Students’ views on the quality of service offered by Programme Coordinators in Regional Centres of the Zimbabwe Open University: A Case of Mashonaland Central

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Abstract
The need for better quality education and service to the students by the Zimbabwe Open University cannot be overemphasized. Service delivery to the students can improve through periodic evaluation of Program Coordinators basing on fulfillment of their key duties and responsibilities. A Program Coordinator evaluation exercise carried out at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) Mashonaland Central Region revealed that there was great need for information dissemination to students concerning feedback on assignments, non availability of part time tutors during weekend tutorials, approachability, attention to student’s queries, sensitivity to students’ academic needs and coordination with the National Centre for availability of modules. For data collection the questionnaire was used in which 50 students were asked to complete an evaluation form in regard to their Program Coordinators. Twenty students were interviewed on the same matter. Staff training and development activities such as knowledge sharing, orientation programs, induction workshops; meetings and conferences should go a long way in uplifting the quality of service to the open and distance learning (ODL) students. Such mind enriching activities need to be carried out continuously so as to enable Program Coordinators to interact and learn from each other and that has to move hand in glove with the departmental quality assurance monitoring framework.

Key words: Views, quality of service, programme coordinator

Introduction and background to the study
Distance education is a unique method of instruction and study. This mode of instruction is based on the principles of reciprocal communication between the student and the tutor. This is made possible because the instructional material (modules, tutorial letters or CDs) prescribed and/or supplied to the student have to be studied. Assignments based on the instructional material must be completed regularly by the student and submitted before or on the due date. Weekend tutorials are also organized by Zimbabwe Open University through Regional Centres from time to time.

There are several problems that face students studying through Open and Distance Learning (ODL). These students, in contrast to students studying full-time on campus, have limited access to, and support from tutors and their fellow students. They study mainly in isolation and have limited access to resources such as libraries, appropriate study facilities and information communication technology. Some students also differ from full-time students in the sense that they are part-time adult students. They have additional commitments of work, family and community involvement. Studying is therefore often second, if not third priority for the majority of ODL students.

Most of the issues and challenges of Open and Distance learning were highlighted by Matthew Simond on http.com as the following:

> The first challenge faced by distance learners is in balancing the combination of work and education. Most of the Open and Distance education students are older, have jobs and families. Job responsibility is already intimidating, let alone the family and the learning. The task of balancing all of the above responsibility is truly challenging for most of them.

> The second issue is in acquiring distance study habits. The students’ everyday environment is very distracting for most of the students. Unlike traditional university students who are always in their learning community which supports them most of the time, distance students are not. Distractions such as friends asking for night supper and wife demanding to go shopping at the mall every weekend are among other distractions faced by students. Acquiring some time in a day to study is quite a hard task to complete.

> Distance learners also have a hard time in being independent and responsible to their own self. Most of the time, there is no one around to monitor the students learning process. The openness of the distance program gives students the freedom to do their learning process whenever they like but most of the time, procrastination is the culprit. Unfocused view of their learning goals also will make the students act irresponsibly towards their learning.
> The other challenges by Pithers (1998) is in coping with distance learning strategies apart from printed material package the students are familiar with. There might be audio/video tape material, television-aided learning, overhead projectors, computer referencing and computer-assisted instruction using the internet. Some students might feel uncomfortable with these learning strategies due to lack of skills and knowledge in using those strategies.

> Sander et al (2000) gives the challenge faced by distance learners in using library facilities to access information and references. Most of the library only opens during office hours and the learners would not be able to go to the library during office hours due to demanding work, at the office. This will definitely cause problems to students who want to gain access to the reference material. Library database program such as the OPAC will also require the students to have proper training and skills in order to maximize the usage.

> The Open and Distance Learning courses are very different from a traditional classroom setting. Due to a number of challenges and obstacles, it often requires a high degree of commitment on the part of the learner.

Therefore a Regional Programme Coordinator plays a vital role in service delivery that should take place in ODL. It is expected that Regional Programme Coordinators apply different forms of tutoring to provide students with essential skills that facilitates active learning and provides the support they need.

**Key terms**

**Views** – individual and personal perception, judgment or interpretation, or a way of seeing something

**Quality of service** – is a business administration term, used to describe achievement in service. It describes a comparison of expectations with performance.

**Programme Coordinator** – is an individual responsible for coordinating programme activities leading to the accomplishment of programme objectives. He/she provides information to students, potential students, clients and the public regarding programme requirements and services.

**Key duties and Responsibilities of Regional Programme Coordinator**

According to career builder.com, roles and responsibilities of Programme Coordinators include, but are not limited to, using instructional design theory, instructional design principles, learning theory and adult learning principles and selecting and/or assisting in the development of courseware solutions. Distance learning coordinators also design and manage learning programmes. Jobing.com states that distance learning coordinators may coordinate funded training and technical assistance activities to achieve goals and objectives established in strategic plans for programmes. Distance learning coordinators are also expected to continuously update their individual skills by attending workshops and training sessions related to instructional technology or distance education.

The Zimbabwe Open University’s job description for a fulltime lecturer include among others:

- Organize weekend schools/tutorial sessions
- Compiling coursework marks
- Conducting examinations
- Conducting staff development
- Conducting students’ orientation sessions
- Sourcing for extra reading material for the students/learners
- Moderation of students’ coursework
- Reporting on programme progress, student queries
- Assignment administration
- Programme reviewing

Jennifer O’Rourke (1993) summarises the following as some of the roles of ODL lecturers.

- *Vision of the rationale, scope and potential impact of a distance education programme in their own context.*
- *Clear view of prospective students and their needs.*
- *An understanding of how distance education works and an overview of planning, resource allocation and promotional tasks required to launch it.*
- *An understanding of how their organisation works and of how distance education will affect existing systems.*
- *Ability to communicate and coordinate distance education endeavours with other educational providers in the region to ensure accreditation is recognised and minimise duplication of provision.*

Dodds (1983) came up with the following roles of ODL lecturers:

- *Ability to convey to other in the organisation the value of distance education and earn their support for the programme.*
- *Ability to identify training needs and provide learning opportunities about distance education processes either directly by mentorship or teaching or indirectly, by seeing out and establishing appropriate learning opportunities, such as secondment, short term attachments to distance education programmes, formal training etc.*
- *Logistical skills: ability to foresee and plan for logistical requirements, scheduling and materials production knowledge; creative problem solving abilities and knowledge of the communication and transportation infrastructure of the region where students live.*
- *Ability to indentify training needs and to provide learning opportunities for students.*

Parer (1989) also had the following ODL lecturer’s expected roles.
Programme Coordinators to ODL students are as follows;

- Coordinator for academic support.
- Provides students with the opportunity to contact their respective learning and tutoring through e-mail and telephone which is no much help that the nursing science students will get from that programme does not allow for an RPC. In this case, there is no much help that the nursing science students will get from the RPC.

Regional Programme Coordinators (RPC) may handle a Bachelor of Science in Nursing Science programme because the number of students in that programme does not allow for an RPC. In this case, there is no much help that the nursing science students will get from the RPC.

The Marker-Tutor Manual (2011) from the Polytechnic of Namibia adds the following functions;

- Records (Progress Check)
  A function of student-tutor dialogue is to provide a record of student progress, not only for the sake of assessment and promotion, but also for the sake of advising students. Students need to know about their progress and whether they have succeeded to master their course content and corresponding learning objectives. The main vehicle of communicating with students is through comments on tutor marked assignments (TMAS) and feedback tutorial letters.

- Maintaining morale
  One of the major functions of student-tutor dialogue is to lessen the student’s isolation, provide a friendly, personal, interested and supportive voice.

- Tutoring
  Some ODL tutoring would include face to face tutoring in the form of weekend tutorials, through multimedia and e-learning and tutoring through e-mail and telephone which provides students with the opportunity to contact their respective coordinator for academic support.

  In a nutshell the duties and responsibilities of Regional Programme Coordinators to ODL students are as follows;

- Stimulating student dialogue
- Motivating students
- Helping students overcome academic difficulties
- Helping students overcome their academic problems of studying through ODL and;
  Helping students feel confident in making subsequent contact with the Programme Coordinator.

  In addition Malfray and Webb (2000) identify the following related roles of Regional Programme Coordinators:

- Facilitator- providing support, advice and monitoring progress.
- Intellectual catalyst- supporting energy and motivation, developing mutual support.
- Mentor- distant but available, comfortable and supportive.
- Partner- an equal participant and collaborator.

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Communication with students who are geographically spaced becomes difficult due to some following reasons; some areas have no communication infrastructure; no network; no frequent postal services; no access to internet and no consistent transport especially areas in lower Guruve like Dande and Muzarabani.

- Modules
  Module resources are not enough and sometimes not available. Some modules though available are too brief and shallow. The library, which is supposed to support the module, is small and not well stocked to fill the gap.

- There are Regional Programme Coordinators who handle some programmes which they are not familiar with. For example, a Physical Education trained Regional Programme Coordinator (RPC) may handle a Bachelor of Science in Nursing Science programme because the number of students in that programme does not allow for an RPC. In this case, there is no much help that the nursing science students will get from the RPC.

- There is no criteria for judging whether the part-time tutors engaged are continuously adding value and updating their knowledge especially where those engaged are working in non-academic areas. The Regional Programme Coordinator has no assessment instrument. Part-time tutor evaluation forms are completed at the end of each semester and sent to the department of research and scholarship. The regions do not receive a feedback on the findings.

Students’ Expectation from Programme Coordinators

Bogdan, R.C. and Biklen, S.K. (2003) highlights some of the students’ expectations as follows:

- The course/programme should be well planned.
- Materials should be delivered on time to students.
- Students support services should be well in place; tutors available and orientation done before the course starts to give the students a roadmap.
- Programme coordinators must be readily accessible to students to address their queries, concerns and any related matters.
- Feedback should be given timely to students.

Pithers and Holland (2001) concur with Bogdan and Biklen when they say one aspect of empowering students at university is to take the view that they be regarded as “clients” or
“customers” rather than recipients of education. Their survey at the University of Technology in Sydney, showed that students had quite congruent expectations of the lecturers. The students saw subject matter expertise as the key factor in their expectations of university lecturers, while grading assessment fairly, keeping learners interested and showing enthusiasm for subject matter content rated highly with students.

Rolfe (2002) completed a study of student expectations which included looking forward to more direction and guidance. Kennedy (1999) role expectations included variables such as: excellence in subject matter content, and social relationships, good organisational ability, motivator, evaluator and role model, diagnostic ability, orderliness, as well as provide warmth, enthusiasm and business-like behaviour. Kennedy (1999) study showed good lecturers as involving organisation, clear information and structure, clear objectives, good pace, clarity of communication and the management of student workload and difficult. Therefore these expectations are similar to those proposed by Bogdan and Biklen (2003).

The feedback requires the Regional Programme Coordinator to:
* Discuss problems identified during the course of marking.
* Suggest remedial action.
* Reinforce learning that was covered in the assignments.
* Explain the assignment mark.
* Make suggestions concerning future assignments.
* Encourage students and provide good wishes.

Data collection Method, Procedure and Presentation

The study adopted the descriptive survey design which is essentially appropriate on areas where human perceptions are required. Due to its ability to solicit information deeply buried in the minds and attitudes of people, and its ability to reveal the true present state of affairs in a given set up, the design is seen to be the most appropriate. Two instruments that were used in data collection are the questionnaires and interview.

All interviews were done face to face. They were conducted in English. The interview started with a brief explanation of the reason for the meeting. The following features of the interview techniques were important in developing the interviews and protocols for this study.
* Purposive selection of the participants.
* Participants have a way of expanding the question initially asked. This means that the questions asked were not limited to the ones prepared beforehand.
* The interview method enables the researcher to establish personal rapport with the participants.
* It offers a level of interaction contributing to the depths and richness of the information gathered.

Population

A total of 500 students were duly registered during the January/June 2012 semester from all the four facilities of the Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland Central Region made up the population. Out of these 70 made it into the sample as follows; 25 from the faculty of Arts and Education which has a total of 167, 20 from Applied Social Sciences which has a total of 63, 10 from Science and Technology which has a total of 77 and 15 from the faculty of Commerce and Law which has a total enrolment of 93. Of the 70 students 40 were females while the male students accounted for 30. The distribution is clearly shown on the table below.

![Figure 1: Distribution of the population by faculty](image)

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to establish students’ views on the quality of service offered by Regional Programme Coordinators in Regional Centres of the Zimbabwe Open University. The main finding was that students appeared generally satisfied with the quality of service, but felt the service delivery system was littered with numerous problems. These research results are shown in the table below showing the number of students who agree (A), undecided (UD), and disagreed (D) with the seven questions put across. The eighth question sought for problems encountered and suggestion on possible solutions to such problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree (A)</th>
<th>Undecided (UD)</th>
<th>Disagree (D)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. RPC always available for consultation</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Coordinator is approachable</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Coordinator interacts well with students</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Students' queries are attended to timely</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feedback on assignments and student queries is valuable to students learning</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Coordinator is sensitive to learner’s academic needs</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. RPC communicates timely with students on changes and developments in the faculty</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Responses by students on the questionnaire

Question 8

List the problems you have so far encountered with your Regional Programme Coordinator and suggest possible solutions to such problems. The responses by students were as follows:
Problems and Solutions

Part time tutors who are under the RPC are not always available and should be adequately and appropriately prepared for tutorials.

* Some courses do not have modules. Ensure availability of modules for each course.
* Sometimes the marking and comments on assignments leave much to be desired; therefore, ensure that comments given are comprehensive and relevant.
* Proper calculation of marks and provision of tutor’s particulars on the assignment cover is encouraged.
* There should be a feedback in form of a tutorial letter responding to problems identified during assignment marking.
* Part time tutors should not read the module but should have some notes to add to the data in the module.
* Even after the semester, modules that were in short supply should be given to students because students paid for them.
* The RPC should inform students on days when he/she is available and attending to students’ queries. It is disappointing to come for assistance only to find the RPC absent with no notice of when he/she will be back. RPCs should stick their weekly programmes in the office or at reception.

Conclusions

The quality of service offered by Regional Programme Coordinators will influence the students’ willingness to continue studying with Z.O.U. Students will therefore turn into goodwill ambassadors and market the institutions to prospective students. The students generally appear to perceive their RPCs in good faith. Another major conclusion is that students get disillusioned if they encounter numerous service delivery problems and worse if RPCs are not readily available to address the queries.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

* Regional Programme Coordinators need to continuously attend to workshops, meetings and conferences in order to uplift the quality of service offered to ODL students.
* Each faculty should have a quality assurance monitoring framework which should be periodically evaluated to correct any anomalies.
* RPCs need to thoroughly supervise part-time tutors to ensure that they are adequately and appropriately prepared for tutorials.
* Modules are an important type of teaching media in distance learning; therefore, all modules should be readily available to students.
* Programme leaders whose programmes are being handled by some RPCs should periodically visit regions and discuss issues with students.

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