regions to interact with each other and with tutors in other regions including programme experts at the National Centre.
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